

## The Original Christmas Choir

Luke 2:4-20

Manuscript and Discussion Guide for December 3, 2023

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In one scene in the Christmas story, God used two very unexpected types of messengers to announce the birth of His Son. The first set of messengers came from the glories of heaven, the other set from the lowliest places on earth. By using these two groups, God communicates to us today that we too—regardless of our status—can bring the message of God’s redemption plan to those around us.

In the early 1830s, a portrait painter was becoming well known for his talent and skill; he was excited about being able to fully support his wife and young family at last.

His name was Henry Morse, and on one lengthy trip away, while he was painting portraits of some well-known people, he and his wife wrote letters to each other. They wrote often, to keep the flow of information steady, especially any news of her due date and the birth of their next child.

Back then, mail was terribly slow. If you can imagine it, just 175 years ago, mail was still traveling by Pony Express. When Abraham Lincoln won his election in 1861, it took nearly a month for the news to reach the west coast.

Well, for Henry Morse, letters from his wife stopped arriving; weeks went by without a word. Finally, he received a letter from his father telling him that his wife, soon after delivering their baby, had suffered a heart attack and had passed away.

The news was so late in arriving that Henry was not able to return home in time, even for his wife’s funeral.

That planted a seed in his mind: there had to be a way to communicate faster. He stopped painting and began experimenting with electric impulses and created a code that translated the impulses into Latin letters.

On May 24, 1844, from inside the old Supreme Court Building in Washington, DC, Samuel Morse demonstrated his new invention by sending a message to his associate in Baltimore, Maryland.

That first telegram was only four words, “What hath God wrought.”

In other words, “Look at what God has done!”

I have heard that human history up to the point of the telegraph was nicknamed “The Great Hush.”

Well, the Great Hush was about to end. Messages now could travel through electric wires at nearly the speed of light, thanks to Henry Morse.

Well, between the Old Testament and the New Testament, there were no messages from heaven for 400 years.

You could call it “The Hush of Heaven.” But that was all about to change. God is about to deliver a message to planet earth—it isn’t a telegram.

You could call it an angel-gram. He’s going to send it by angels who can travel faster than we can imagine; their message is never lost in transmission; everyone who receives an angel-gram gets the message.

Frankly, we can’t imagine the unseen world of angels. If you literally multiply the prophet Daniel’s accounting of angels around the throne of God, Daniel is listening in as 100 million angels worship God (***Daniel 7:10***).

Well, this 400-year hush of heaven is about to end as God sends a choir of angels to deliver the news. You could call them the original Christmas choir.

***Luke is the only Gospel writer to give us this event.*** Let’s take an even closer look at this event, recorded in ***chapter 2***.

As you’re turning, you may know enough of the narrative to know that Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem and, because of the imperial decree to pay taxes in your hometown, Bethlehem was overrun with people.

For Joseph and Mary, this was inconvenient and costly, if not dangerous to travel when Mary was so close to giving birth. But they are making the best out of the worst of conditions.

***Verse 7*** informs us that when they arrive, they find shelter in a Bethlehem stable, more than likely a shallow cave which was commonly used in that region to provide shelter for the animals of travelers.

What we do know is that Mary goes into labor. We also know that there are no doctors, no nurses, no midwife, no one to help this frightened teenage girl who is now experiencing contractions.

Back in their hometown of Nazareth, under normal conditions, if everything had gone according to plan—and it obviously hadn't—the birth of a son would have launched a village wide-celebration.

But instead, here they are, virtually alone; they've swaddled their baby with strips of cloth; Mary is evidently so exhausted, and Joseph too, that they've placed Jesus in a manger **(verse 7)**; when our children were first born, Marsha and I took turns holding them for several hours; not Mary and Joseph, they put Jesus into a feeding trough—a little ledge cut along the wall of the cave, which was typical in that day.

They're tired, anxious, and alone; there is not one friend or family member to celebrate with them or congratulate them.

It was the custom during this time for the father to hire musicians and singers to bring music into this scene as they celebrate the birth of their baby boy.

And there are no musicians in sight.

But then again, God the Father has arranged something Himself—a choir is warming up nearby.

Now verse 8:

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*

*Luke 2:8-11*

The Son of God has just been born and shepherds are the first to find out.

You would think that such an important message like this would have been telegraphed by angel-gram:

- into the temple precinct.
- or to the home of the High Priest.

- or at least to the Sanhedrin—the Supreme court of Israel—who could verify that content of the message.

