

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF JESUS THE MESSIAH
WEEK 5 – JESUS’ BIRTH: THE SHEPHERDS VISIT THE LAMB OF GOD

“Ideal” is NOT a word that we, from a human perspective, can use to describe Jesus’ birth.

Herod the Great had seized the throne of Israel with political support from Rome. Herod was the “King of the Jews” – and yet wasn’t Jewish! Herod's father was an Idumean (from the family of Esau/Edomite). A Jew is a descendant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (not Esau). Herod was king of Judea because he conquered Judea by force, leading a Roman army. Herod was nominally a follower of the Jewish religion, because the Judeans, in Maccabean times, had conquered Idumea and forcibly converted the Idumeans to Judaism. Once in power, Herod so guarded his stolen title, “King of the Jews,” so ruthlessly, he even put his own sons to death when any of them posed a significant political threat.

Joseph, Mary’s betrothed husband nearly divorced her (Matt. 2:18-21). He brought her to Bethlehem near the end of her pregnancy by a decree made by a Gentile. There was no room at the inn – rejection before Jesus was even born! Jesus’ entrance into this world was far less than grand – from a human perspective.

BUT GOD – Gal. 4:4 – “*But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law,*⁵ *to redeem. . . .*”

So, it was the PERFECT time!

Luke 2:1-7 – “*And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife,^[a] who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*”

I’m suggesting that Mary and Joseph – from their perspective - probably didn’t travel to Bethlehem from Nazareth to fulfill Bible prophecy. They traveled to Bethlehem because GOD orchestrated the events!! They HAD to travel to Bethlehem. God used pagan Caesar Augustus to issue a decree that a census would be taken for the purposes of taxation. The Jews hated the Roman taxation. BUT GOD was at work. And so – we MARVEL!

Are we seeing “BUT GOD” moments in our lives? REMEMBER: when we spend time with Jesus, He opens our eyes and God’s desires become our desires – we see our circumstances the way God sees them!

Caesar Augustus (“revered one”; ruler of the Roman Empire when Jesus was born; Gaius Julius Caesar Octavian) was moved by the Spirit of God at exactly the right time. And he unknowingly fulfilled Micah 5:2 – which was written centuries before. The irony re: the census that Caesar Augustus issued – it was one of the ways he employed to get control over the various parts of his empire. He hailed himself as the Savior of the world – reigning over the entire known world. In the process – as he sought to tighten his grip – what he organized led to the fulfillment of the birth of the One Who would eventually reign over the world!

So, Mary and Joseph traveled to – Bethlehem. From Nazareth it was a three-day trek. Some have asked if Mary had to accompany Joseph. The Archaeological Study Bible states: “Mary, also of the house of David, was probably required to enroll (to be registered). . . . women twelve years of age and older were required to pay a poll tax and therefore to register.”

The decree issued by Caesar Augustus brought many into Bethlehem. Ancient Near Eastern rules of hospitality required the local inhabitants to open their homes to the visitors. The numbers of travelers to Bethlehem to be registered, however, would have quickly overwhelmed the poor people of Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph would have, therefore, sought out an inn. Scripture, however, tells us that “. . . *there was no room for them in the inn.*” The Inn Keeper most likely turned many people away.

People were too busy to notice that. . . . God had entered the world as a baby!

Inns in Jesus’ day were seedy little establishments oftentimes run by shady characters that offered only a slightly better alternative to sleeping in the open fields.

So, where did Mary and Joseph find “lodging”?

In reading the Christmas account in Luke 2 – it really doesn’t make much sense unless you know what was written about the Messiah in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Luke 2:8-12 – *“Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”*”

What does this mean to us in Arizona in 2012? Why would an ANGEL OF THE LORD appear to shepherds? Shepherds were the lowest of the low. These Jewish shepherds were under a rabbinical ban since they were living in the fields. Because they were with their flocks in the field 24/7, it was impossible to follow all the law's religious

regulations including purification rites. Therefore, they were shunned by the Jewish community. So here are the shepherds – the lowest of the low – visited by an angel of Almighty God. What does that say to us? God’s grace reaches down to the lowest of the low. REMEMBER, Jesus’ genealogy recorded in Matthew lists four women (women were not highly thought of in this culture) and three of the women were GENTILES! God’s grace reaches down to the lowest of the low. God’s grace reaches down to us!

Where were these shepherds tending their flocks? What does Micah 5:2 tell us? Firstly, there were 2 Bethlehems. . . One in Galilee – 6 mi. NW of Nazareth (Josh. 19:10, 15 – in the listing of cities given to the tribe of Zebulun) Secondly, re: the Bethlehem in Judah, Ephrathah was north of Bethlehem on the road to Jerusalem. Rachel, Jacob’s wife, died delivering Benjamin on the way to Ephrathah and was buried in that place (Gen. 35:16-19).

