

Wise Men Special 25-12-28a

Good morning, welcome to the Sunday morning services here at Grace & Truth Bible Church. This is the 28th of December, 2025, and we're going to continue our recognition of the season here with a short Christmas special. This is by request, and it is a revisitation of something that we talked about a long time ago, but it is fascinating.

It is something that has pertinence and application for us as we think about this time where we celebrate the incarnation of the Lord Jesus, and it is worth refreshing. There are a number of us who weren't here back in the days past when we were able to cover some of these things in detail. So we're going to be in Luke chapter two.

This is an exceedingly familiar passage of scripture. I think that anyone who watches the Charlie Brown Christmas will remember Linus reading it. You hear it every season.

I would say behind John 3, 16, it is one of the most familiar portions of scripture to those who are not necessarily oriented toward Christian faith and regular church attendance. Nevertheless, there are things here that are often overlooked and that bear investigation, especially as we think about what is coming up in the year ahead of us. So let's ask God's blessing on our time of fellowship and study, and we'll begin.

Father, we are so grateful that you formulated a plan that involves our salvation and our redemption, the expression of your character in sacrificial love in sending the Lord Jesus, your only begotten son, to be our savior, a sacrifice for our sins, and to communicate in a graphic way the seriousness of sin and the magnitude of your willingness to save us and grant to us eternal life. We pray that as we look at this portion of your word together, that the Holy Spirit will help us to understand it, to remember it, and to have it be an influence in renewing our minds so that we will understand your good and acceptable and perfect will. We ask it in Jesus' name, amen.

Luke chapter two, you will recall this. I'm only going to read a short portion, but in verse seven, Mary brings forth her firstborn son, wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the house. In, of course, doesn't mean that there was a motel six or some other commercial establishment.

You will recall that many times houses at this time and in this place were two-story affairs and much of the meetings and meals would take place in an upper room. There would be other, what you might term bedrooms, other accommodations that are on that second floor. And on the first floor would be much more indoor, outdoor space, including stabling for animals.

People didn't have large yards with fences and so on. And so many times they basically lived over the barn in the way that some of us might have space over a garage. Park your car underneath, come upstairs, and you've got living accommodations.

Mary and Joseph are coming for the census. Everyone has to return to the city of their origins, of their clan within their tribes. And for Joseph, this is Bethlehem.

The people who have corresponded with him have not anticipated the number of people that were going to arrive. And there is an eyebrow-raising lack of sensitivity, which we can think about in our own experience. If one is expecting several guests and you've mapped out who's going to stay where, and one of your guests arrives very pregnant, pregnant to the point of it could be any day or any hour, you would think someone would say, as on a crowded bus, ma'am, take my space.

I can go downstairs and make a pallet out of the materials available where the animals are kept. You should be comfortable. You should be where you're cared for.

We don't know what the details are. Did they expect that this would be disruptive to children that might already be there? There is often a lot of sound effects that accompany a live birth without anesthesia. And this could have actually been consideration that she wouldn't want to be in a crowded apartment trying to give birth with lots of relatives around, maybe some of them more distant than others.

In any case, there is not an accommodation suitable for her when they arrive where they thought they would be staying. And so they end up somewhere else. The usual assumption is that they went to a nearby stable and this comes from our Old West movie experience where we think there's a farrier down the street and he's got stalls and he rents out horses and such.

And this was not a feature of ancient Near Eastern villages either. Some think that they went further and stayed in a cave. You will see some creches or nativity scenes that have a cave.

There is a less well-known idea that I think has a lot of merit. And it is this. It is based on the visit that we see here in Luke chapter two, where beginning at verse eight, there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

The fact that they are living in the fields, it says abiding in the old King James, would indicate that this is springtime, not the middle of December. The latitude of Israel, Lebanon, and that region is not terribly different from ours. And it was not common for shepherds to abide in the fields in the cold of winter, but they did do so in the spring because it was lambing season.

So they are out there to ensure that newborn lambs are not trampled. This is our assumption. So they are keeping watch over their flock by night.

And an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And they were greatly afraid. Understandably so.

