



Central Peninsula Church

Catalog No. 1286-3

Luke 1:57—2:21

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December 19, 2004

A Christmas “To Do” List

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

I like that video because it's the guy who looks like Santa that gets it right. It seems only he knew the real Christmas story – the story of the birth of Christ. But even he didn't quite get it all right. Most of us have heard this story so many times that we think we know what it's all about, but the fact is we might have passed over some important pieces. If we look a little harder we might find a whole new piece of the nativity scene that's been in the closet for years but we've never unwrapped.

You see, in Luke's gospel, the Christmas story is not just about one birth but it's about two births. Before we read about the birth of Jesus, we read about the birth of John. In fact, the surprising thing is that John's birth gets more coverage than Jesus' birth. John gets 24 verses, while Jesus only gets 21. If we just take Jesus' birth apart from John's birth we don't really get the whole story. It's like reading the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy without reading *The Hobbit*, or teaching a kid how to throw a football without teaching him how to play the game. If we're going to do Christmas right, we have to look at both of these births.

“Now the time had come for Elizabeth to give birth, and she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and her relatives heard that the Lord had displayed His great mercy toward her; and they were rejoicing with her. And it happened that on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to call him Zacharias, after his father. But his mother answered and said, ‘No indeed; but he shall be called John.’ And they said to her, ‘There is no one among your relatives who is called by that name.’ And they made signs to his father, as to what he wanted him called. And he asked for a tablet and wrote as follows, ‘His name is John.’ And they were all astonished. And at once his mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he began to speak in praise of God. Fear came on all those living around them; and all these matters were being talked about in all the hill country of Judea. All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, ‘What then will this child turn out to be?’ For the hand of the Lord was certainly with him.”

“Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city. Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child. While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and

keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.’ When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, ‘Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them. And when eight days had passed, before His circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb” (Luke 1:57–66; 2:1–21).

I. Luke's Christmas story includes not one but two births.

A. One gave birth at home; the other far away from home: There is a saying in the real estate business: “Location is everything.” Notice the location of these two births. The first one took place at home, while the other took place far away from home. Zacharias and Elizabeth were from the hill country of Judea, and that's where their son was born. That's how it was supposed to happen in those days.

But not so for Joseph and Mary. Joseph and Mary lived up in the region of Galilee, in the little town of Nazareth. For the last six months of her pregnancy Mary had been there, no doubt expecting that to be the place her son would be born. But Luke tells us that when Mary was great with child Caesar Augustus sent out a decree calling for everyone to return to their hometown for a census. Joseph, being from the line of David, would need to return to Bethlehem. But Joseph wasn't about to leave Mary alone in Nazareth, so the two of them packed up and headed south for Bethlehem. It was a long journey; at least a three day trip, and the timing couldn't have been worse. Perhaps in the back of their mind was the ancient prophecy about Bethlehem; that it would be the birthplace of the coming Messiah. It might have all made sense at that point; seeing God's hand in the decree, but it couldn't have been easy.

To make matters worse, Bethlehem was filled to the

gills with visitors who were there for the census. Normally they would stay with relatives, but they were forced to try to find shelter at an inn. But there was no room for them there either, so they found shelter in what was most likely a cave or a stable for farm animals.

I heard a story about a little boy who was to play the part of the innkeeper in the Christmas play. When it came time to tell Joseph that there was no room and they had to sleep in the stable, it just seemed so cruel that he couldn't do it. So instead he said, "There's no room, but do you want to come in for a drink?"

Mary and Joseph didn't have it quite so good. They went straight to the stable. Don't be fooled by your adorable nativity scenes. This wasn't a pretty sight. As they entered the cave, the smell of urine might have knocked them off their feet. Instead of laying on a soft bed of hay, of which there was little in Palestine, Mary might have sprawled out on a bed of manure.

But the location was not the only difference between these two births.

B. One was attended by friends and relatives; the other by shepherds: One of the best things about bringing a new child into the world is getting to share it with your friends and family. In the case of John, all the friends and relatives were in attendance. This is what you want when a child is born. My father never had a daughter, so when my daughter was born, his first granddaughter, he showed up at the hospital with a pink bow tied around his head! That's the kind of thing you want. Everybody is there, everybody is happy for you.

A while back, Queen Elizabeth II visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, 40 pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost 20 million dollars. It wasn't quite that way for Mary and Joseph. It seems so quiet. Jesus was born without any doting relatives around; without any fanfare.