Sheep destined for Temple sacrifice had to be “kept” in fields year round that were within a certain radius from the Temple in Jerusalem. Ephrathah (on the northern outskirts of Bethlehem) was within that radius. By the way, “Rachel” means EWE (as in LAMB)! AND, in Ephrathah there was a watch tower which was used by shepherds for protection – against enemies – against wild animals. According to writings by the Rabbis – this watch tower was the place where ewes were brought to give birth not to ordinary lambs – but to lambs that were destined for Temple sacrifice in Jerusalem.

In Micah 4:8 we read - “To you, O tower of the flock, (this is the watch tower), the stronghold of the daughter of Zion, to you shall it come – even the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem.” I’m suggesting that the “former dominion” in this passage refers to the first coming of the Messiah – when He was born – to die as a sacrifice. And, where does He come? To the tower of the flock – where the lambs were kept – the lambs that would be sacrificed!

While the shepherds are watching their flocks in an area of Bethlehem called Ephrathah where the sheep that were destined for Temple sacrifice were kept, Luke tells us that the glory of the Lord shone round about the shepherds. The glory of the Lord is God’s manifested presence (Ex. 16:7). It was the Shekinah glory of God that appeared to the children of Israel in the wilderness – in the pillar of fire by night – in the cloud by day. The glory of God filled the Temple when Solomon dedicated God’s house. We read in Ezekiel that the “Glory of God” DEPARTED from the Temple – the glory of the Lord departed from Israel (Eze. 10).

The glory of the Lord is back! When the angels appeared to the Jewish shepherds, the “Glory of God” was back. We read in John 1:14, “And we beheld His glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.” Jesus the Messiah is the very glory of God in the flesh!

The angel speaks of “Good tidings of great joy. . . .” Good tidings” – this was the Gospel – the message of the forgiveness of sin. Galatians 3:8 tells us that the Gospel had been preached to Abraham. In Gen. 12:3 God had told Abraham that all the families of the earth would be blessed through the descendants of Abraham – through the Jewish Messiah – the descendant of Abraham. It was prophesied in the Tanakh – in the Hebrew Scriptures - Isa. 41:27 – that the Messiah would bring “good tidings”.

These “good tidings” would be “to all people.” When God made the covenant with Abraham 2000 years before Jesus, God promised to bless all the families of the earth through the Jewish people. God’s plan of salvation/redemption included all peoples – not only the Jews – but the Gentiles too (Gen. 12:3; Isa. 49:6 – The Messiah restore Jacob [Israel] and be a light to the Gentiles). Jewish people and Gentiles have been receiving God’s gift of forgiveness – of ETERNAL LIFE – through the Messiah, Jesus since sin entered the world.

The Angel mentions that this great news – this joy - was taking place in the City of David – where David was born. The Jewish shepherds knew that the Messiah Who would be King would be a descendant of David.

The Angel mentions “Savior.” What is that to a Jewish person? The Jewish people were looking for a Savior. The Hebrew word for “salvation” in the OT is Yeshua!!!

This Savior was born. In Gen. 3:15 we read about the Messiah as the seed of the woman. Isa. 7:14 – a virgin shall conceive and give birth to Immanuel – God with us. Isa. 9:6 – unto us a Child is born – and His name shall be wonderful, counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

This Savior Who was born is the Messiah the Lord. Messiah means “Anointed” (Isa. 61/Luke 4). In Biblical times Prophets, Priests, and Kings were anointed with oil. The Messiah Whom God the Father had promised would be anointed with oil (Psa. 45:7). The Messiah would fulfill all 3 roles: Prophet (the Word), Priest (offered Himself as the ultimate sacrifice; He is now our great High Priest), and King (will sit on and rule from David’s throne during 1,000 years of peace when He returns).

Then we have in the angel’s message mention of a “sign.” The Babe would be wrapped in swaddling cloths (Luke 2:12). Babies were wrapped in swaddling cloths in that culture. How was this a sign? What kind of sacrifices were acceptable to God? Unblemished. The lambs that were destined for Temple sacrifice had to be without blemish to be eligible. These lambs were wrapped in swaddling cloths to prevent them from bruising themselves when they were delivered. And, people were wrapped in swaddling cloths when they died! In this message to the shepherds we have symbols of sacrifice and death! How appropriate for the entrance of the One Who would be our sacrifice!

Another part of the “sign”: this Babe was to be found lying in a manger – feeding trough for animals. This was indeed a lowly birth. At Jesus’ birth we have two images of lowliness – the lowly shepherds AND – in lowliness the Messiah came.