Let me tell you, one of the first things that amazes me here is who God ignored.

If you were assigned the public relations challenge of announcing the birth of God the Son, you would begin by making a list of everyone who ought to know.

But God seems to be ignoring everybody who should be on that list!

He bypasses the educated, the religious, the politically powerful, the wealthy, the power-players of the world.

He didn't announce it to the Jewish Supreme Court: the Sanhedrin. He didn't announce it to the High Priest in Jerusalem. He didn't have somebody send a memo to Caesar Augustus and the Roman Senate.

The astounding thing is who God ignored in this message. But it's equally shocking who God told.

The most unlikely people to be given this kind of news ***were some shepherds camping out in the field that night, watching over their flocks.***

For generations, shepherds were just as despised as tax collectors and lepers. They were outcasts.

They weren't able to keep all the religious regulations, like washing their hands before eating out there on the hillsides or not touching blood or a dead animal, which was a part of their job description as they delivered lambs and fought off the wolves.

Shepherds were considered perpetually dirty, literally unclean.

According to the Mishna—codified Jewish scribal law—shepherds couldn't worship in the temple. They were permanently banned.

And besides, they worked on the Sabbath, the sheep had this bad habit of never taking Saturday off so neither could the shepherds.

They were disqualified from worship, and *they* are the ones to whom God sends the message; they will be the first to hear the news of the Savior's birth.

But these aren't just any shepherds. These shepherds are camped out in the fields where Boaz used to work, the fields where he spotted a Gentile widow named Ruth, where he demonstrated the grace of God in choosing her—of all people, a former Gentile idolater—to be his bride.

In these same fields, their great-grandson, a shepherd boy named David, used to run around practicing his slingshot as he shepherded the family flock.

Now, in this same field, shepherds are the first to hear the news that Jesus was born.

Someone who would call Himself the Good Shepherd; whom the Apostle Peter would call our **Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4)**. In **Hebrews 13:20** Jesus is called the **Great Shepherd**.

I find it interesting that the title “shepherd” happens to be the title God selected for the men who will lead and feed the Lord’s church.

Of all the titles God could have chosen, He chose the title shepherds, translated pastors in **Ephesians 4:11**, from which we get our word pastures; pastors are to pasture the flock, to feed the flock, to lead them to green pasture.

It’s ironic to me that the term for those who lead the church in worship is the same term for men who were never able to worship in the temple.

Let me make one more observation here; **verse 8** informs us that the shepherds are in the vicinity of Bethlehem (**verse 4 & verse 8**). Bethlehem is only 6 miles south of Jerusalem; it was on the rural outskirts of the city.

Jerusalem of course, would swell with several million Jews during Passover as they came with their lambs to sacrifice in celebration of their former deliverance from Egypt.

Josephus, the first century Jewish historian records for us that during the lifetime of Jesus, around 250,000 lambs would be killed and eaten in Jerusalem’s annual Passover feast.

Where would they get all those sheep from? Well, many people raised their own, but the temple also raised sheep and other animals which it sold to worshippers. In fact, it was big business for the temple.

A rule is recorded in the Mishna—that Jewish book of law I mentioned earlier—that sheep found between Jerusalem and Bethlehem were qualified for temple sacrifices.

More than likely, these shepherds are on the temple payroll; they’re working for the priests, watching over thousands of lambs and sheep, destined for the sacrificial altar in Jerusalem.

So get this irony: God is announcing the birth of the final sacrificial lamb to shepherds who are watching over sacrificial lambs. God is announcing to men who are unclean that the Savior has been born who can cleanse them. God is announcing to people out of fellowship with the worship system of Israel that a baby has been born who will bring them into fellowship with God.

And that's just **verse 8**. **Verse 9** is where the fireworks start.

**Luke writes:**

*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.*

*Luke 2:9*

I guess so! For nearly 500 years, no angel has been seen by anybody on earth and suddenly the sky lights up!

**Now verse 10:**

*And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."*

*Luke 2:10-11*

This angel delivers quite a divinely appointed telegram that's loaded with information.

In fact, he reveals three titles for the newborn baby boy.

The first title is the word **Savior**.

This was a politically combustible term because this word Savior (*soter*) was known all over the Roman empire. And that's because it was the title adopted already by the Emperor Caesar Augustus; He claimed to be the *soter*, the Savior of the World. The Gentiles especially would perk up their ears at this title especially.

The next title the angel reveals is the title **Christ**, a Savior who is Christ (*Christos*, the anointed One).

