

Scripture Readings for December 19th, 2021

Isaiah 52:7-10 (NIV)

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, "Your God reigns!"

⁸ Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the LORD returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes.

⁹ Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

¹⁰ The LORD will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Luke 2:1-20 (NTE)

² At that time a decree was issued by Caesar Augustus: a census was to be taken of the whole world. ² (This was the first census, before the one when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ So everyone set off to be registered, each to their own town. ⁴ Joseph too, who belonged to the house and family of David, went from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judaea, David's city, ⁵ to be registered with his fiancée Mary, who was pregnant. ⁶ So that's where they were when the time came for her to give birth; ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him up and put him to rest in a feeding-trough, because there was no room for them in the normal living quarters.

⁸ There were shepherds in that region, out in the open, keeping a night watch around their flock. ⁹ An angel of the Lord stood in front of them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 'Don't be afraid,' the angel said to them. 'Look: I've got good news for you, news which will make everybody very happy. ¹¹ Today a saviour has been born for you – the Messiah, the Lord! – in David's town. ¹² This will be the sign for you: you'll find the baby wrapped up, and lying in a feeding-trough.'

¹³ Suddenly, with the angel, there was a crowd of the heavenly armies. They were praising God, saying, ¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest, and peace upon earth among those in his favour.' ¹⁵ So when the angels had gone away again into heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Well then; let's go to Bethlehem and see what it's all about, all this that the Lord has told us.'

¹⁶ So they hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the feeding-trough. ¹⁷ When they saw it, they told them what had been said to them about this child. ¹⁸ And all the people who heard it were amazed at the things the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these things and mused over them in her heart.

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.

Sermon: “Savior, Messiah, Lord.”

Let’s begin with a quiz!

1. Who was the Roman emperor at the time Jesus was born? *Ans:* Caesar Augustus¹ (he ruled from 27 BC to 14 AD).
2. Who was the local, Roman-appointed “king” of Judea at the time? *Ans:* Herod the Great² (he ruled from 37 BC to 4 BC).

No, this is not a history lesson! Luke mentions both people at the beginning of his Gospel because he wants his readers to know that the birth of Jesus *didn’t* happen “a long time ago in a land far, far away,” but the event occurred in Judea while these *particular* leaders were in power.³ I’ll come back to that later. Luke also stresses that Jesus was born in a *particular* place, in Bethlehem in Judea, known locally as the “city of David.” Why is that important? Although Luke doesn’t say it explicitly,⁴ he knew there was an oracle by the prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Luke also knew that Jesus was raised in Nazareth in Galilee and so he provides a somewhat dubious rationale⁵ as to why Joseph and Mary must travel to Bethlehem while she is heavily pregnant, namely, it was all the government’s fault!⁶ (Incidentally, Matthew has *no* such journey to Bethlehem; Joseph and Mary already lived there.⁷) Nevertheless, Luke uses this journey to again stress the messianic connection by pointing out that Joseph is a direct descendant of King David. OK, next question:

3. *How* did Mary travel to Bethlehem? *Ans:* We don’t know! Luke *doesn’t* mention of a donkey! The addition of a donkey comes from a fanciful story written about a century later.⁸
4. *When* (on the trip) was Jesus born? *Ans:* The common perception *is the night they arrived*, which again comes from that fictitious story. Luke has *no* such urgency; the baby happened to be born sometime while they were in Bethlehem.

¹ Luke mentions Caesar Augustus in Luke 2:1.

² Luke mentions Herod the Great in Luke 1:5; see also Matt 2:1. Note that Jesus was *not* therefore born in 0 AD!

³ However, Quirinius was governor of Syria only from 6 to 12 AD, so there is an inconsistency/error here—long appreciated by scholars. Moreover, an *empire-wide* census where you had to travel to your birth town would cause utter chaos and so is implausible. In fact, the census practice was to simply register in the town where you lived and was for taxation purposes—and could even lead to violence (Acts 5:37). Because Luke knew Jesus was raised in Nazareth (in Galilee), he creates this trip to Bethlehem (in Judea, 80 miles way) to stress the *Davidic* connection. (Note: Periodically someone will grab the news headlines by saying there’s no evidence outside of the Bible that Jesus ever existed. This is simply *not* true; the evidence may be sparse, but no serious scholar doubts Jesus was an historical figure.)

