

Christmas Eve and Christmas Day

THE MANGER: THE SIGN OF PROMISE

Luke 2:1-14, 15-20

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Analysis by Bruce T. Martin

Luke 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver the child. 7And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

DIAGNOSIS: Terrified By Glory

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – *Getting (False) Messiahs*

Hardly anyone wants to pay taxes, whether in the first century or the twenty-first. To register to pay is an insult. But to pay for a brutal occupying force was doubly irksome, especially for Jews of the "house and family of David" (v. 4). Wanting and waiting for a messiah to liberate "all the people" (v. 10) from the Romans was the common hope of the day. For "we the people," it is liberation from global terrorism; but also from government, sex, church, work, death—that is, from life itself. Creation's web of accountability confirms that the messiahs we want, and the ones we get, are those to whom we can ingratiate ourselves. And our reason, in company with religion and all spiritual impulses, suggests that the same must be true when it comes to our relationship with God. Truth is, we do not want to be held accountable to anyone; not even to God, though all powers are "from God" (see Rom 1:20 and 13:1). For the biblical God refuses all our presumptions. Why else were the shepherds "terrified" (v. 9) by the glory of the Lord? For we fear rightly, that we shall fail to ingratiate ourselves to the

current or promised messiah, including the one of God's choosing.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – *Not Wanting a (True) Messiah*

Our accountability before God, before Whom we are rightly terrified, runs far deeper than what we can see. For we suspect, however feeble this inkling may be (but it is confirmed by Scripture), that we are not able to justify ourselves before Him. In our quest for false messiahs, we search for any other means than that provided by God to stand before Him and live. Hence we do not desire a true messiah but a false one. The Jewish people, in looking for a political messiah to crush the Romans, placed their trust in what they could see rather than in the promise of the Lord (1:31-33, 55; see Lev 26:11-13). Like all people, we seek through lawful means to avoid God's gaze at every turn, even if that means believing in false promises, false gods and false messiahs. The inescapable, impenetrable, and uncompromising conundrum of sin is that we do not want to die, either at the hands of others or at the hand of God; nor can we believe that the promise of the Lord could be anything other than "terrifying." Such is the overwhelming power of the Law.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – *Not Getting God's Messiah*

We are not wrong to believe that "the glory of the Lord" is, for us, terrifying unto death. God told us as much already (through the Scriptures), and it is confirmed by experience. That much we can believe, because we live inescapably under the Law. And because we do not—cannot—trust in God, we all surely shall die (Gen 3:3). So long as we live we are bound to believe, not in the promise of the Lord, but in the law of God. But, so long as we live under the Law—so long as we live unto ourselves, we do not get God's promised Messiah. All we get is a messiah of our

own feeble imaging and our own futile promising, which results in DEATH; for us also. That is the bad news, the “terrifying” reality.

PROGNOSIS: Joyed By the Manger

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Birthing the Messiah

“Do not be afraid” (v. 10), the angel of the Lord said “to you” (v. 11, to the shepherds); also to us. Something brand new is happening: “a great joy” (v. 10; the relative article helps to retain the gift character of the noun). No more waiting! A messiah of God’s own choosing “is born this day” (v. 11). There is now no need to come up with any of our own fearful, futile messiahs. God’s PROMISE is being fulfilled. He is of the house of David, a true Messiah, the Savior, the Lord (v. 11; see 1:32-33; see Rev 21:2-6). Luke’s three-fold title suggests that the promised One will bring much more than we could ever imagine. The “good news” (v. 10) is that the manged child will bring “peace” (v. 14) with God, and not terror. Jesus the Messiah is God’s chosen one par excellence (2:26-32). Jesus the Savior is God’s way of salvation Who forgives sin. Jesus the Lord signifies that God Himself is accomplishing all this, from beginning to ending. The “sign” (v. 12) of this promise is a child “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (v. 12). Not exactly what anyone had expected and certainly not a terrifying sight. God had conceived in Mary what we sinners could not possibly conceive about God!

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – Believing the Messiah

For those who see the glory of the Lord lying hidden in a manger, clothed in flesh and blood—in our own fearful humanity, the endless search for false messiahs is over. At this point in the story of the Messiah, the beginning of the PROMISE

fulfilled, all we see is the “sign” of the manger. Like Mary and the shepherds before us, we believe the angelic announcements that this manged child is nonetheless the One promised by the Lord, “a great joy for all the people.” We Messiah-believers “ponder these words in [our] heart, . . . glorifying and praising God” (vv. 19-20) at this humble beginning, yet in joyful anticipation—for that is the character of all promises—of greater fulfillments still to come (cross, resurrection, parousia). For now, the “joy” is our faith.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – *Expecting the Messiah*

All those “favored” by God, that is, all those who believe in the manged and crucified Messiah, Savior and Lord, now have “peace” with God (v. 14; see Rom 5:1; “all the people [of Israel]” in v. 10 means, for us, spiritual Israel). We Messiah-believers expect that God will complete the “great joy” (v. 10; see 24:52) that He has begun. We fully expect that the selfsame crucified and risen Messiah, in Whom there is “no fear” (v. 10), will come again (Acts 1:11) in unclothed glory to “make all things new” (Rev 21:5). We do not need to know how the trinitarian God will accomplish these things, for we believe that He will. That is the message hidden in the “sign” of the manger; in the “sign” of the cross as well. Upon such faith, we have confidence to reject all other messiahs as feeble at best and ultimately false; to reject all our works, even works of love (by any definition), as futile before God to secure any righteousness before Him (though such works may be of great benefit to others), to announce the “good news” that God’s Messiah is born “this day” (vv. 10-11), and to “glorify and praise God” (v. 20) for all that He has done and promises yet to do.

[Endnote: For further commentary, see Ed Schroeder’s Thursday Theology #339 on “Peace and Justice.”]