God has not sent miraculous communication of this sort in centuries. There are some people, as we know, who have received divine communication or visitation. We know the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth and the announcement that their son, John the Baptist, is going to be the forerunner.

Mary has been in converse with Gabriel. So has her betrothed husband, Joseph. And so has Simeon, and so has Anna.

So there has been a sudden cluster of communications from on high. But the shepherds are likely quite unaware of all this. And so when an angel appears to them and notice it is a single angel.

This is God's gentle consideration. I think they might have passed out from fear and dismay if the entire heavenly host had appeared before them. So one angel appears, but he is clearly not a passing stranger walking in the cool of the night across the hills of Judea.

He is reflecting the heavenly glory of God. And it is providing its own bright light. So they are sore afraid.

They're greatly afraid. So the angel says to them, do not be afraid. How many times does the Lord Jesus appear? Appears to his disciples walking on the water.

Do not be afraid, it's me. And this is God through his angel saying, this looks startling. This is unexpected.

It is unusual. It is outside your experience, but don't be afraid. I am here to bring you good news.

And this is going to be an occasion for great joy. We should watch for this. A point, maybe our first point of application is sometimes things that can instill fear because they are unusual, they are different.

It is a big change. It is outside our experience. These things come into our experience and we tend to react with fear.

We belong to God through the Lord Jesus. He loves us. He knows every sparrow that falls.

He knows what we need before we ask him. We are worth more than many sparrows, as Jesus told his hearers. And it is natural to have an instinctive fear of change, fear of the unknown, fear of that which startles us.

But the constant encouragement we have throughout scripture is fear thou not. Fear not, do not be afraid. We can be alert.

We can try to think and bring to bear what we know, but we shouldn't be in the grip of fear. Fear can approach, fear can tempt us, but fear should not overwhelm us or overman us as they used to say. We stop, remember who we are, whose hands in which we are held, and we resist fear.

God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of self-control, a sound mind, sobriety. So the shepherds are encouraged to set aside this fear. Do not be afraid.

Look, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. This is a turn of phrase that is familiar, but if you stop and think about it, it doesn't say to all God's people, Israel, to all the Jews, it's to all people, period. Why these shepherds? Why do they, of all of the available personnel in Israel on this night, why does the angel come to these shepherds? I think we can answer that question shortly.

Okay, why is this good news of great joy that can be a source of joy and can be good news to all people? Because there is born to you this day, born to you, this now is specifying, not just born to humanity, but born to you Jewish shepherds, you Jewish people, in the city of David, this by attraction and by juxtaposition tells us that you are those who are the descendants of the people over whom David ruled, the city of David. This is the historic assigned region for the tribe of Judah, the city of David. A savior who is Christ the Lord and this, the sign to you, notice will be as an italics, the sign to you, this.

You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Then suddenly there is with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host. I so appreciate this gradual introduction of this supernatural visitation and communication.

Again, God knows us. He knows what we can take, what we can bear, what we can understand. And so having gotten over the initial appearance of this messenger angel, now there is an assembled host with him.

Now, there are all sorts of conceptions of what this looked like. Look at Christmas greeting cards, look at nativity scenes, but it says that this host is with him. Where is he? Where is this messenger angel? An angel of the Lord stood before them, it tells us back in verse nine.

He's on the ground. So many times when you see the angel of the Lord or some other heavenly messenger, they're on the ground. When Gabriel came to Mary, he's standing on the ground.

When Gabriel talks to Zechariah in the holy place, he's standing on the ground. So there is nothing here to suggest an aerial view or a crowd of angels in flight or hovering. These multitude of angels are now standing with the first angel.

Could be Gabriel, he's not named here, but this seems to be his job to announce the birth of the Lord Jesus and attendant circumstances. In any case, there is now, does the light get a little bit brighter and reveal them? Were they there all along? But suddenly they now see this multitude of the heavenly host. They are praising God and they are saying.

We've referred to this many times in the past. There is no mention of singing, no indication of harps or a tune. This is spoken worship in the form of a chant.

