

Good News of Great Joy

Luke 2:1-20

**A sermon preached by Calvin Warpula at the
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It's easy to get depressed from reading the newspaper and listening to and watching the news of our world, our country, and our state and city. Here are some headline and lead stories in today's Houston Chronicle:

“Battle Lines Drawn over City Pensions,” “Don't Tell, Don't Ask is a victory for gay rights,” “Obama vows to develop U. S. missile safeguard,” “Likely carcinogen found in most tap water,” “Scientist sues university, says faith cost him his job,” “Twist in a honeymoon slaying,” “Inside Juarez: Hope Amid the Despair,”

One little girl watched the first eight minutes of the evening news with her father. She left in disgust after six consecutive news pieces of bad news. As she left, she asked, “Doesn't anything good ever happen in the world anymore?”

The night that Jesus was born some 2000 years ago was not much different. The headlines in the Jerusalem Chronicle, had there been such a paper, might have carried the following stories: “King Herod Marries Again, Refuses Pleas of former Queen,” “Caesar Raises Taxes, Calls for New Census—Creates Hardship on Poor,” “Two Merchants Murdered on Jericho Road,” “Man Swindled Out of Property in Judah Says Judge was in Cahoots with Swindlers,” “Army Centurion Killed in Fight with Sergeant over Stolen Booty.”

That was the kind of world in which Jesus was born.

Ever since the fall of mankind from God shortly after creation, our world has been and is in a mess. And I, too, being a part of the world, and a sinner against God, I am in a mess, too. My only hope is in God the Father, and in God the Son who is Jesus the Christ, and in the help and assistance of God the Holy Spirit,

I look at the world and I am **distressed**; I look at myself and I am **depressed**, and I look at God and I am **blessed**.

I am thankful to God to say that I have good news from God today. This good news, literally “the gospel,” is the story of how “God so loved the

world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The entire Bible centers in this one great central, fundamental truth.

The message of the OT is “Someone’s coming.” The message of the NT is, “Someone is here and someone is coming again.” The entire Bible centers in this one “someone.” That someone is Jesus of Nazareth.

The story of how the second person of the Godhead, deity, the God team, became flesh and dwelt among us begins with an ordinary Jewish girl in the Galilean hill country in a city named Nazareth. Nazareth was near a major trade route between east and west and south. It is estimated that in the first century that it had a population of 15,000 people. It is a part of the land of Israel known as Galilee of the Gentiles. The reason is that many Gentiles lived in this region. These Gentiles, the peoples of the world who are not Jews, not descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, were pagans. They engaged in feasts and celebrations in orgies in temples built to honor the gods of the Roman Empire. The Gentiles influenced their Jewish neighbors with their sports, games, gambling, worship, greed, and immoral lifestyles. Nazareth was a key center in Galilee. Because it was near the major highways or trade routes, caravans spent the night here. Squadrons of Roman soldiers were stationed here. Nazareth was never known for its spirituality. It is not even mentioned in the OT. In the NT, Nathaniel, one of Jesus’ early disciples from the neighboring town of Cana, only 12 miles away, echoed a common saying when he retorted, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Yet God chose Nazareth, not Rome, Damascus, Athens, Alexandria, or Jerusalem. In this hill-billy, hick city God saw a young woman that according to Jewish marriage customs of the time must have been 14 to 15 years old. The girls were promised at an early age, some as early as age 13, to be married. This engagement was called a betrothal. A betrothal would last a year. During this time, the couple would be known as husband and wife and the relationship could only be broken by a divorce. However, during this time, the couple did not sleep together or live together. They did not take those privileges until after the community wedding and celebration when the groom would take his new bride to his house.

God looked down from heaven and saw Mary, an ordinary Jewish girl betrothed to be married to a Jewish carpenter named Joseph. This young woman was a devout and righteous woman who loved the Lord and honored her betrothal commitment by keeping herself sexually pure. She believed that true love waits.

One day an angel appeared to her. She was frightened by the angel. She had never seen an angel before. Sometimes angels brought good news and sometimes angels brought bad news. Mary is said to be “highly favored by the Lord” because God has chosen her because of her character to be the most important mother in the world. The angel announced to this little girl, “You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.”

