

Gods and Kings (*Luke 1:1-20*)

Introduction – We want to continue to remember in the midst of our festive holidays. When a culture forgets the reason for the season, it will come up with its own. Our culture, based on romantic sentimentalism and individual pietism, has re-made Christmas, and the church has led the way with her own errors. “Anti”-Christmas stories emphasize religious sentimentalism (a shot of religious feel-good) and moralism (we really are good people deep down in our hearts). These are antichrist. The Christmas story is the story of sin, promise, redemption, faith and glory.

Bringing the Background to the Foreground (vv1-7) – In shallow storytelling, the background is often unimportant to the message. In thoughtful literature, most if not all of the background information has meaning; it is never simply setting the stage.

Caesar Augustus (v1) – Adopted by Julius, Augustus reigned as Caesar from 27 BC to 14 AD. He took the name “Augustus” meaning “worthy of reverence and worship,” and declared himself divine. He was known as “savior” and “lord” and while reigning, Pax Romana had brought “peace on earth.” Augustus, like David, ordered a census of his entire kingdom.

Quirinius (v2) – Ancient historians write about this “new man,” because he had come to hold his political office on the basis of his own merits rather than by family tradition and inheritance. These two were obeyed, and so “...all went to be registered.”

Bethlehem (vv4-5) – The rich and powerful king who called himself “god” (with the help of his self-made governor) perfectly fulfilled the prophecy of the True God by sending Joseph, of the line of king David, to the city of David (Micah 5:2). The whole world was in motion in order to bring Christ to Bethlehem.

Firtsborn (v7) – Mary brings forth Jesus in poverty. They will offer up turtledoves (2:24) at her purification. He is the firstborn, not only important for the one who would be offered up, but also implying that Mary later had other children, half-brothers and sisters of Jesus (Matt 13:55f). Jesus is laid in a feeding trough, possibly out in a courtyard near an Inn, or even in a cave (which Justin Martyr records in the second century).

The Men, The Messengers, the Message (vv8-20) – Even though He is brought forth in such obscurity, God declares the great rivalry of this King of kings to all other rulers.

Shepherds (v8) – Bethlehem was about 8 miles from Jerusalem. These shepherds were probably caretakers for sheep used in temple sacrifices. Shepherds were not considered the upper-class, nor respected in their day. But this is where the angels would come.

The Angel’s Message (vv9-12) – When the angel appeared in glory, the shepherds were greatly afraid (unlike many sentimental depictions). The declaration is “to all people.” A “Savior” has been born in the city of the great king, David. He is Messiah, the “Lord.” This is a message that is to bring great joy to all people. This is not supposed to be kept secret or private. It is intended to be a general, public, all-inclusive declaration. Nevertheless, God is making this announcement out in the fields, not before the Sanhedrin or Herod.

“Glory to God” (v13-14) – Suddenly this angel is joined by an “army” of angels. This military multitude is declaring another “peace” upon the earth, but it is a peace which comes after glory is given to the true God.

The Shepherds Go (vv15-20) – After the angelic multitudes recede into the heavens (like the stars?) the shepherds go straight to Bethlehem to worship the Lord. The great sign is a little Babe lying in a manger. These shepherds now become the first preachers for the Great Shepherd (v17) and all those who heard marveled at their proclamation. Then they returned to their vocation, glorifying and praising God.

The Glory of the Story – God’s condescension towards us is immeasurable, and His irony as He weaves His story of redemption is wonderful. “Glory to God in the highest” is sung by an angelic host to dirty shepherds in a field. God stoops down to us in the Incarnation, but does so through the lowliest in order to bring forth the greatest.

The Glory Goes to God – Why does He do things this way? We can see that in His redemption story, no glory can go to man, for man never plans nor implements any of this work. It is all the work of God. And He is able to do this using those who love Him (Mary and Joseph) and those who do not (Caesar and Quirinius).

From Glory to Peace – When God gets the glory, true peace is given to men. When men grasp for the glory, any peace is temporal. It only lasts until the next revolution.

From Glory to Joy – When man thinks he has built himself up, there is no lasting joy. When the glory goes to God, man lives in peace and in joy forever.

Coming Like Shepherds – They had nothing to offer the Babe. They would never be heard before the powerful in their day, but God saves the lowly. If you think you have something to bring, you cannot come – you aren’t qualified. If you think that you are too dirty, too sinful, then you do not understand the story, and like Mary, you need to ponder all of this more. The fact that you are a hopeless mess qualifies you to come. God sent His Son into the world to die for people who are as messed up as you and me.

This is the story of the true God and true King. It is His story and all the glory will go to Him.