

Savior's Birth

Devotional Reading: Micah 5:1-6
Background Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Luke 2:1-16

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel

said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom
his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Key Text

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." —Luke 2:15

Introduction

A. Life-Changing Announcement

At one point or another, monotony afflicts us all. One day might feel the same as the previous day. Repetitive days become redundant weeks, and we seek any relief from the cycle of monotony.

Occasionally, a life-changing event breaks up the monotony. The first day of school, a wedding, a parent's funeral, or a national tragedy are examples of joyous or sorrowful events that change our lives.

I imagine that shepherds in the first century AD faced boredom and monotony in their work. Their tasks were likely the same day-to-day: ensure sheep were well-fed and safe. However, for some certain shepherds outside Bethlehem, their whole lives changed in a moment one evening. Today's text details the events that brought a life-changing announcement to these shepherds.

B. Lesson Context

Today's lesson text is part of a much larger story in Luke 1–2 that details Jesus' conception and birth. Luke weaves this story with his account of John the Baptist's conception and birth (see lesson 3). Both births were announced by an angel, accomplished by God's miraculous power, and accompanied by wonders that God performed.

Luke juxtaposed the birth accounts for two reasons. First, John the Baptist was a prominent figure in first-century Judea. His disciples traveled as far as Ephesus in Asia Minor (Acts 19:1-3). Second, Luke's Gospel demonstrates the link between the ministries of John and Jesus. John was a messenger preparing people for the coming Messiah (see Isaiah 40:3-5, quoted in Luke 3:4-6). Jesus was this promised Messiah, a fact confirmed by Simeon (Luke 2:25-32). By telling the birth stories of John and Jesus, Luke emphasizes how these events were all part of the same glorious plan of God.

In the centuries before Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire had conquered territories around the Mediterranean Sea. By 63 BC, Rome had conquered the city of Jerusalem and the surrounding territory, although it took some years for the Romans to solidify their control. Caesar Augustus became emperor in 27 BC. Due to his numerous

A King

Forever and Ever

Unit 1: Jesus, the Heir of David

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Identify those invited to visit the newborn Jesus.
2. Trace on a map the route and distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem.
3. State a way that he or she will “go to Bethlehem” in a spiritual sense this Christmas season.

Lesson Outline

Introduction

- A. Life-Changing Announcement
- B. Lesson Context

I. In Those Days (Luke 2:1-7)

- A. The Decree of Rome (vv. 1-3)
- B. The Journey of a Family (vv. 4-5)
- C. The Birth of a Child (vv. 6-7)

Hopes and Expectations

II. In the Fields (Luke 2:8-16)

- A. Angelic News (vv. 8-12)
- B. Heavenly Host (vv. 13-14)
- C. Shepherds' Response (vv. 15-16)

Drop Everything Now

Conclusion

- A. Journey to Bethlehem
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

building projects, he had to tax his people heavily. Those who did not submit to Roman authority could be fined, flogged, exiled, or executed.

Roman domination was more than a political and economic burden for the Jewish people. It was also a religious problem: as long as Rome ruled, God did not (or so it seemed). The reality of Roman occupation was a constant reminder that God had consigned Israel to a state of exile—even “exile” within its own borders—for generations.

The faithful looked to the promises of Scripture for hope. God had promised a great Son of David to rule over his people (2 Samuel 7:12-16) and restoration beyond exile (Isaiah 51:11). One day, the pagan powers would be destroyed, and God would rule supreme over all nations (Daniel 7:1-14). By the first century AD, centuries had passed since God first gave his promises. The faithful looked beyond the failures of their forefathers and kept their trust in God’s promise to take back his world.

These ideas intersect with Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth. The power of Rome is portrayed through its ability to tax. We glimpse the oppression of Israel in the poverty of Jesus’ family. The promise of God is evident as we hear again of David, whose promised Son is to rule over all.

I. In Those Days

(Luke 2:1-7)

A. The Decree of Rome (vv. 1-3)

1. In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

Luke transitions the narrative of his Gospel account from the birth and childhood of John the Baptist and the subsequent worship from his father, Zechariah (Luke 1:57-80). The phrase *in those days* places the events of the text during the reign of the emperor *Caesar Augustus* (27 BC–AD 14).

