

Explore the Bible: December 20

Proclaimed – Luke 2:4-19

By Ann Maniscalco



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“Are you ready for Christmas?” We probably hear this question numerous times during the month of December. The signs of the season are everywhere. Christmas carols fill the airwaves, Santa welcomes awestruck youngsters to his lap, manger scenes nestle in places of honor in our homes, and choirs prepare lyrical celebrations of the Messiah’s birth – but the question gives me cause for pause.

We decorate homes, wrap gifts, set holiday menus, and plan get-togethers. When all is done we breathe a sigh of relief, but does an aching longing remain? Perhaps we haven’t gotten “ready for Christmas” properly by preparing our hearts. As we ponder anew the beloved story that commenced that glorious night so long ago, may our spirits warm in worship and praise over the coming of Emmanuel... God with us.

“And it came to pass in those days,” the familiar story commences (Luke 2:1 NKJV). What were “those days”? Let’s examine some of the background for clarity. Historians show this to be a time of Roman occupation after conquering what would later become known as the Holy Land.

Previously, Alexander the Great had begun his conquest of the world, spreading the Greek language and culture far and wide. Caesar Augustus wielded authority over the entire Roman empire of the time and called for a census, possibly to facilitate taxation. Although this was secular politics, God often has used such worldly events to orchestrate His purposes.

Roman subjects customarily returned to their birthplaces to register for a census. Thus, Joseph, because “he was of the house and lineage of [King] David” (Luke 2:4), traveled to Bethlehem. Accompanying him on this arduous journey was Mary, his betrothed wife, who was in the latter stages of pregnancy. After arriving, “the days were completed for her to be delivered” (v. 6).

The time was perfect, according to God’s timetable: “But when the fulness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman...” (Galatians 4:4). The place was also previously God-ordained: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little... out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be ruler in Israel” (Micah 5:2).

This quiet, obscure village would welcome the Christ child: “And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths” (Luke 2:7), which provided warmth and security.

Whether the couple had arrived recently, or just hadn’t found a suitable place to give birth in the busy inn, Mary welcomed her Son in a lowly setting “and laid Him in a manger” (v. 7). This manger actually may have been a stone-feeding trough; wood was not plentiful in the area.

As Mary and Joseph lovingly tended their newborn, God set the scene for a glorious birth announcement. In nearby fields were some shepherds, “keeping watch over their flocks by night” (v. 8). Heralding the coming of the One who would later call

Himself “the good shepherd” (John 10:7), these humble shepherds were chosen to be the first to receive the news.

As an angel stood before them, illuminating them with God’s glory, fear overwhelmed the men. Seeking to calm them, the angel announced “good tidings of great joy which will be to all people” (Luke 2:10). The “Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (v. 11) had been born! This Jewish Messiah did not come only for his countrymen, but to freely offer salvation to all.

Hearing how they would find the kingly Babe, they were invited to seek one “wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger” (v. 12). Suddenly, the lone angel was joined by a “multitude” of others, who broke out in exultant, God-glorifying praise, while announcing a message of peace and good will to men (v. 14).

After the angelic entourage departed, the shepherds hurried to Bethlehem and found Mary, Joseph, and the holy Babe, just as the angel had said. What a story they had to tell! They did exactly that, making “widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child” (v. 17). All who heard the news “marveled at those things” (v. 18).

It had been an incredible journey that culminated with the humble birth, and then came the unexpected manger visit by a bunch of scruffy shepherds excitedly announcing their heavenly visitation. Mary needed time to process these events. Today’s passage ends by telling us she “kept all those things and pondered them in her heart” (v. 19).

As we, like Mary, take time to ponder this story, may we likewise follow the shepherds’ lead, making known the “good news of great joy” to those who have yet to hear.

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