The good news of God then begins with a public scandal: an unwed pregnant teenager. Mary is stunned. She immediately asks, “How can this be? I am a virgin. I have never known a man. I’m not married and I am sexually pure.”

The angel explained: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Nothing is impossible with God.”

The word “overshadow” here is the same word used of God’s presence among the Israelites in the wilderness when he overshadowed them with the pillar of cloud and of fire. It is the word used of the presence of God in the *skkinah* in the temple. It simply means that God is going to work a miracle in your womb.

There is no crude, lustful thought here of God mating with a female in fleshly relations. It is a high and holy thought of God miraculously working in Mary’s womb to conceive a baby by his power. This is the first and only birth of this nature in the history of the world. There never was a virgin birth before and there has been or will be one since.

Some resist the idea of the virgin conception because it is biologically impossible. But it's like the little boy who asked his preacher dad a question. The dad preached on the story of Jonah and the big fish. When he got home, his son asked, “Daddy, did you really mean what you preached? Do you really believe that? Daddy, do you believe that a fish could swallow a man and keep him alive for three days and three nights?”

The preacher sat down with his son and said, “Well now son, let me ask you a question. If God could make a man to begin with out of absolutely nothing, son, don't you believe that God could make a fish that could keep a man alive for three days and three nights?”

The little fellow said, “Well, if you're going to bring God into it that's different.” The virgin birth brings God into it. That's the only explanation.

God did not force this pregnancy upon Mary against her will. When the angel gave her the announcement, Mary responded to the angel, “I am

the Lord's servant. May it be to be as you have said." Mary voluntarily submitted to the Lord's will for her life.

This shows her faith and commitment to God. She was willing to give her body to bear the Christ child. She was willing to carry that baby in her womb for nine months. She was willing to go through childbirth to bring the Savior into the world. She was willing to rear this baby, to feed this baby from her own milk, to burp, to change dirty diapers, to nurture. She was willing to teach and train this baby to adolescence and to adulthood for God.

Mary's song in Luke chapter one shows her devotion to God. Notice it with me now in Luke chapter one, beginning in verse 46: [read vs. 46-49].

Mary is a devout, Jewish woman but she is not sinless. She speaks of "God her savior." Mary needed the forgiveness of God just like every other person. The baby that she bore would someday die on the cross for the forgiveness of my sins, your sins, the world's sin, and Mary's sin.

God the Father chose this ordinary young woman in an ordinary city to give flesh to God the word. "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God. Without him was nothing made that has been made. In him was life and the life was the light of men. And the word became flesh and dwelt among us." Thus reads the opening paragraph of the Gospel of John.

This miraculous, virginal conception was the means that God the Father chose for God the Son to become flesh. Now God could have had the Son to come into this world as the angel of the Lord who would temporarily appear to have flesh but it would only be an appearance of God. Now God, who made man and woman in the beginning out of the dust of the earth, and who made the earth out of nothing, could have created a body for his son the same way. But God so loved the world that he wanted to totally become in every way like man except sin. That means that following the miraculous conception the gestation and birth of Jesus through Mary's womb and birth canal was totally natural and normal. God the Son became flesh and dwelt among us.

This is a shocking surprise. Who would have ever thought that God would stoop so low as to come into this world through a messy human birth, and be a baby eighteen inches long, seven pounds or so, a helpless baby so small that he could have been easily stepped on by one of the cows near the manger? The mystery of godliness is this: that God the word forever changed himself and took forever our humanity. God the Father has no flesh and no body; God the Holy Spirit has no flesh and no body; but God the Son took flesh, lived in the flesh, died in the flesh, was buried in the flesh, arose

in the flesh, ascended in the flesh, and is coming again in the flesh. The flesh of Jesus was somewhat different as a result of his resurrection and his body was glorified when he ascended into the heavens, but the fact remains: he became what he was not forever. He assumed our humanity into heaven and will come in like manner as he went. “There is one mediator between God and man, the man Jesus.” “For in Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form”.

We don't know exactly when God touched Mary's womb and caused it to conceive but it must have occurred shortly thereafter. According to Luke's gospel, in just a little while, Mary went away to the hill country of Judea to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who in her old age was now six months pregnant with a son to be named John. Mary stayed with Elizabeth for three months and then returned home to Nazareth.