The growth of the Roman Empire depended on taxes. These monies funded the military, allowing the spread of the *Pax Romana*, or “Roman peace.” To standardize the tax-collection process, the emperor *issued a decree* to take a *census of the entire Roman world*. An accurate count of the empire’s residents was necessary to gather the most taxes.

This verse also reveals Luke’s intention to give an orderly account of the context of the story of Jesus (compare Luke 1:1-4). By presenting the historical circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth, Luke demonstrated that Jesus was born in a real and specific context.

2. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

Estimating the exact year of Jesus’ birth proves challenging. The mention of “Herod” in Matthew 2:1 and Luke 1:5 gives us a time frame for Jesus’ birth. That individual is Herod the Great, king of Judea. He died in 4 BC, so Jesus’ birth must have occurred before that time. However, historical sources outside the Bible state that *Quirinius* became *governor of Syria* in 6 AD, about 10 years after the death of Herod the Great.

There are multiple ways to understand Luke’s statement without assuming he made a mistake. First, the underlying Greek word translated *governor* may refer to a lesser position in the government. According to the historian Tacitus, Quirinius was elected “Counsel” of Syria in 12 BC, and Luke may have been referring to this position. It is also possible that the sentence structure in the original language means that this was the tax that occurred *before* Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Considering the timing of the reigns of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great, a reasonable calculation places the birth of Jesus at around 5 or 4 BC.

3. And everyone went to their own town to register.

Roman taxes required that each person return to the *town* of his or her ancestors to be counted in a census. Ancestral records or land-ownership titles determined the citizenship of that town. However, as their housing situation in Bethlehem would soon reveal, it is unlikely that Joseph owned property or a home in Bethlehem (compare Luke 2:7, below).

How to Say It

Colossians	Kuh-losh-unz.
Ephesus	Ef-uh-sus.
Herod	Hair-ud.
Quirinius	Kwy-rin-ee-us.

What Do You Think?

How should Christians discern whether or not they should cooperate with the directives given by the government?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures come to mind that guide your decision-making in this regard?

B. The Journey of a Family (vv. 4-5)

4-5. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

Before receiving news of the census, *Mary* had been in *Nazareth in Galilee* (Luke 1:26-27). *Joseph* also lived in Nazareth, as the two were *pledged to be married*. Following the census requirements, Joseph traveled to his ancestral home *because he belonged to the house and line of David* (compare Matthew 1:6, 16). The town of *Bethlehem* had been the hometown of David before he became king (1 Samuel 17:12, 58). The name *Bethlehem* means “house of bread,” a fitting meaning for the birthplace of the one who is “the bread of life” (John 6:35, 48).

The couple *went up from* Nazareth because Bethlehem is located in the mountains of Judea at an elevation of approximately 2,550 feet above sea level. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem required a total elevation gain of about 1,250 feet.

The trip between the towns was about 85 to 90 miles, depending on the route. A day’s journey on foot could cover up to 20 miles. However, *Mary* was in the late stages of pregnancy and *expecting a child*. Further, the trip was fraught with danger and hardship. The couple risked injury due to the rugged terrain, possible ambushes by bandits, and challenging weather conditions. The journey may have taken the couple a week or longer.

C. The Birth of a Child (vv. 6-7)

6. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born,

After arriving in Bethlehem, *Mary* went into labor. Luke does not indicate the time between when they arrived and her labor.

7. and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

Mary’s pregnancy came to its fulfillment, and she gave birth to *her firstborn, a son*—an obvious point because she was a virgin (Luke 1:34). This detail also implies that she had other children in the following years (compare Mark 6:3).

The first order of business was to wrap the newborn in swaddling *cloths*, long fabric strips that bound the infant’s limbs. This method ensured the baby stayed warm and felt secure. An ancient non-biblical work notes that the baby who would later become King Solomon “was nursed with care in swaddling clothes. For no king has had a different beginning of existence” (Wisdom of Solomon 7:4-5). The opposite is seen in Ezekiel 16:4.

