

Session 4

December 23, 2018

THE ANGELS' ANNOUNCEMENT

Luke 2:1-14

Like most families, our Christmas is filled with traditions. From candlelight services to Christmas caroling; from the big family dinner to sipping eggnog (non-alcoholic, of course!) in front of the fire; from opening one gift on Christmas Eve to playing dirty Santa in my Sunday School class three weeks later; somehow we manage to cram it all in. And I can guarantee that one thirty-minute segment of the season will be taken up by the classic “Charlie Brown Christmas.” The iconic animation is filled with classic Christmas scenarios as Charlie Brown searches for both personal meaning and the cosmic significance of Christ’s incarnation. The cartoon culminates with Charlie Brown’s desperate plea, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” His blanket-bearing buddy Linus replies, “Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about,” followed by the touching scene of Linus quoting from Luke 2. It’s no accident that Linus has center stage and spotlight illumination during his less-than-a-minute recitation. Indeed, the focal point of the cartoon—like the focal point of history—is captured in those classic verses of Scripture.

The scene (vv. 1-5). What the apostle Paul called “the fullness of time” in Galatians 4, was made that way by events ordained by God. Luke the historian recorded the background behind the burgeoning event in great detail. What brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem was an edict ordered by the Roman emperor requiring a registration of the entire general population. Some translations use the word “tax;” but the idea is a registration of the people in order that they might be taxed. Verse 3 makes it clear that the order was binding and followed by all. The requirement for registration in one’s “own city” was to insure an accurate count on the part of Caesar, but also an accurate fulfillment of Scripture on the part of Mary and Joseph (see Micah 5:2). Verse 4 traces the relationship of Joseph to his ancestor David, and verse 5 traces the relationship of Mary to her fiancé Joseph. The drama is heightened by Mary’s pregnancy. While the language is simple, the King James translators captured the context vividly: Mary accompanied Joseph, “being great with child.” Her fulness of time had also arrived!

The Son (vv. 6-7). While stories of an innkeeper have painted him as both a hero (who provided his backyard stable to the poor couple), or a villain (who refused the poor couple a room), Luke’s account of that night mentions neither an innkeeper nor a stable! His narrative is simple, yet precise. In the back corner of an overcrowded city, Mary gave birth to her firstborn, a son. He was wrapped in pieces of cloth and placed in a trough used for feeding animals. Though not meant to belabor the point, Luke’s description captures the humble—even meager—beginnings of Our Savior’s life.

The Shepherds (vv. 8-14). Although they are colorful characters in the Christmas story, shepherds were nobodies in that day. These men were lounging with their sheep on the sleepy hillsides surrounding the bustling city. An Arab friend of mine who grew up in Nazareth told me that shepherds still tend their flocks outside at night in the pleasant temperatures of spring and fall. And even today, shepherding is considered among the humblest of professions. But it’s interesting to note how many significant men in the Bible started out as insignificant shepherds,

how often the Lord is depicted as a shepherd, and how many references to “shepherding” are applied to the church (e.g.: Ps. 23, John 10:7ff, 1 Pet. 5:2; et al.). Again, without really trying to do so, Luke highlights the fact that the initial announcement of Messiah’s glorious birth was made by God’s highest angels to man’s lowest laborers, proving once again the angel’s proclamation of “good news of great joy” was indeed “for *all* the people.”