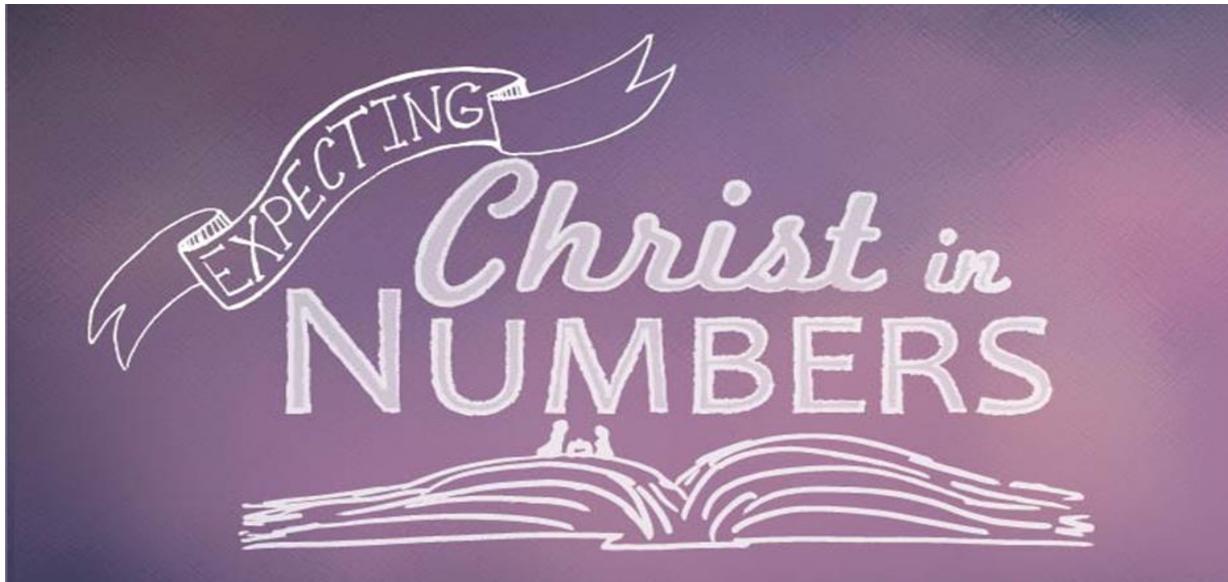


Christ Our Savior is Adored by Angels
Advent Sermon Series on Expecting Christ in Numbers
Kenwood Baptist Church
Pastor David Palmer
December 25, 2016

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20



Merry Christmas. I love gathering for church on Christmas Sunday. A couple of people have asked me why we don't do that every year, even when Christmas does not fall on a Sunday. It is really significant to gather on this day, isn't it? We celebrate good news of great joy, and this morning, as we look into God's Word together on this Christmas Sunday, I want to make sure that you have a Bible open, and I want us to consider the story of Christmas as Luke sets the story for us. We are going to begin at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke. Luke tells us in Luke 1:1 that in the very beginning, many people set out to compile a narrative of "these things that have been accomplished or fulfilled among us." He continues in Luke 1:2:

“. . . just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us.”

Luke tells us in Luke 1:3:

“It seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.”

I know some of you really love order, while others of you are operating in a kind of chaos model. For many of the order-lovers among us, Luke is their favorite Gospel because it makes

sense for people who like order and sequence in the narrative. Luke was a physician. He didn't like extraneous pieces of information, but he wanted the story to make sense, so he set out and laid it out in order.