A *manger* was a feeding trough for domesticated animals. A tradition dating back to the second century depicts Jesus’ birthplace as being a cave. This place might have resembled a rudimentary cellar for storing perishables and housing domestic animals. The promised Messiah, God’s own Son, entered the world in a place reserved for cattle—a humble backdrop seemingly unfit for the “firstborn over all creation” through whom “all things were created” (Colossians 1:15-16; compare 2 Corinthians 8:9).

Older versions of the Bible, like the *King James Version*, use the word “inn” rather than *guest room*. This has led some readers to imagine that *Mary* and *Joseph* were denied space at an ancient hotel. However, the underlying ancient Greek word better describes a guest room in a house (compare Luke 22:11). One possibility is that the couple was staying with an extended family member who had no room for them because of other family members in town for the census. As a result, the couple found themselves in the only available living space in the house.

Hopes and Expectations

The birth of our first child did not go as we had hoped. My wife and I had decided on a home

birth with a midwife. Complications during labor led the midwife to suggest we go to the hospital. There, doctors concluded that a C-section would be necessary. As my wife recovered from the procedure, I joyously held my newborn son, Wilder. That joy, however, soon changed.

Doctors informed us that Wilder had a bacterial infection that required immediate transport to the neonatal intensive care unit. If not treated immediately, the infection could spiral into meningitis.

I boarded an ambulance with my newborn son, encased in a transport incubator. He spent a week in the NICU, but it felt much longer for my wife and me. Eleven years have passed, and Wilder sits on my lap as I write this illustration.

My wife and I could never have expected how the first weeks of our son's life would play out, but we trusted that God would lead us through that season. Using my "sanctified imagination," I envision Mary and Joseph also had certain hopes and expectations for the birth of Jesus, which likely did not include a manger for a cradle. How are you preparing to trust God, no matter the circumstances?

—C. S.

What Do You Think?

How have you seen God work through surprising circumstances?

Digging Deeper

How can you get better at noticing God's work around you?

II. In the Fields

(Luke 2:8-16)

A. Angelic News (vv. 8-12)

8. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Luke's Gospel brings readers' attention to the fields outside Bethlehem. *Shepherds* worked an important but lowly profession in the ancient world: caring for and tending to sheep. The hill country surrounding Bethlehem contained suitable pastureland for tending to sheep and goats (compare 1 Samuel 16:4, 11). Shepherds and their flocks were typically *in the fields* from early spring

to early fall, but nothing in the Gospel accounts confirms the exact time of year of Jesus' birth.

9. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Scripture sometimes depicts angels as heralds, messengers for God (examples: Zechariah 1:14-17; 3:6-7; Matthew 28:5-7). Unlike the previous angelic appearances in Luke's Gospel (Luke 1:11-20, 26-38), this particular *angel* is unnamed.

Consider how the shepherds might have felt. They had been guarding their flocks, on alert for sounds from predators or thieves. Out of that silence came a sudden angelic appearance with *the glory of the Lord*. No wonder they were *terrified!*

10. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Scripture sometimes depicts angels as agents of God's judgment (examples: 2 Samuel 24:16-17; Revelation 15:1). Therefore, upon seeing *the angel*, the shepherds may have feared pending divine judgment. The imperative, *do not be afraid*, acknowledged their fears (compare Genesis 15:1; Luke 1:30). The *good news that will cause great joy* was the beginning of the gospel message.

11. "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

Shepherds were among the first to receive the good news of the child *born* in Bethlehem. The proclamation signaled that God was overturning the world's expectations, casting down those considered mighty by the world's standards and raising up those considered lowly, like these shepherds (see Luke 1:52; compare 7:22).

This child would someday be *a Savior* for people (compare Luke 1:47; John 4:42). Jesus' work, culminating in his death and resurrection, enacted God's plan of salvation for the world (1 John 4:14).

