

## Christmas Eve 2013.

**Luke 2** 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 his 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 room for them in the inn. 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 of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ 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, and on earth peace to men 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. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

I caught a short snippet on the news as I drove home recently. You know the programs with a selected panel discussing the topics. One of the men was commenting on how different Christmas had become for him over the years. He shared: (paraphrases)

"When I was a kid it seemed like it took forever for Christmas to get here, and I couldn't wait for its arrival. Now it's just depressing. As I get older, each year seems to flash by more quickly. Before I know it: Christmas has come again, and I dread its return: It's all a reminder of how my death is getting closer."

And one of the women replied:

"I know, but then there is the whole *Christ is born* part of Christmas, and that he came to save us."

[Pregnant pause]

[Silence.] That's what the response was. It was like I could see through the stereo panel to shocked expressions on the faces seated around that woman. In that silent reply, followed by a hurried move on to the next topic, I seemed to hear: "**Get real.**"

When someone tells you to "**get real**," they want you to get a reality check and to stop behaving as though you're living in a fantasy world. There are so many trappings of the season that are just phony; it's little wonder that so many come to the real Christmas account with a skeptical glance & a shrug of their shoulders. . . and then move on.

The crowds will go along with hearing a classic Christmas carol sung, even enjoy it. They may sit through a reading of Luke ch.2 without protest, maybe even feel some sentimental kind of cheer or calm. But so many people will stop there, think “nice enough little story,” but move right on, “now let’s get real – we’ve got life to deal with, and all its piled-up problems. They seem to come one after another, without a break, especially as you get older. And then there is death, speeding its way to my door.”

God tonight gives us His reply: “I know. You’ve got real problems. And the greatest of them is death. Now listen for a few moments as I tell you what’s real. You, deep in your soul, long for answers: ‘Is hope for real? Are joy and peace for real? In this world of recycling pain, it sounds too good to be true. Is love for real – lasting, I’ll-do-anything-for-you kind of love?’ I’ve got news for you: It’s all for real! Because Christmas is for real. You know what I mean by that: Christ’s birth is real. And that he was *born to save you* is the truth at the heart of it all.”

You want to “get real”? God wants you to get the real news, without mistakes. So look right here – to “real time” in Luke ch.2. Here you go: Rome was in power - Caesar Augustus was giving out decrees – Quirinius was in charge as the census was handled in the area that included Syria, Galilee & Judea. Did you notice? Real people. Historically verifiable figures. Real geography (empire, region, areas, cities), meshing seamlessly with history.

The layers of authenticity pile up. Joseph & Mary headed south on their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And yet we are told they “went up.” Why this description? It reflects the rise in elevation which takes place across the approximately 70 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The topography is accurate.

Another detail is captured when we hear: Joseph was a direct descendant of King David of Israel. But what does Joseph’s descent from Israel’s royal family of the past mean in a Roman-ruled land of the present? Little help it provides Joseph: he has no wealth to pull out, no political favors to call in or extra social status to throw around in order to gain even a meager room. He, and his about-to-deliver bride, are left out in the cold.

But there they are: in the city foretold from hundreds of years prior.  
And there Mary, a virgin, gave birth to the baby – a son.

Do you hear God calling out: “It all happened!”? “It’s real. And it really matters. For by this event, I give hope. You’ll find peace and joy – when you see and trust this baby was born to save you. My everlasting, unshakeable love for you is this real.”

*But as you took a close look, if even you lived during that time, it would be very hard to believe God’s Son was reduced to an infant that was forced to lie in squalor. But God isn’t telling us a fairytale. This is not some made-up story, with “flat” characters, leading to a fictional ending. Authenticity accompanies every word, every movement, every breath. Of course Joseph and Mary wouldn’t have picked out a manger as a bed for this long awaited Son. But babies hardly ever arrive when they’re supposed to; and they had been denied access to any better lodging. Instead they were forced to shelter in a place with animals, and their smells, and their filth. And Mary and Joseph, in the midst of such real surroundings, came up with the best*

they could for the baby: “Here’s a manger; at least we can keep him off the ground where an animal might step on him.”