It is vital for Christian faith that Christianity is rooted in history. Luke tells us that he didn't make this story up. He tells us that it is rooted in an investigation of things that were really accomplished. He says that he looked and met with people who were eyewitnesses of these things and recorded them now in his gospel that we call the Gospel according to Luke. That word *gospel* means *good news*, and we will talk about that more in just a moment. Luke writes his gospel, and in Luke 1:3, he dedicates it to certain man named Theophilus. *Theophilus* means *one who loves God*, and Theophilus was probably a patron and a man of means and gave gifts so that Luke's gospel could be written, published, produced, and widely circulated. He dedicates his work to Theophilus that he might know the certainty of the things that he had been taught, and on this Christmas Sunday I want you to be certain of the things that you've been told. Luke desires to tell the truth in an orderly arrangement. The feature of his narrative that I want to focus on this morning is how Luke draws our attention to how heaven and earth connect on Christmas. We often think of the birth of Christ as that moment, that child, that descent of the Son of God into this world, where heaven and earth meet and this world is transformed and changed as a result. A feature of Luke's story of how heaven and earth connect is the role of the angels in this story, and I want us, as we move through these first couple of chapters of Luke together, to highlight the role of angels. The word *angel* is actually a foreign word. Angel, *angelos* in Greek, means *messenger*. An angel is one who is sent as a messenger from God, and the word *angelion* means the *message*. We do a lot of messaging. I remember a person I met who said that they had text-messaged more than 10,000 times in a month. I've tried do the calculations and I wondered how that was humanly possible. We message all the time, but most of our messaging will not last for eternity. Yet, this message that the angel announces is a good message, *evangelion*.

Let's see what the angels do in the early portion of the Gospel of Luke. The angel Gabriel comes in Luke 1, and he announces the good news to Zechariah. In Luke 1, Zechariah is in the temple. He is worshiping. He is offering incense, and suddenly, in Luke 1:11, we read:

"And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense."

The angel has a message, an *angelion*. Listen to the angel's message to Zechariah. When the angel appears to him, his appearance fills Zechariah with awe, a holy wonder, to see this celestial heavenly being, and Zechariah needs comfort immediately. Most people, when they see angels in Scripture have to be told right away: "Do not be terrified. Do not be full of fear." There is a holy awe in seeing this heavenly creature, and yet his *angelion*, his message, in Luke

1:13-14 is:

"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard, and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great before the Lord."

The 'greatness' in Luke 1 in the angel's announcement is greatness in that John's mission is to go before the Lord. He goes on to say in Luke 1:16:

"And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God,"

Greatness in Scripture is a life that is consecrated to God and has the effect of turning people around you towards the Lord. And, in Luke 1:17:

". . .and he will go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."

An angel appears and he has a message. Zechariah says: "No disrespect intended, Gabriel, but I am old and my wife is barren. How will I have a child?" And Gabriel says in Luke 1:19:

"I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news."

An angel, a messenger, brings a message, and the message of Christmas is identified explicitly as good message, an *evangelion*. The angel Gabriel was sent again in Luke 1:26-27 in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy:

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary."

He greets her in Luke 1:28:

"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!"

Mary, like all who see the angels, is filled with awe and wonder, and the angel Gabriel has an *angelion*, a message, for her. He says in Luke 1:30-33:

"Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end."

An *angel*, a messenger, has an *angelion*, a message, an *evangelion*, a good message, for Mary. The message, the good news, the good message, the gospel report to Mary is of a son, the Son of God born miraculously to her, a Son who will reign on David's throne; and He will reign

forever, and there will be no end to His Kingdom. The angel's announcement, his message, his good message, echoes the words of the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 52, who declares good news, the gospel: *the Lord reigns!* Mary, like Zechariah earlier, is astonished at this good news, this good announcement, and asked in Luke 1:34:

"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

She had never known a man, and Gabriel explains God's sovereign purpose and means in Luke 1:35:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God."

The Holy Spirit would overshadow her like the Holy Spirit at the dawn of creation, hovering over the waters. Then he says in Luke 1:37:

"For nothing will be impossible with God."

Mary trusts God's word, His message sent through the angel.

