

Hark the Herald Angels!

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[0 : 0 0] So, turn back please to Luke chapter 2. We're going to focus mainly on the section from verse 8. So, this is the announcement to the shepherds of the birth of Jesus. And I want you to, I want us to really sense as we look through this short passage, the drama of what's happening and what happens in this fundamentally so important time in the history of the world, where God announces his good news and what he is going to do, the real sense of drama and what unfolds in this short section. If you think about it, God had promised that he was going to send a Savior. God had promised what he was going to do, but he never said how exactly, how it would unfold. He never said exactly when and so people were waiting. How would God announce the Savior?

How would God bring into the world the one who was to be the Messiah? What spectacular way would he do it? In what great important city of the world would he first bring his Messiah? And what we see in this short passage is I think a really wonderful mixture of amazing and ordinary. Amazing and ordinary. And I want to go through this short passage, looking at four, as I said, thinking about the drama of this, looking at four brief scenes. So, there are four main scenes that I just want to bring out as we go through this. Scene one, the stage is set. Like I said, people were expecting a Messiah. God had told the people in the Old Testament that he was going to send a deliverer, that he was going to send a Messiah. There was such a great sense of expectation, but there had been no news for so long. So, God has sent prophets time after time to convict the people, the Jewish people, God's people of how they were going wrong and how they were so often going against the way that he wanted them to live. And he kept calling them back to his ways. And he would prophesy, he would send through these prophets a message of the coming one, the one who was to be the deliverer. But then in the period between the Old and New Testament, there had been no news, silence as it were from heaven. And then all of a sudden, picture the scene on a quiet, lonely Galilean hillside, the news comes. Really, a nowhere place, a hillside.

This isn't announced, first of all, in the center of Jerusalem, where the wealthy and the influential gathered. This is announced on a quiet hillside with three men and a bunch of sheep.

What an extraordinary way for God to announce the coming of the Messiah. This is what he does. So, we read that in verse 8, in the same region, there were shepherds out in the field, keeping over their flock, a watch over their flock, spent out. They were not expecting what was about to happen. You know, we know this story. And even if you're visiting, you may well be familiar with this story. But they were not expecting what was about to happen at all. So, let's just remember that just at the start. So, the scene is set. A people were expecting, but they'd heard nothing. There was this great sense of silence. And we have this quiet Galilean hillside, a very unsuspecting place. And we have, let's just remember this as well, some very unsuspecting people. Who would have thought that God would announce to three shepherds the news of the birth of the Messiah? Three shepherds, we don't know their names. So, a lot of people say that the shepherds had a very bad reputation. Others say that that is a reputation that came a little bit later. Regardless of the fact whether they were shepherds as a whole were classed as an unscrupulous people, regardless of whether these were,

I don't think they were. I think these were honorable people. They weren't particularly anybody, were they? They're really just nobodies. They're just three men guarding sheep out on a hillside. So, in other words, they don't have any great claim to be people who received this message. They're just ordinary folk like you and me, going about their business, watching over the sheep.

[4 : 5 7] Scene two, into this really unremarkable situation, the drama of God's announcement comes. And so the drama unfolds over the next few verses. And I want to point out just three things from verse nine onwards, okay, in this little section about the drama. So, the first thing is in verse nine, let me just read that. Into this quiet it says, and an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the

glory of the Lord shone around them and they were filled with great fear. First thing is that there is awe in this event. There's a huge sense of awe.

Please don't just picture a kind of pleasant Christmas card. An angel out of nowhere appears and the glory of the Lord is with this angel as he speaks to three shepherds who probably cannot believe their eyes. He speaks. So, we have the second character who comes in at this point. There's absolutely nothing ordinary about this. Absolutely nothing ordinary. Now, again, if you're visiting or if you're somebody who's just exploring what the Bible has to say about life and about who we are as people, you might say, well, this is just ridiculous, an angel. But the Bible never shies away from talk about the supernatural. We have to talk about it. Take that, don't we? It speaks about God after all. It is the word of God. And so, if it is the word of God, we shouldn't think it's so remarkable that it speaks about an angelic being. The Bible often speaks about angels. And this figure, this angel is the one who's chosen by God to go and announce to these three men the message and of course, the glory of the Lord shone around him as he does this. And so, what do they do? What's their response when they see this? They're terrified. They say at the end of verse nine there, they were filled with great fear, you know, our Christmas cards. In some ways, they portray a kind of shiny Christmas, a nice Christmas. And that's fine. But there is there is fear and trembling in their, the first response of these men as they see this sign.