Shortly after this time, Mary began showing signs of her pregnancy. Joseph, her husband to be, was one of the first to notice it. The Gospel of Matthew, chapter one, tells us Joseph's side of the story. Joseph was a good and righteous man of God. He was shocked, stunned and surprised that his little Mary was pregnant. Thoughts flashed through his mind in rapid succession: “How could she do this to me? To us? Who is the father? Who did this? Mary, you have messed up our lives for good.” Joseph then began to think what he would do now. He knew positively the baby was not his because he had kept himself chaste and pure for his wedding night. Mary must have gotten involved with some enticing Roman soldier or a fast-talking traveling salesman. Whatever the case, Joseph thought, “I don't want her hurt anymore. I will divorce her privately and quietly and let her go her way and I will go mine.” That night, in a dream an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, and said, [read Matt. 1:21-22]. The text then says, [read Matt. 1:24-25].

The text says that Joseph and Mary then had a formal wedding. They started living together as husband and wife but there was no sexual union between them until after the baby Jesus was born.

This early marriage would salvage some of Mary's reputation but it still does not stop wagging tongues from spreading the gossip of the young girl who got in trouble and had to get married quickly. Mary and Joseph knew the truth but how do you explain a virgin birth, a once in eternity virgin birth to your friends and neighbors. I can imagine what some of them would say. “Hmm. A virgin birth? Ha ha. Now I've heard everything. Virgin birth, my eye. Hey, storks don't bring babies, not even in Nazareth.” Mary and Joseph had to live with the scandal. How could they prove otherwise?

Maybe to save Mary from some of this scandalous pressure and to be near his lovely wife during the latest terms of her pregnancy are the reasons that Joseph took Mary with him to obey the emperor's orders that every Jew return to his native city to register and pay his taxes.

Caesar Augustus in Rome ruled the world as this time. He became emperor in 27 B.C. and ruled until A. D. 14 when he died and Tiberius succeeded him. His real name was Octavian but the Roman senate gave him the name "Augustus" which means "high and exalted, august, or reverend." They gave him this name because for the powerful, rich and for the Roman citizens he brought about the *Pax Romana*, "the peace of Rome." This *Pax Romana* was enforced by the Roman army. However, this *Pax Romana* meant heavy taxation and economic exploitation for the poor. It did not end slavery. The *Pax Romana* meant very little to the small, far away places like Palestine and to small villages like Bethlehem.

So Joseph took his pregnant wife, Mary, with him to the small village of Bethlehem of Judea, five miles south of Jerusalem. Bethlehem which literally means "house of bread" was the ancestral home of King David. It was here that the "bread of life" came into the world. It was here that David kept sheep for his father Jesse. His grandfather, Obed, was born here to Boaz and Ruth. Five hundred years before Jesus, the prophet Micah prophesied [read Micah 5:1-2]. The prophecy stated that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem, not Nazareth. Isn't it amazing how God moved a pagan emperor in Rome, 1500 mile away, to order a census, and that every Jew had to return to his home town, and that meant then that Joseph and Mary had to come to Bethlehem? Augustus did not even believe in Jehovah God and he never heard of Jesus Christ, yet God moved him to order an event that fulfilled perfectly a 500-year-old OT prophecy. William Cowper was right, "God moves in a mysterious way, His wonders to perform." This is a prime example of God working "all things for good to those that love him."

We don't know how long Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem when it was time for her to give birth to the one who was to be her savior and our savior. We don't know where Jesus was born except that there was a manger present. We do know that because of the rush of visitors to town to register that there was "no room in the inn." There is no biblical reference to a cave, although Justin, an early church father of A. D. 150 said Jesus was born in a cave. The biblical record says nothing about a barn or a stable or animals present but those might could be assumed from the presence of the animal feeding trough called a "manger." John Nolland in the Word Biblical Commentary on Luke says that the word "inn" could include any kind of

dwelling. He reasons that probably Joseph and Mary were staying in a single room, crowded Palestinian home that was a raised platform above the area directly adjoining where the animals stayed in the same room. There was no room in the house for the baby Jesus so Mary laid him in an animal trough that was free standing or attached to the wall.

Human birth is a messy thing. It is a hard thing for the woman labors in pushing the child from her body. And the first child is typically the hardest. Blood and body fluids cover the baby and the bed. Joseph may have cut the umbilical cord with a pocketknife and tied the cord with a piece of string. Mary quickly wrapped her newborn in uncut pieces of cloth and laid him in the animal feeding trough. Joseph may have cushioned the baby's body with some straw for a mattress.