If you've heard group recitation of scripture, responsive reading is what they used to do in churches in the past. That I was in when I was growing up. So they are saying in unison, glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace toward men of goodwill.

You're well familiar that that is what this says in Greek, peace toward men of goodwill. And it is a reminder that we have a choice of what we believe, what we choose, whether or not to have good will. Goodwill toward whom? Goodwill about what? Well, the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked according to Jeremiah 17, nine.

So in order to have goodwill, and this is good as the angels define it, as God determines it in his righteousness and justice, we are all as an unclean thing. All our righteousnesses are as filthy rags and we all do fade as a leaf and our iniquities like the wind have carried us away. There is none that doeth righteousness, no, not one.

These are old Testament scriptures I am quoting. This is the understanding. This is why we need salvation.

We need God's grace to cleanse us, to purify us, to enable us to have a good conscience. When we were in first Timothy, you remember that we are to worship God with a pure heart and a clean conscience and a sincere faith, pure heart. It can only be purified by God's grace.

And we know this comes to us through the Lord Jesus Christ. The blood of Jesus Christ, his son, cleanses us from all sin in first John 1, nine. And first John 1, seven says, if we walk in the light because we exercise our will, we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

We have fellowship with God. God has contact and fellowship with us. And the blood of Jesus Christ, his son, cleanses us from all sin.

All of those, as you may remember, are present tense. If we keep on walking in the light, as he keeps on being in the light, we keep on having fellowship with him. And the blood of Jesus Christ, his son, keeps on cleansing us from all sin.

First John 1, seven, first John 1, nine. I don't like to ever quote 1, nine without including 1, seven because there is the act of cleansing through acknowledgement of our sins, but then we are exhorted. And that exhortation comes first to keep on walking in the light.

This is what goodwill is. There will be peace for those people of goodwill through Christ. Elsewhere in scripture, it says, there is no peace, saith my God to the wicked.

The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God to the wicked. So if there's going to be peace on earth, it isn't universal.

This is not universalism. There is peace available toward those who see and hear the offer of salvation and deliverance through Jesus Christ and respond. They did it in prospect in Old Testament days.

We do it in retrospect now. Peace on earth toward men of goodwill. And this means that we can have peace in the present.

Peace on earth, it isn't there will be peace in the valley by and by, we'll go to heaven, walk the golden streets, then there will be peace. There is peace available now. This is what Jesus said before he left his disciples.

Peace, I leave with you. My peace, I give to you, not as the world gives. This is a supernatural peace.

Peace that is sourced in the presence and power of God through his Holy Spirit, through his word. And those who have his word and keep it, there is the presence of Jesus Christ and even the presence of God the Father promised. So on earth, in the here and now, there is supernatural peace available toward those who are of goodwill.

So then the task becomes, how can I cultivate, exercise and reflect goodwill? Only through the power of God. The power of God comes into the life of the believer, through the spirit and the word and in no other way. So it was, verse 15, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing.

Some people say that Jerusalem is the city of David, but the shepherds didn't say, well, we've got a hike ahead of us because the city of David is Jerusalem and we're clear down here in Bethlehem. They go to Bethlehem because that is the city of David. Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

What a wonderful example. When the Lord makes something known to us, it sparks joy and it prompts action. Let us go and see.

Let's stop what we're doing. Now, these are responsible shepherds. They don't abandon the flocks.

This is a group of shepherds that evidently have others. They are keeping watch. They may be alternating.

And so they go wake up the other set of shepherds and say, we have seen a messenger angel. We have seen the heavenly host praising God and glorifying him and proclaiming peace. We are going to go check this out.

In our coverage of the Matthew nativity this past Wednesday, you remember that when the wise men brought news of the birth of a king in Israel to Jerusalem, the scribes are aware, the chief priests are aware. They go and search the scriptures to determine where such a child would be born. They return that information to Herod.

And it is noised through all Jerusalem that these wise men have come seeking a newborn king. How many of them accompany the wise men and follow the star to where the child at that future point from this account is residing with his father and mother? Evidently none. It doesn't say anyone left Jerusalem.