They're really scared. But in a sense, this is familiar as well, isn't it? Because there are different times throughout the Bible where God announces himself, where he speaks to people and every time he does that, in some senses, we get the same response. Think about the way that he appeared to Moses way back in the Old Testament. Moses is going about his business again. And suddenly he sees this bush on fire, not consumed continually burning.

And he's spoken to by God. How strange and how awesome. And of course, he's told to remove his shoes because he's in the presence of the Holy One. But that wasn't that wasn't a comfortable situation for Moses. Isaiah, in chapter six of Isaiah, as we read about the great vision that Isaiah receives, what's his response when he's confronted with the glory and the awesomeness of God is to fall on his face and to recognize that the one before whom he stands is awesome and is holy. And so he realizes that he's not able to stand when he falls on his face. And there are other examples that we could look at when God comes and presents a message to different people throughout the Bible that is this huge sense of the weight and the awe of the occasion as we find here. The shepherds are scared, they're overcome, they're awestruck. So awe is the first thing. The second thing that we find very wonderfully is relief. See what immediately happens. Verse 10, the angel said to them, fear not. Aren't those wonderful words? Fear not. So the messenger, this awesome creature with the glory of the Lord standing hadn't come to just to destroy them or to terrify them. But this angel has come to bring them news and he's come to bring them good news and so he speaks to them words of comfort. Now that's the same if we go back to the two examples I just mentioned. Whenever God comes and speaks to people, when he speaks to Moses, he reassures Moses that he is with him and that he has a purpose for him. When he speaks to Isaiah, he reassures him that he has pardoned him and he restores him and he sets him up again in his feet and he commissions them and he says, go out, I have a job for you to do. All these people again are just ordinary people but God comes and commissions them and uses them wonderfully. He uses the ordinary people to accomplish his purposes. And so the angel comes and says, fear not for behold, I bring you good news of great joy. There is relief for them. They are told to stand, get up, be at peace, don't fear, I bring you good news. And the message that they hear of course, think about this context, these people in this Jewish context and the expectation that they had, this kind of resonance in their culture of them being those who were waiting for the Messiah. And then read this statement and think about how this hit every point for them. He says, and the angel said, fear not,

I bring good news of great joy that would be for all the people. Verse 11, for unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Now that was such a heavy statement with meaning for these people. The city of David, they were waiting for the one who would be in the line of David, who would be the one who would be the King, who would reign eternally, a Savior who is Christ the Messiah, the anointed one from God, the one who God has chosen to be his Savior, the Lord, the one who would reign over them and the one who would lead them as a people and who would be their Savior and Lord. And as they hear this news on this hillside in the dark, unsuspectingly suddenly it's revealed to them this incredible weight of this moment as God opens

up that now is the time in all of history, now is the time when he's saying, my Savior has come and I want to tell you about it. That's amazing. That's an incredible truth for them to hear. Now, it's really important for us also to think how do we take that statement? This isn't an ancient irrelevant promise that has to do with just a select people group because this Savior was to be the Savior for all the world. But I think there's something very important that we have to realize when we read a statement like this. Because sometimes we, or people that you maybe know, people in our culture, there's a snag here, isn't there? What will make us think that this is good news? Well, the only reason we'll think this is good news is if we think and agree that we need a Savior. You see that in verse 11? This is why it's so good news because he's a Savior, not just because he's awesome and impressive or nice or wise because he's a Savior. That's why the people say, thank