The title *Christ* comes from the ancient Greek translation of the ancient Hebrew title *Messiah* (compare John 1:41; 4:25). Both titles mean "anointed one," referring to the anointed Redeemer and King of the people of God proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets (Isaiah 9:6-7; 16:5; Micah 5:2; etc.). The promised Messiah would save his people and establish a reign of peace (see Zechariah



Visual for Lesson 4. Display this visual as you discuss Luke 2:4 and the possible routes taken by Mary and Joseph.

9:9-10). First-century Jewish belief held that the Messiah would come from the family of *David* (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Jeremiah 23:5-6) and the town of Bethlehem (see Micah 5:2-4; Matthew 2:3-6).

Lord is a term of absolute authority. The Roman emperor was often called the “savior” and “lord” of the empire. By referring to Jesus as *the Lord*, the angel proclaimed the arrival of the absolute and eternal ruler of the cosmos (compare Matthew 28:18).

12. “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

The swaddling *cloths* were expected for a newborn (see Luke 2:7, above). On the other hand, the *manger* was unexpected, not ordinarily used as a crib for a baby. This *sign* would confirm to the shepherds that everything the angel said about Christ had been accurate.

B. Heavenly Host (vv. 13-14)

13. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

The sudden manifestation of a heavenly multitude emphasizes the angel’s message. The Old Testament identifies *the heavenly host* as an army of angelic messengers who served the Lord of Hosts (examples: 1 Kings 22:19; Psalm 103:21).

Luke, more than any other New Testament writer, includes the theme of praising God in

his writings. A form of the phrase *praising God* appears nine times in the New Testament, seven of which are found in the writings of Luke (here and in Luke 2:20; 19:37; 24:53; Acts 2:47; 3:8-9).

The text does not say whether or not the heavenly host sang or spoke their praise, only that their voices joined to praise God. What the prophets had prophesied, even without understanding the full import of their own words, was being fulfilled. And what the angels longed to see (1 Peter 1:10-12) was finally revealed.

14. “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

The host’s message of praise is two-way, intended to be received by *God* and directed for the good of humanity. The *glory* given to God acknowledges his power and his work of salvation. The phrase *in the highest heaven* refers to the place where God resides (compare Luke 19:38). Though God is all-powerful, he revealed himself in and through humble circumstances: a baby born in a manger.

The second part of the statement refers to the genuine *peace now on earth*. The Roman Empire brought the *Pax Romana* through force, but only God can bring eternal peace. His peace is not just the cessation of hostility or the absence of conflict; it is the good news of God’s salvation through Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6; Acts 10:36). One of the most significant peace pronouncements of the New Testament is this: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1).

What Do You Think?

What steps can you take to be an agent of God’s peace in the world?

Digging Deeper

How might you respond to the claim that *peace* only refers to the absence of conflict?

C. Shepherds’ Response (vv. 15-16)

15-16. When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one

another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

The angels delivered their message and praises and then departed *into heaven*. This raises some intriguing questions. Did they simply disappear? Was there a visible departure until they could no longer be seen? What is not in doubt, however, is the shepherds’ response. Stunned, they collected their thoughts and took the only reasonable actions their experiences led them to do.

It was just as the angel had said: shepherds found the infant Jesus *lying in the manger*, with *Mary and Joseph* in attendance. Without a doubt, this was a privileged group of people who gathered that night. God makes himself known to the lowly (Luke 10:21).

What Do You Think?

What steps will you take to be attentive to God’s directives, even if they are highly disruptive to your plans?

Digging Deeper

What distractions might you need to remove in order to hear better from the Spirit of God?

Drop Everything Now

One Sunday, when my wife neared full-term pregnancy with our daughter, I had been scheduled to preach at a church about two hours away. She had experienced some contractions that morning, but we didn’t think she was going into labor. Still, I was apprehensive about traveling hours away from her. We agreed that I would preach and promptly return home.

Before I began the sermon, I placed my phone face-up on the pulpit. I informed the congregation of my wife’s situation. If she called during my sermon, I would answer and, if needed, leave immediately. I would drop everything to be with her.

The congregation understood, and, fortunately, I did not receive a phone call. Almost two weeks later, my wife gave birth to our daughter.