Luke 2:13-14 tells us that suddenly with this news having been proclaimed, a multitude of God’s army – the heavenly host – came on the scene praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace toward men of goodwill.”

Luke 2:15 - *“Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this things that has come to pass which the LORD HAS MADE KNOWN TO US!!”*

Did the angel tell the shepherds where to find the Babe? No! Did the shepherds ask WHERE in Bethlehem they’d find this baby? No!

The Bible does not tell us that Jesus was born in a stable or a cave.

We read these facts in Scripture:

- There was no room in the inn
- Mary laid Him in a manger (feeding trough)

We do know He was laid in a manger. How many mangers could there have been in Bethlehem? A LOT! In that day many of the homes in these towns had mangers – a ledge protruding from the wall with hay for the livestock. These mangers could be found in side rooms in homes that were set up for visitors who traveled with their animals. Additionally, it was not uncommon to find mangers in “livingrooms”. Homes typically had one room. Mangers were even set up in the main room. How do we know that mangers were inside homes?

I Sam. 28:24 – the witch of EnDor took a calf from the HOUSE and gave it to Saul.

Judges 11:31 – Jephthah vowed that the first thing coming out of his HOUSE – he would offer as a sacrifice – fully intending that it would be an animal that would come out of his HOUSE. But, of course, we know his daughter came through the door first.

The shepherds might’ve had to comb the entire city looking for this baby. However, Luke 2:16 tells us that they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the Babe! I’m suggesting that they found Him in that watch tower in Bethlehem Ephrathah – in the tower of the flock – because they knew Micah 4:8 and Micah 5:2 - about the Messiah’s entrance into this world !

This tower of the flock, Migdal Eder, is mentioned in the Targums (Aramaic translations of the OT) and is translated “The Anointed One of the flock of Israel”. Rabbi Munk wrote of this tower of the flock – that it was the place where King Messiah will reveal Himself at the end of days.

Luke 2:17-18 – “Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning the Child. And all those who heard it, MARVELED at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”

Luke 2:19 – “But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.” (NKJV)
 “But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.” (NASV)

The Greek word for *treasure* means “to protect, to preserve, to guard, or keep watch over something.” *Ponder* means “to throw together” or “to bring together;” it means to bring together in one's mind, confer with one's self.

The Gospels tells us that the glory of God Who led the Jewish people through the wilderness in Moses' day, surrounded the Jewish shepherds in the field in the area of Ephrathah north of Bethlehem and the message the angel shared with those shepherds was directly from the Hebrew Scriptures. The account of the shepherds speaks to the Messiah Who came as our perfect Passover Lamb – Who came – in His first coming – as the Suffering Servant – Who died for our sins.

“Jesus entrance into this world – not grand.

A more lowly place of birth could not exist.

Majesty – a King – in the midst of everyday life.

Holiness in the midst of sheep manure and sweat.

GOD entering the world in a sheep stall, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter.

This baby has created the universe. The royal robes He wore in heaven have been exchanged for the rags that were keeping Him warm in the manger. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a sheep stall.

Meanwhile, life goes on in Bethlehem.

The merchants are unaware that God has visited their planet.

The innkeeper would never believe that he sent God into the cold of night.

And, the people would scoff at anyone who would tell them that the MESSIAH lay in the arms of a teenager on the outskirts of their village.

They were all too busy to consider such a possibility.

Those who missed His Majesty's arrival that night missed it NOT because of evil acts or malice. They missed it because they simply weren't looking.

Little has changed in the last 2000 years, has it?” (Max Lucado)

Unpretentious, humble – but world changing! Jesus – the desire of nations (Psa. 2), the Servant of God Who would restore Israel and be a Light to the World – had arrived. God didn't become human merely to add His good to offset our evil. NO – the birth of Jesus as an invasion – for the purpose of transforming the WORLD – of transforming US!

Jesus is God. We need to hear and see with different eyes. We need to realize that what Jesus said, did, and taught was intended to create a very different world. The truth that Jesus presented intended to create a very different perspective – a very different you and me!

He's coming again, isn't He? Time has gone by – and we're waiting. Scripture speaks to a gap between the Messiah's first coming and His second coming.

How will we celebrate this Christmas season? How are we to celebrate each day as we walk with the Lord?

DO WE SEE WHAT GOD SEES? DO WE HEAR WHAT GOD HEARS?

“O Holy Night” – a “thrill of hope” – the weary world rejoices. . . .
Are we living like this?

Homework

PONDER – “How shall I prepare for the celebration of the birth of the Son of God this year?”

What V-8 moments did you have from this lesson?