An angel appears to Joseph soon after that in Matthew's Gospel. When Joseph, a just man, discovers that Mary is pregnant and expecting a child, he considers divorcing her quietly. Perhaps something has gone wrong in their courtship, and yet an angel comes and appears to him in a dream and says in Matthew 1:20-21:

"Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins."

In Luke's Gospel narrative, the reign of this promised Son, this good news, this good announcement that God heralds to the world through angelic messengers, is good news for all the earth. This gospel goes out and rings forth to a society longing to know the truth. We go back to Luke's narrative in Luke 2 as he roots the narrative of Christmas in real history. The angel tells Mary that *"all things are possible with God; nothing is impossible for Him."* Luke begins to unfold the miracle of the first Christmas. He says in Luke 2:1:

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered."

Caesar Augustus was the Roman Emperor from 27 BC to AD 14. Caesar Augustus began a struggle to obtain power of the Roman world when he was 18 years old. When he was 18 years old, his adopted father Julius Caesar was assassinated. Caesar Augustus was named as the heir of the Roman world. I don't know what you were doing when you were 18 years old, but I imagine it was not struggling to rule over the world, and yet this was his task. Caesar Augustus then launched a program that was an extended Civil War, and he claimed to have brought

peace to the world. Caesar Augustus' proclamation, his announcement, his message to the world, was of a peace that was obtained as a result of war, a war that he won. He planned to record his deeds and issued a royal announcement that people would know this good news.

This is really the counterfeit gospel of Luke's story. Caesar Augustus made elaborate plans to record his deeds with a monumental inscription, *Res Gestae*, "Deeds Accomplished." He inscribed them onto bronze pillars and set them up in the city of Rome. Thankfully for historians and archaeologists, he also ordered a stone copy to be



made. Later, people who needed weapons took the bronze ones and melted them down, but the stone inscription remains and so we have a record of his deeds where we can remember what he had done. He recorded his raising of an army; he recorded his winning peace on his terms; he recorded that he sought to reign over the entire world; he recorded that to count those in his dominion, he ordered a census multiple times. He recorded that he made a census of the people. In 28 BC, he accounted for a little over 4,000,000 heads of Roman citizens. In 8 BC, which is probably the census of Luke's gospel, he ordered another census to see how his empire had grown, and this time it was 4,233,000 Roman citizens. His last census was right before his death in AD 14, and this time the empire was 4,937,000. He sought to register the world, and this is really a counterfeit gospel that says he would count the world and unite them under his reign. He gave forgiveness, land, property, and citizenship for those who asked. He counted the world for the purpose of taxing it and reckoning it.

Luke tells us about Augustus' orders a certain Quirinius to register those in Judea. This is sort of the counterfeit consumer-gospel of the first century. Quirinius comes to count the people, to raise the taxes so people would spend their money and give herald and praise to this counterfeit good news. Caesar's birthday was celebrated. He was claimed to be the *divi filius*, "the son of God." His birthday was marked as "the birthday of the divine one which has marked the beginning of good news for the world." Can you imagine! And yet it is in his reign that God's great message was sent by the angel. The good message of God's saving purpose comes in the reign of Augustus during this census carried out by Quirinius, and though humans plan these purposes, the Lord has His glory in store. In Luke 2, as the narrative unfolds, Caesar's census causes Joseph and Mary to go to Bethlehem, their ancestral home, the City of David where God had promised to bring forth One who would rule and reign over His house forever.

Jesus is born in Bethlehem. He is wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. In this

same region, shepherds were in the field watching their flocks, and we see an angel again appear. The angel appears to the shepherds and brings this news in Luke 2:10-11:

“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.”

The angel proclaims God's saving purpose found in this Child. Notice that the angel comes to shepherds, those in the low end of the social spectrum, with an announcement of great news, good news for all peoples. As the shepherds hear and receive this news, suddenly the heavens seem to split open, and we read in Luke 2:13:

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. . .”