The news is received via these messengers, these Chaldeans, these Magoi, the Magi. All Jerusalem is made aware. Nobody goes.

Why are these shepherds selected? For the same reason that Simeon was selected and given the information that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's salvation for Israel. Because he is a man of faith, he loves God and loves God's revelation and has reached a level where God can make a wonderful special promise to him. You will not depart until you have laid eyes on the salvation of God's people Israel.

Same thing with Anna who dwelt at the temple. And you're well familiar, we've done specials on both of them in other years. But these shepherds are selected to receive this message because they are not merely shepherds.

They are shepherds like David was a shepherd. They no doubt, I have no doubt in my mind, they sing the Psalms of David. Psalm 23 is known to them by heart in Hebrew.

They might even know the original tune passed down from generation to generation. I would love when time permits in the eternal future to meet and converse with these shepherds and find out what tremendous men of Israel they were. The religious leaders can't be bothered, don't believe, aren't interested.

These are blue collar shepherds in the tradition of David. And they're gonna go to the city of David and they are going to find this child. And notice they don't need a star to follow.

Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. They don't say, let's see if these things are so. They're even better than the Bereans in Acts who searched the scriptures to see if these things are so.

They know it's so. Saw the angel, heard the angel, believe the angel. When we are struck in the core of our being by what we learn from God's word, God the Holy Spirit impresses it on our hearts and we recognize it as God's true and effective witness to us, it ought to make a difference.

We should be different. We should not blend. We shouldn't be indistinguishable from those in the world who have no faith in God or a dormant or disinterested attitude, even as believers.

We should be characterized by enthusiasm and motivation. Remember the triad of Christian virtues, faith and hope and love. Faith is the means.

Faith doesn't bless us with any special merit because the merit of faith is in its object. Two people can go and sit on two different chairs. They can both believe that the chair is solid and will hold them up.

One chair is rotten and the other is sound. They can have an equal amount of faith, but if the chair is bad, that is misplaced faith. So we aim our faith at the word of God and the promises of God, guaranteed by God's character and the merit of our faith is in what we believe in.

These shepherds believe this is what God has made known to us. How can we not act? He wouldn't have told us so that we could continue to sit here with a piece of grass in our mouth and watch the sheep. There's born to you this day in the city of David.

So obviously the angel doesn't say, now arise, get thee to Bethlehem and find the child. They draw this conclusion from the message. Isn't that what we're supposed to do? Reflect on the words that we hear from God and figure out what we are supposed to do in light of that communication, in light of what has been made known to us, just as the shepherds.

So they came with haste, often overlooked. They hurried, they couldn't wait to go in. They came with haste and found Mary and Joseph.

Right here, this is like that area in Genesis between chapter one, verse one and chapter one, verse two. And people want to shoehorn in great eons of time. In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

And then much, much time passes and the earth is without form and void. And in the meantime, there was a first creation. Satan fell, God had to destroy it.

It's packed in ice. And now we're resuming any number of eras and generations and centuries later in one too. Here, something exists between they came with haste and they found Mary and Joseph.

And this would be, how do they know where to look? In the ancient day, Bethlehem is a sizable town. If they were in the garage accommodations below the second floor, how many houses? There are hundreds of houses in Bethlehem and its surrounding districts. If everybody's got a manger in there for their transportation, a manger isn't going to single it out.

There's no star guiding them. The angel doesn't say, come, follow me and walk them into the town. He appears and gives them the message and it isn't stated, but obviously at some point he is no longer visible.

He's no longer there, nor is the host behind him who were saying glory to God in the highest and proclaiming peace toward those who have goodwill. These shepherds have goodwill. They're going to go to Bethlehem, but I would suggest they seem to know where they are going.

Why would they know this? We're going to pause and take our break. And when we come back, we have a clue. We have several biblical clues and we have some historical information that will help us understand why there is no visible gap in verse 16, between they came with haste and they found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger.

They evidently didn't wake up the town. They didn't bang a spoon on a pot and wake everyone up and say, where's the newborn baby? They hurried and they got there fast. How did they do that? We'll see it when we come back from the break.