⁴ Matthew, however, does make an explicit connection by citing Mic 5:2 in Matt 2:6—and such citations are frequent and a feature of Matthew’s Gospel. Luke often subtly *alludes* to Old Testament texts, as in the case of Hannah’s song in Luke 1, and this makes his actual citations more note-worthy (e.g., Luke 3:4-6; 4:17-19.)

⁵ See [3]. Moreover, is it really necessary that a heavily pregnant Mary accompany Joseph for the purposes of a census?!

⁶ Luke 2:2-4; of course, Luke would have seen this edict as providential!

⁷ See Matt 2:1. Only after the ‘escape to Egypt’ and the later death of King Herod, do Joseph, Mary, and the family move to live in Nazareth; see Matt 2:22-23.

⁸ The *Gospel* (or *protoevangelium*) of James introduces the donkey (17:1, 2), this is a late 2nd century apocryphal text. See: <https://www.gospels.net/infancyjames> .

5. In what *kind* of dwelling was Jesus born in? (a) a cave⁹; (b) an inn; (c) a stable or barn; (d) a house? *Ans:* (d) a house, and that might surprise you!

All this goes to show how much we have been influenced by artistic portrayals of the birth of Jesus, including Christmas pageants with their stereotypical inn-keepers' all saying: "There's *no* room"! Let me expand on this briefly.

We must first remember that, culturally-speaking, hospitality was both a common decency and a religious obligation. A pregnant woman would therefore receive priority care because the alternative social shame would be unthinkable. Moreover, Joseph, as an honored, male descendent of King David, would also have some influence in Bethlehem. It's also likely he had relatives there who could provide some sort of accommodation. The difficulty arises from the biblical use of the word "inn," which to us means country hotel. And that meaning is appropriate in the parable of the good Samaritan, who you will remember put the injured man in an inn and pays for his care.¹⁰ But a different Greek word is used in the Bethlehem story and would refer to *the guest room* in the relatives' house.¹¹ However, Luke says that this room was filled beyond capacity with all the other visitors who had journeyed to Bethlehem for the census. Just because the guest room was full *doesn't* mean that Jesus was born in a barn or stable at the end of the garden! The appropriate implication is that the hosts invited them to stay in their own family room *and the manger – or feeding trough – was a standard part of that room*, because the animals also stayed in the house overnight for security. Luke has no mention of the Mary and Joseph being turned away by a mean-spirited innkeeper! But the Christmas pageants get it right about the farmyard smell! Nevertheless, Mary and Joseph would have been treated as honored guests, and social etiquette would demand they be *well cared for*. What is perhaps surprising¹² is Luke's *lack of detail* in describing the actual birth of Jesus!¹³ And that leads us to look again to see Luke's emphasis in his narrative, namely the angels and the shepherds.

This is Luke's *third* mention of an angelic¹⁴ visitation, this time to shepherds.¹⁵ The [unnamed] angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy *for all the people*: to you is born *this day* in the city of David *a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger."¹⁶ The function of an angelic message is to inform us of something we could never figure out for ourselves; it's a divine *revelation*. What do we learn? First, this is *good* news—so there's no need to be fearful! It's news that will bring

⁹ The *Gospel (or protoevangelium) of James* has a cave (18:1); there is also a midwife (19:1)!

¹⁰ Luke 10:25-37, esp. 35.

¹¹ The same Greek word is used for the upper room used in the Last Supper/Passover meal, Luke 22:7-13. See also Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008, chapter 1.

¹² Especially after all the detail in Luke 1! (It has been noted that Luke 2 can be read independently from Luke 1 with little loss of pertinent information. Consequently, some scholars see Luke 1 and 2 are two separate traditions that Luke combined.)