[12 : 49] God for this good news. He has sent the one who is a Savior. And sometimes our hearts are proud, so we don't think we need a Savior, or we're a bit cynical and we think, well, that's really quite an old fashioned way of thinking. We really don't need Saviors nowadays. We're quite able and quite advanced and we can work things out for ourselves, we can be good people. So fundamental to understanding what the message of Christmas, the message of the Lord as he brings his word at this point is, is coming to a personal recognition that we need somebody to save us. It's quite a raw thing to think about, isn't it? That we're utterly dependent on God saving us. And they respond. Do you remember the shepherds respond with great joy and they're really excited about this? So obviously for them, this is good news. They're really excited about it. Now, I want to ask, will you respond with joy and with gladness and with a sense of thankfulness to God this morning? It's maybe a message that we're very used to, but it's the core of who we are and who we need to be as people who are saved by God. And so we can go home untouched by the Gospel if we don't recognize the need we have for a Savior. And so that's something that each of us, each of us needs to recognize that this morning. There is awe in this drama and there is relief and thirdly, surprise. Just to go back again to the shepherds, I mentioned already that they are a very unlikely group. Isn't it incredible that this message of the

Savior is revealed to these people? These ordinary people, these nobody's out on the hillside. God chooses these people to reveal his message to. But again, think about the way that God works throughout many different passages, many different instances where he reveals news or uses people. Who was Mary? She was a nobody. God chooses to use this woman who wasn't even married to be the one who was to bear the Savior. The shepherds receive the news of the birth of Jesus. News of Jesus's imminent arrival is born by a desert hermit, John the Baptist. Who was he? News of Christ's resurrection. Who was, who bore that news first? Woman who were close to Jesus but whose testimony in their culture wasn't appreciated, wouldn't have been held up in a court. And then of course, who bore Christ's Gospel to the nations? Who were his closest friends who were the ones who were to hold this message and to take it? But, fishermen and a tax collector and just again ordinary people, all of these different people, all of the ways that God works in salvation histories through just ordinary people. The message of the good news of the Gospel is for ordinary people like us and incredibly God uses ordinary people like us. As we take the news and as we believe the news, then he also says, and I want you to take that news and to share it with others. So this great drama that unfolds in this chapter really builds up to the third scene. Two final scenes here to mention just briefly. The third scene is this great heavenly chorus. So we have this one angel who appears and he then sends them off and he says he wants to give them a sign of the promise of verse 12 and then in verse 13 we get this incredible line.

Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God. So from one angel things just get even more remarkable, even more remarkable on this quiet lonely Galilee and hillside with these three men and some sheep. After this one angel appears suddenly there's a multitude of angels filling the sky and declaring the praise and the wisdom and the goodness of God. We get different appearances of angels in the Bible as I mentioned earlier for different purposes I think. We've just been studying Job in the mornings and you'll remember right at the back of the book of Job the scene where God calls the angelic beings into his presence and of course with them comes Satan the accuser and really that shows us their accountability before God the fact that he made them and he's over them.

We have the great dream that Jacob had where he sees this vision of the angels ascending and descending and the image there of the kind of connection, the communication between heaven and earth. We have that really incredible scene in second Kings where the servant of Elisha has his

eyes open to behold the kind of ring of angels surrounding the hillsides when he feels a great sense of fear and threat and the security and the presence of the angels to reassure him at that point of the presence of God. And of course when we go to somewhere like Revelation we get many examples of the angels praising God. Praising God. In fact what's distinct in Revelation when we get that little vision of the time when the seventh seal is opened and there is silence in heaven. That's remarkable isn't it? The time where there's silence in heaven because so often we think of heaven as a place where there is an abundance of praise, where there is a continual sense of praise being poured out to God because it's the appropriate thing and it's so the appropriate thing at this point in time as God announces his good news it is absolutely right that this band of angels appear saying God is good look at what he has done give him glory. Verse 14 glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he has pleased. And so the angels really lead what should be our response to this news. They lead with the sense of the awesomeness and the wisdom and the goodness of God. And it challenges us doesn't it? It challenges us to think about the way that we respond to the announcement and the incarnation of Jesus. As we look back so many years at this event that happened and we ask ourselves the question do I in an ongoing way still know the huge significance of what God did at that point in time? What significance does that have for me now? Does it lead me to give glory to God? So they proclaim notice the two things that they say these angels. Interestingly it doesn't say singing we often think of the angels as singing but it just says they were declaring glory to God. So he is the one who is worthy of all glory. And they declare peace among those with whom he is pleased. Now remember they had said to the shepherds when they first saw them fear not. So they calm them and they gave them assurance and they gave them good news and then here as they proclaim the glory of God they also proclaim peace on men and women who know him. So this isn't peace to everybody regardless of who you are and what you feel like and what you do. This is peace among those with whom he is pleased. Peace to those who know him. Peace to those who believe in him. Please make sure that you believe in him this morning. Please make sure that you know him. Please make sure that you know that peace. Our feelings of peace can come and go. But if you are somebody who has said [21 : 46] Lord I believe in you. I trust in you then. He proclaims his peace to you as somebody who knows and believes his gospel. And so it's appropriate also for us to respond as the angels do and to give him praise. So we've had the scene set. We've had the drama of everything that's happened. We have had this heavenly chorus as we have this great kind of crescendo of praise. And then finally the lights go up. All of a sudden everything's back to normal. In this remarkable scene where we've had a sudden interruption into the ordinary of the kind of the drama of what's just happened and the brilliance of it. All of a sudden everything's ordinary again. And it's recorded in a very kind of ordinary way. Verse 15.