What things would cause you to drop everything immediately? The word of the angels and the revelation from the Lord were enough for these shepherds to drop everything to visit the newborn baby in the manger.

During this time of year, it seems like *everything* requires our attention and focus. What steps must you take to be like the shepherds and “drop everything” to make time for Christ during this Christmas season?

—C. S.

Conclusion

A. Journey to Bethlehem

The circumstances surrounding Jesus’ birth subvert our worldly expectations of value and importance. Among the first people to receive the announcement of Jesus’ birth were not the powerful and elite, although such people did receive the announcement (see Matthew 2:1-12).

Instead, the first announcement of good news came to lowly shepherds. In that instant, their lives forever changed. Their journey to Bethlehem resulted in the spread of the gospel message. They left Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus that night, ready to proclaim the good news they had received (Luke 2:17-18). How will you have a spiritual “journey to Bethlehem” to receive and proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ?

What Do You Think?

How has this lesson led you to think differently about the Christmas story?

Digging Deeper

How will you respond in light of this fact?

B. Prayer

God our Savior, show us how we might “travel to Bethlehem” this Christmastime. Reveal how we might be messengers of the gospel to all people. Thank you for the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

God loves and invites the lowly.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with NIV Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Begin by asking for volunteers to describe how they plan for an extended trip. Ask each volunteer the following questions: 1—What steps were involved in planning the trip? 2—How did you decide what to pack for the trip? 3—What decisions were made regarding the number of stops on the trip? 4—What did you learn about yourself as you planned this trip?

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Packing List for Expecting Parents” exercise from the activity page, which you can download. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated.

After either activity, lead into Bible study by saying, “Even our best plans can sometimes go awry. We can trust that God will provide for us, regardless of the circumstances and our expectations. Today’s lesson will show us how God provided and revealed his work in a way no one could have expected.”

Into the Word

Option. Choose volunteers to play the roles of Caesar Augustus, Joseph, Mary, an angel of the Lord, the heavenly host, and the shepherds. Select another volunteer to be the narrator. Ask the narrator to read aloud Luke 2:1-6 while other volunteers act out the events of the passage. Volunteers may use their “sanctified imagination” to improvise certain events from the story. After reenactment, ask the following question for whole-class discussion: “What part of this story impacted you the most and why?”

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:1-7. Divide learners into groups of three and ask the following questions for in-group discussion: 1—What was the significance of the decree from Caesar Augustus? 2—What is the significance of Joseph’s (and Mary’s) journey to Bethlehem? 3—What Scripture texts speak of Bethlehem’s significance? 4—Why was it significant that Jesus was

placed in a manger? 5—What are three ways that God provided for the needs of Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus? 6—In what unexpected ways has God provided for you or your family?

Ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:8-16. Have learners discuss the following questions in the same groups: 1—Describe when you felt fear after experiencing a work of God. How did you respond? 2—How would you articulate the “good news that will cause great joy” to a modern-day audience? 3—How has God, through Christ Jesus, brought peace to the world? 4—What is the significance that God chose to announce this news to shepherds, a group not highly regarded in the first century? 5—What is the significance that the shepherds were given a sign to find the baby?

Option. Distribute copies of the “Mixed Message” activity from the activity page. Have learners work in pairs to complete as indicated. After three minutes, ask a volunteer to read aloud Luke 2:14 so that pairs may check their answers.

Into Life

Say, “The Christmas season gives us the opportunity to reflect on God’s call on our lives and how we can follow him. In the story of the first Christmas, the shepherds followed God’s call by going to Bethlehem. In our context, we can ‘go to Bethlehem’ in a spiritual sense and notice God’s work.”

Distribute a pen and index cards to each learner. Ask them to write down in one minute or less a way that he or she will “go to Bethlehem” in a spiritual sense this Christmas season.

Place learners into pairs and have them discuss their response before answering the following questions with their partner: 1—What distractions do you need to remove to hear God’s direction better as you “go to Bethlehem”? 2—Who is an accountability partner or spiritual mentor who can help you on this spiritual journey? 3—What is one thing that God could teach you as you “go to Bethlehem”?