¹³ See Luke 2:6-7. (For example, no experience of their emotions over the birth of Jesus.)

¹⁴ For the other two occasions see Luke 1:11-20 (Zechariah), 26-38 (Mary), and Gabriel is explicitly mentioned.

¹⁵ Luke 2:8-15.

¹⁶ Luke 2:10-12, NRSV/NET. (cf. "this day" with "in those days" (Luke 2:1); God's new day has arrived!)

*great joy to everybody!*¹⁷ A baby has been born; *where?* In Bethlehem—the city of David; *who?* A *Savior*, who is *the Messiah, the Lord*—three titles that tersely explains the reason for the joy, and the rest of Luke’s Gospel will explain those names and why it’s good news for everyone. And there’s an important *sign*, which is one of comfort and reassurance to the shepherds. The shepherds could have been intimidated by the angel’s news, thinking that a kingly Messiah or Lord would be well outside of their social league. Yet the angel said, “You will find a child wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger,” and that tells them this child has been wrapped in the normal way of any rural person, and he is to be found in a simple manger, not a royal palace. After the angels have burst into song and finally departed, the shepherds process the information they have been told. It’s certainly good news message *for* them because they were “outsiders,” because being a shepherd was a despised occupation at the time. They were seen as shifty, dishonest people who graze their flocks in other people’s lands. Moreover, they were ritually unclean simply because their jobs made it virtually impossible for them to observe the Jewish purity regulations. It was to such marginalized shepherds, which included girls, that God’s message first came, and that’s a hint as to the *kind* of people who would ultimately welcome Jesus and his message. Moreover, Luke’s reference to shepherds not only alludes to King David who was a shepherd in his youth, but this is another concrete example of God “lifting up the lowly,” as Mary sang in the Magnificat.¹⁸ The shepherds respond: “Let’s go right away to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁹ And Luke says, “They hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in the feeding trough.”²⁰

Now we might not be impressed by that simple fact, but Luke’s point is that the angel gave the shepherds a *sign*, and that sign *was fulfilled* in that it led them directly to baby Jesus. If that *lesser* thing has proved to be true, then the *greater* is also true—implies Luke—that this child will grow up to be the *Savior of the World, the Messiah, the Lord*. And that was a logical argument that people understood and respected in those days.²¹ Two things happened next: first, the shepherds told *everyone*, including Mary and Joseph, about the angels and their message, and the townsfolk were *amazed*. The Messiah has come, and he was born in Bethlehem, in this particular home, and was found lying in a manger—just as the angels had said. The shepherds eventually return back to their flocks of sheep, their mundane normal work, though now transformed by all they had seen and heard and continue to praise God.²² Second, “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”²³ Nine months earlier, the angel Gabriel had come and announced to her that she was favored by God and that God was with her, and that she was mysteriously going to have a baby by the Holy Spirit.²⁴ According to Luke, Joseph and

¹⁷ The *Pax Romana* was good news to the wealthy, powerful elite, not so much for the vast majority of people.

¹⁸ Luke 1:52. This upside-down role reversal of the Kingdom of God is a key theme for Luke, see Luke 4:16-21. And don’t forget, Luke, being a non-Jew, was also an outsider—as are we. If there is a place even for shepherds, then there is hope for all of us!

¹⁹ Luke 2:15.

²⁰ Luke 2:16, NTE.

²¹ This *assurance* connects with Luke 1:4, (and assurance is a better translation than truth; NRSV), and the whole of Luke 1.

²² Luke 2:20. In a sense, the “unclean” shepherds have been made clean by God’s initiative (and their actions).

²³ Luke 2:19.

²⁴ Luke 1:28.

Mary were still not technically married, though were as good as married.²⁵ It can't have been an easy nine months, there was likely gossip and suspicion—as I mentioned last week.²⁶ The affirmation of the shepherd's witness of the angel's message and the fulfilled sign would have been *hugely* reassuring.²⁷ God was indeed with them, despite their circumstances!