When the angels went away from them into heaven the shepherd said to one another. All of a sudden the angels weren't there anymore. The scene had just finished. You'll know that the feeling won't you have having been in a cinema or a theater or somewhere and you're caught up in all the drama and the lights and everything that's going on and all of a sudden it finishes and you're back to normal and you have to get up and walk out and everything's as it was. And you've lost the sort of transportation that you can have when you watch a film or a play. And the shepherds experience this. All of a sudden they're back just themselves, just the sheep in the same place. Speaking the same language, doing the same things with the same responsibilities. But they're changed. They're totally changed. What happens to them?

Well they go and see and they go and see quickly because what was communicated to them has left such an impression. They have such a strong sense of how remarkable this is and the weight of the news of what is being proclaimed to them. That they let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us. They know that this has been communicated to them by God. They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph.

So they're not left though with nothing. They're left with a baby. A baby. Again how remarkable is that that God chooses to bring his Messiah, his Savior, into this very ordinary situation as a vulnerable child. And of course we know because we have a blessing of having the Gospel that this child will be the one who is to live and to die as the Savior in the world.

So they have this message of this baby, who they go and see. They have a promise that he will be the Savior of the world. And they also have, and I want us to consider this just as we finish. They have a mission. Again I was saying this earlier. The ordinariness of people who God uses. Are

these the first evangelists? They hear the news of Jesus.

[25 : 05] They go and see Jesus. They experience him. They obviously believe. They say the Lord told us this. We will go and see him. They go and see him and then they go and tell others. Because as I was saying to the kids right at the start, if you get good news you want to tell other people. That's a natural reaction for us. If we're excited about something, we want to share it. And so we're left with that question, aren't we, of our response to this remarkable event. Our response to this person, Jesus, who is the one who is born, about whom all this is really about. And we're also left with our response to how the shepherds behaved.

You know, they took a trip to see Jesus and every one of us needs to take that journey. Every one of us needs to go to Jesus and to encounter him. And then we're left with the fact that they went and told others because they were so excited. Because they recognized the significance of it. We will have to think through how we do that. Many people are very skeptical. Many people don't understand. Many people don't have a lot of background information about this, if you like. And so it is right for us to think about how we communicate the message. But we have to communicate the message. And we have to go and tell. Sometimes we just need to be willing to go and tell. Sometimes we need to think. The problem here is that I'm not actually excited about this message. It stopped being remarkable to me. And it's become something that I just hold quietly in my own little private space. And so we should be encouraged to witness. We should know that this is God's message. It's his message that he wants to use ordinary people like us to send out there and to be a blessing to many other people. And so we should pray for one another also and encourage each other in this. Amen. Let me just pray. Lord, we ask this morning that you'd please give us a sense of your presence. Please help us to know in a fresh way the great blessing of Christ's coming into the world. Lord, help us to see what a remarkable thing this is. Help us to see the need for us to personally know Jesus, submit to him, trust in him. And help us to tell others. Help us to be excited about this message. Help us to love you and fill us with a sense of your glory and your goodness. Fill us with a sense of your peace and Jesus' name. Amen.