Meanwhile God sent messengers to deliver the message of His Son’s birth. Kids, have you ever asked: “Are angels for real?” Well, you’ve got an answer right here. “Wow!” you gasp. “Angels!” And your reaction is correct. Far from the fluffy cherubic fragile figures we have invented: angels are powerful beings who stand in the very presence of God. They were sent to deliver the message ~ not to the capitol city of Jerusalem, not to the important political and religious leaders of the day, but to shepherds. If you were living at this time, and you were into status symbols, your lip would curl. “Shepherds?” You see, shepherds were looked down upon by the religious leaders of the day. If you were making up a story, you could easily choose a more highly regarded group. God isn’t concerned about appealing to false human views which inflate one group of people’s standing over another. Our God is concerned about souls – every soul. And so what did He do? Shepherds suddenly find themselves in the presence of one of God’s holy messengers: The glory of the Lord floods the sky.

“Uh-oh!” the shepherds quaked. That – “Oh no!” – is the real emotion that spilled out from the shepherds, and is captured on the page. “They were terrified!” An older way of saying that draws out the depth of what they were feeling: “they were sore afraid!” So afraid, it hurt!

Ah, now we’ve come to it. The absolute authenticity of Christmas bedded in reality is uncovered in this exchange. What causes the shepherds to be so afraid of this heaven-sent messenger that their insides hurt? The holiness of the messenger points to the holiness of God. The shepherds are terrified because their conscience is struck by this problem: it is *the* problem of all problems. “I know God is holy. I know the only way to stand in his presence is to *be* holy. I know I am *not* holy. I know my miserable sinful acts. I know the sinful thoughts that I have each day. And God knows too. I can’t even stand in his presence – let alone remain there. I don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve anything but punishment for my sin. And now here is his holy messenger sent to me to...”

And the angel silences their inner turmoil with God’s answer to their fears...

- You don’t have to be afraid. And here’s the reason why... I bring good news that will fill you with joy! Be at peace.
- The Messiah – the One Promised shortly after the beginning of time when all this sin and death and pain pierced the world – is born! He will take away your sin! And so he takes away all your reasons to fear! Your Savior from sin, your Savior from eternal death, is here.
- Now go and confirm how real this all is!

And what does this mean for you and me today? You hear that this is relevant for you. Right? The only one whose judgment matters has made clear in His Word what we confessed earlier: “all of us have become like one who is unclean – we have turned astray – we have become corrupt.” But God doesn’t leave us shaking in fear at that news. Listen to the angel with God’s Christmas tidings, “I bring good news of great joy that is for *all* the people.” This means: *for all the nations*. This means the angel’s news is for you! “A Savior has been born for you: he is Christ, the Lord!”

Oh, what joy, then exploded from the night sky! Surrounded by an army of angels, the shepherds are given an ear to the song of Heaven itself. Lives changed forever, these shepherds leave everything behind in search of the Christ Child. Hearts formerly filled with fear are overflowing with praise: they worship a God so great they could see him in the flesh. Such joy spills over and bursts out to the world. They saw him who was *born to save us*.

By God's grace, through his holy Word, we see him too. And every heart brought to trust in him has the real blessings: hope, peace with God, and his love that will outlast all the problems and pain of life in this world.

Now go back to where we started – go back to the problem the radio commentator had. Christmas comes faster and faster each year. "Great! Now that I've seen this, I can't wait once again!" And that whole thing about death getting ever closer? Because you know Christmas is for real - Christ's birth is for real - the truth that he was *born to save us* is the reality at the heart of it all ... you don't need to fear death, dear Christian. You get to live with God for all eternity! Amen. God grant us each hearts that always hold onto the real truths of Christmas. Amen.