This would have perked up the ears of the Jewish world. This was the title specifically designated for the Messianic office. Only the Messiah could claim the title "Christ."

So, with these two titles, the Gentiles and the Jews will be astonished by this message from the Shepherds.

But this last title summarizes everything in one breathtaking claim.

This Savior, this Christ, is also **the Lord**.

The name Lord is from *Kurios*; it happens to be the Greek counterpart to the Hebrew term Yahweh. In fact, throughout the Greek translation of the Old Testament, more than 6,000

times, *kurios* is the translation of Yahweh, Yehovah or Jehovah, as we would say it in English.

Lord means Jehovah/God. These lyrics included the astonishing truths that the Savior, who had come to save them—Christ who had come as the Messiah—was deity in the flesh.

So, you could read this announcement this way:

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the anointed Messiah, none other than Jehovah in the flesh.*

**Savior, Christ, Lord.** The true gospel demands all three titles.

A Jehovah's Witness can't agree with this angelic choir; a Mormon can't agree to this; a Muslim can't agree; a Hindu or Buddhist won't agree with this announcement.

They might agree that:

- Jesus was an anointed prophet.
- that Jesus was one of many sons of God.
- that Jesus is one of many Saviors.

But they do *not* believe that Jesus is:

- the anointed Messiah.
- Jehovah in the flesh.
- eternal deity now equally human.
- God incarnate.
- the only true and living Lord.

The Apostle Paul declared in **Romans 10:9** that in order to be saved you must **confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord.**

This isn't a statement of your submission to His mastery; this is a statement that you believe He is deity. He is Jehovah-God—the only Lord of eternity.

One day, when you see the face of Jesus, you will be looking into the face of Jehovah.

**Now let's move ahead to verse 13:**

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying ...*

*Luke 2:13*

Before we rush to verse 14, you might wonder if angels were singing. It says here that they were saying.

That's **going to** mess up a bunch of Christmas hymns.

Were the angels singing or not? Here in verse 13, it says that the heavenly host was praising God and saying, the Greek word praising is the verb aineo (αἰνεῖω), **which is** rarely found in the Greek New Testament.

However, it's often used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament for the verb hallel which refers to praising God, primarily through singing. The hallels were put to music throughout Israel's history.

Aineo in the New Testament is interchangeable with hallel in the Old Testament.

Both words typically refer to praising God through song.

**So**, you could amplify verse 13 correctly to read:

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God with these lyrics ...

And now verse 14, in poetic form—musical form—gives us the lyrics to their anthem:

*“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”*

*Luke 2:14*

What a choir this must've been, as many as 100 million literally filling the sky; what singing this must have been.

This original Christmas choir literally explodes the heavens with their song of grace and the gospel of Jesus Christ.

- Job chapter 38 tells us that angels watched as God the Son spoke the universe into existence, and as they watched, they sang (Job 38:7).
- The Book of Revelation tells us that at the end of human history, we will sing to the Lamb one day in **h**eaven and the angels will join us (Revelation 19:5).

And now here, in between the creation of the world, and the final glory of heaven, you have this angelic choir. **A**t this most significant moment in world history, **the** angelic choir fills the sky with singing.

Luke writes here in verse 15:

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*

*Luke 2:15-16*

The verb translated "found their way" means to discover after searching.

And they're not just looking for a newborn baby, no doubt other babies were born during these difficult days of travel, no, they're looking for: a baby so impoverished, belonging to parents so poor and alone, without friends or family or accommodations, a baby lying in a feed trough; that is the unusual sign, **and it will be** impossible to miss.

Well, they finally discover Jesus and his parents in verse 17:

*And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

*Luke 2:17-20*

By the way, did you notice that now the shepherds are glorifying and praising God? They're singing what the angels had sung to them earlier. They were evidently fast learners.

Has it ever occurred to you that angels haven't sung in the skies since this event here?

It's been 2,000 years now. God could send more angels couldn't He? Why not every Christmas season?

I would. Every Christmas season I would completely drown out, "Here Comes Santa Claus" with a 100 million angel choir. Why doesn't He?

Well, we know the angels will sing again in the future; but for now, God has chosen to use ordinary, simple, faltering, forgiven, children of God.

We're His choir now; we're His choir for now. We're still singing the lyrics today of this original Christmas choir.

And by the way, you're listening to just another shepherd today, from a long line of shepherds, repeating the news to you today: that for you, Jesus is and Jesus must be: your Savior, your Messiah, your Lord.

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