The Scriptures don't tell us how many angels there are. The highest meaningful number counted in the first century is a myriad, just 10,000. We are told that 10,000 times 10,000 surround him. We see this multitude of the heavenly host praising God, declaring a message that is for all the earth. In Luke 2:14, we read the angelic announcement of the heavenly host:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!”

The angels declare God's glory, His purpose is revealed in the birth of this child, and it is sent by an angel. The angels' announcement on this first Christmas is global in scope—peace on earth: *“Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth.”*

We see in this announcement the vocation of the angels. The Scriptures tell us that the angels that surround God's throne see His saving purpose vividly. Peter tells us in 1 Peter 1:12:

“It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look.”

Hebrews 1:6 says:

“And again, when He brings the firstborn into the world, He says, ‘Let all God's angels worship Him.’”

When we see the heavenly court unveiled in the Book of Revelation, we see the host of angels gathered around the throne of God worshiping Jesus Christ. John tells us in Revelation 5:11-12:

“Then I looked, and I heard around the throne and the living creatures and the elders the voice of many angels, numbering myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, ‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing!’”

The purpose of the angels is to worship the Lord. The angels serve Him with a glad obedience as a messenger bringing a message to this world surrounding the story of Christmas. It is an

evangelion, good news, for all the earth. When John sees heaven burst forth into praise, he says in Revelation 7:11-12:

“And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, saying, ‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.’”

Christmas carols are filled with imagery from angels. From James Montgomery's carol, “Angels from the Realms of Glory”:

Angels from the realms of glory,
Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth:
Come and worship,
Come and worship;
Worship Christ, the new-born King.

From “Angels We Have Heard on High”:

Angels we have heard on high,
sweetly singing o'er the plains
and the mountains in reply,
echoing their joyous strains.
Refrain:
Gloria in excelsis Deo.
Gloria in excelsis Deo.

The angelic announcement of Christmas unveils before us God's saving purpose, and we are invited to join in this chorus. Those who see angels in Scripture are tempted to worship them. Sometimes the angels appear in splendor. Other times, angels appear in human guise and people mistake them. Some of you know Gary Osterbrock who was part of Kenwood for a long time. One time, Gary came to church, and I said, “Gary, how are you doing?” He said, “I'm doing great. I just saw this gigantic angel in Blue Ash.” I said, “Really? What did you see?” He said, “It was an angel about 80 feet high standing by Cross County Highway.” I said, “Wow, I've never seen that! That's why you're doing great.” I've never seen an 80 foot tall angel. I have seen angels come in human guise and give a message in a timely way.

Whatever you may have seen or may not have seen, the center of Christmas is this narrative that advances through angelic announcement—good news for all the earth. Psalm 8 tells us that humanity is made a little lower than the angels, and I want to challenge us this Christmas

that our role in the earth is in heeding the message of the angels around Christmas. We become bearers of that message. *Angel* means messenger; *angelion* means message; and *evangelion* means good message. The good message that burst forth the first Christmas is a message for all the earth, and for those who of us who have received Christ and know Him, we become bearers of that message. We find the meaning of our humanity in worshiping Christ, the newborn King. We become those who know this message and then delight, like the angels, to announce this and share it with all the earth. As you celebrate, steer clear of the counterfeit gospel that lurks around these days, and embrace God's good news which finds fulfillment in the birth of Christ, the Savior of the world. Let's pray.

Lord Jesus, we extol You this morning. We magnify You, saving Son of God. We thank You that we are invited this morning to join in the angelic announcement, a message of good news for all the earth. We thank You for this morning that Christianity is rooted in history, that these events have taken place in real time, in real places. We thank You, Lord, that we can trust the reliability of Your Word rooted in eyewitness testimony of the things that have been accomplished among us. We pray this morning that we might embrace the message announced that day, to understand it and share it with those around us. Lord, we give You praise, we give You honor. Worthy is the Lamb. Hallelujah!

In Jesus' Name, Amen.