I have two further observations. First, the chapter begins with Caesar Augustus who was the Roman emperor known to have brought peace (*Pax Romana*)²⁸ throughout the empire by ending its bitter civil wars. Consequently, people said that Augustus was the Savior of the world, he was its King and its Lord. His birth was celebrated as a gift from the gods, and he too was to be worshiped as a divine being. Yet his so-called "peace" was oppressive and brutally enforced. Luke contrasts this reality with the pre-dawn of God's new kingdom, celebrated by the choir of angels, singing "'Glory to God in the highest, and *peace upon earth among those in his favour*.'"²⁹ Jesus, God's Messiah, the coming Savior of the World is bringing a different kind of peace, one achieved non-violently through compassion; one that is inter-relational and based on love of God and neighbor.³⁰ It is Jesus who is the true Lord of all, *not* Caesar, says Luke, and by the time we reach the end of the his second volume—the book of Acts—he will have made his case. Let's treasure and ponder that in *our* hearts as we move towards Christmas and having lit the candle of Love.

Second, Luke mentions the word manger—or feed trough—*three* times,³¹ and given his details of the birth of Jesus are sparse, that surely significant. Scholars suggest this is an allusion to Isaiah 1:3, which says: "An ox recognizes its owner, a donkey recognizes its master's manger; but Israel does not recognize me, my people do not understand."³² We too can miss God if we don't look for him, we too can miss God if he doesn't fit our preconceived ideas about God, we too can miss God if we seek for him in the wrong places. It's scandalously shocking that the Lord of all should be born in an ordinary home, to working class parents, in a small town like Amherstburg—rather than in Ottawa. Do we, today, really grasp what has happened here in Luke's story—what the angels are celebrating and what the shepherds had witnessed? That's the final question in our quiz! Most people in Luke's day did *not*

²⁵ The marriage was not yet consummated (cf. Matt 1:24-25), which was the ultimate sign of marriage in those days.

²⁶ See : <https://secureservercdn.net/198.71.233.235/a4s.655.myftpupload.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/The-Worries-and-Joys-of-Mary.pdf> .

²⁷ As would have been Simeon and Anna's later witness, Luke 2:21-38.

²⁸ This peace lasted for about 200 years.

²⁹ Luke 2:14. Luke makes a further parallel between Jesus and Caesar Augustus, since it was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become Emperor. In this case, of course, the angels are praising *God*, not Caesar! Luke uses that familiar literary pattern to proclaim the "good news"— the gospel—of joy and peace to occasion of the birth of Jesus, who is *not* an Emperor, but is called Savior, Christ, and Lord. Incidentally, the previous usage of "Lord" in Luke is synonymous with God. Perhaps this is feature of Luke's Christology parallels Matthew's "Immanuel" (Matt 1:23) and John's "Word made flesh" (John 1:14). (According to Barclay: When a baby boy was born. Local musicians would congregate at the house and greeted them with simple music. In this case it seems like heavenly minstrels took the place of earthly ones.)

³⁰ Jesus is a new *kind* of King. His kingdom is not won by means of power, but by means of servanthood and suffering.

³¹ Luke 2:7, 12, 16.

³² See also John 1:10-13. The common question why the Jews in general did not recognize Jesus as their Messiah is therefore considered and addressed by the Gospel writers.

understand, and so he writes his Gospel to persuasively make the case. Read Luke's Gospel again with an open mind and see what you discover?³³ Both Luke and Matthew say we have to be alert to God's presence in unexpected places.

Finally, we have been waiting in hope for the God's peace, joy, and love to be revealed during this season of Advent. Are we now ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus? Are our lives and our homes fit to welcome him? Do we have a manger ready in our house for the unexpected guest? Amen. Let us pray.

³³ Let's go beyond his birth narratives and see how the angel's proclamations to Zechariah, Mary, and now the shepherds are fulfilled in life of the adult Jesus—and of the early church in Luke's second volume, the book of Acts.