Whatever the circumstances, Jesus' birth was a sign of the humility of God and of his divine condescension.

In the neighboring fields, possibly the very fields of Boaz and later of Jesse and David, shepherds, just ordinary shepherders, were watching their flocks by night. Possibly these sheep were special ones being raised and prepared to be part of the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem, just five miles north. To their surprise they will hear about and go see one who will be the perfect lamb of God to offer himself for the sins of the world. Shepherds lived with the earth. They could not always be hygienic. They were generally frowned upon by the elite religious upper crust because they handed dead sheep, assisted in the birth of sheep, and could not ceremoniously wash their hands several times a day. They lived in the fields with the animals and probably had an odor of the animals in the pores of their skin. They did not attend the synagogues or the temple services regularly, or at all. They were not refined in social graces. The Pharisees had classed them with the prostitutes and other sinners. Yet it was to shepherds that the first birth announcement was made. God chose ordinary shepherders to hear the first news of the birth of the greatest one ever born into the world.

These shepherds may have been frowned upon by the religious establishment but they glorified and praised God and were obedient to the angels' instruction. They seemed to be in the class to whom God gave peace, "those on whom his favor rests." These shepherds who were the first to hear "the good news of great joy" were also the very first ones to spread the news of the birth of the Messiah, the Savior.

The story of the birth of Jesus is full of surprises, of unexpected events and ways that God works. He chose an ordinary girl in a very ordinary city, not a princess, or a queen in Rome or Jerusalem. He chose the

small, unimportant, unnoticed people to be the main characters in the bringing of his Son into the world. If it were not for Jesus, we would never have heard of Mary or Joseph. And now every female in Mexico and in some other Latino countries has Mary or Maria somewhere in her name. Mary is the most famous woman in the world.

Who would have ever thought that Jesus would grow up in a blue collar craftsman's home, and not in a golden palace with silver dishes? Why Nazareth? Why Bethlehem? Why the manger? Why the Shepherds? This is the most important birth in all the world and all God can find on which to rest the little precious baby is an animal trough? You got to be kidding! And a pregnant, unwed mother---who could ever imagine? But this is God, who takes the simple, the ordinary, the unimportant, the unnoticed and works miracles in their lives.

That means that God can work with me, too. God chooses the lowly, simple things to confound the wise. God is always full of surprises. The Lord tells us, "My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my thoughts higher than your thoughts and my ways higher than your ways, say the Lord" [Isa. 55:7-8].

The life of Jesus here began with a scandal—a pregnant unwed teenager it ended here with a scandal—a Roman cross. The best Christmas tree is not one wrapped in red and silver ribbon and decorated with glittering balls but the tree of Calvary where Jesus died for us. The birth of Jesus and the death of Jesus are inextricably tied together. He was born to die. He died for our sins. The way to the throne was through the cross. Jesus became Lord of the universe following his death and resurrection. His birth gave him a body to offer as a vicarious sacrifice for our sins. Before he was born the angel told Joseph, "You shall call his name Jesus for he shall save his people from their sins." The Bible plainly says, "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." During his ministry, Jesus said, "The son of man is come to seek and to save the lost." When he was only eight days old, the aged Simeon in the temple held the infant Jesus and said to Mary, "A sword will pierce your soul also." The "also" indicates that the sword would pierce Jesus, and the "also" indicates that the same pain would pierce Mary, too. This prefigures his death that grieved his mother, too.

The birth announcement carried with it a seed of the death announcement when the angels said, "Unto you is both this day, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The way Christ saves is through his death on the cross for our sins. The apostle Paul summed it up like this, "Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures."

The angel said, “He is Christ the Lord.” “Jesus is Lord” is the earliest confession of the Christian church. We are free under the Lordship of Jesus to do, not as we please, but as he pleases. Sooner or later, we all have to make the confession a member of Alcoholics Anonymous makes: “I can’t manage my life. I need divine direction and assistance.”

I want you to worship now the risen and reigning Lord Jesus by singing together the sweet refrain, “Jesus is Lord.” After that song, we will commune with our Lord and one another in the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper.

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