This is like the Super Bowl played in an empty and silent stadium. Well, sort of. There were those shepherds. The shepherds actually get more attention in the Christmas story than Mary or Joseph. You know the story. They're out there with their flocks at night. An angel, most likely our old friend Gabriel, stands before them surrounded by a bright light. The shepherds are scared stiff – Gabriel is used to that by now. He tells them not to be afraid because he comes with some good news – the Savior of the world has just been born. Like Zacharias and Mary, the shepherds would get a sign. They would discover a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a feed trough. The cloths weren't so unusual, but the feed trough was a different touch, especially for a king. Off they go to Bethlehem, and sure enough they find the baby lying in the feed trough.

So Mary and Joseph get to share their joy with a few smelly shepherds. There is some debate among scholars as to how shepherds were viewed in those days. Some have said they were despised; others believe that

thinking didn't really develop until later. Either way, we know for sure that shepherds were just ordinary, unlettered folk. Mary and Joseph would not be writing home and bragging, "You won't believe who showed up at the birth! Shepherds!"

C. Both were occasions of joy and singing: That's not to say there wasn't a lot of joy in this event. We read that there was rejoicing among Elizabeth's friends when John was born. But the shepherds brought joy of a different order. It all started with the angel. He said, "I bring you good news of great joy..." It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and joy at the birth of one who was to become the emperor. Now, in that same pattern, comes the good news of joy occasioned by the birth of a Savior.

And where there is joy, singing is usually not too far behind. At the end of chapter one, Zacharias, filled with the Holy Spirit, blurts out what down through history has been called the Benedictus. It's a prophecy, more about Jesus than John. He praises God for bringing redemption and salvation to his people. He sings about God's tender mercy which will result in the forgiveness of sins. And he likens the coming of Jesus to the sunrise which will give light to those who sit in darkness and guide them in the way of peace.

But Zacharias' song was no match for the choir of angels that joined Gabriel out there in the fields. There was a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased." It was a short song, but the lyrics were significant. Glory should be given to God in the most exalted of ways, while on earth this child brings peace for those with whom he is pleased.

D. Both births were followed by the circumcision and naming: One more thing that we see in both births: In Jewish culture, after a son was born, friends and relatives would gather at the home to celebrate for eight straight nights prior to the circumcision. At that time, the son would officially be named. In the birth of John, this created quite a stir among the relatives. The angel had told Zacharias that he was to name the boy John. But they don't know that because Zach has been kind of quiet lately. The relatives assume they'll name him after Zacharias. That's what you did back then. But then Elizabeth pipes up and says, "He shall be called John." Uncle Levi is thinking, "What kind of name is that? No one in our family is named John!" (You think you have family pressure at Christmas!?) So they go to Zacharias and in sign language ask him what he wanted to name his son. It seems the poor guy was not only mute but he was deaf! They know Zacharias will have the final word on this. He'll straighten out Elizabeth. But Zacharias writes on a tablet, "His name is John." Not, he'll be called John; but his name IS John. He's saying, "I don't have the right to name him. God already did that."

It wasn't quite so hard for Mary and Joseph. Of course, everyone knew that Joseph wasn't the father. So Luke just says, "When eight days had passed, before his circumcision, His name was then called Jesus, the name given by the angel before He was conceived in the womb."

So we have not one birth but two births. One took place at home, with doting friends and relatives in attendance; the other took place far away from home in a stable with no one there but animals and a few shepherds. Both of them were occasions of great joy and singing. Both of them took place in accord with Jewish law, naming and circumcising the boy on the eighth day. You might be thinking, "That's all fine and good, but what does all

this mean for me?" I believe Luke lays these two births side by side to teach us something about what TO DO at Christmas. In the cast of characters of these two births we see representative responses to the Christmas event; they're meant to teach us something about OUR RESPONSE. In fact, all of this is capsulated in the response of the shepherds to the angels words in vv.15-20.

II. The two births teach us what "to do" at Christmas.

A. The work of faith: The first thing these guys teach us about what to do at Christmas is simply to believe. A couple of weeks ago we saw how Zacharias failed to believe that God would do what the angel promised him. That's why he's silent until his son is born. Then we saw how Mary, in contrast to that, believed that what the angel said really would take place. But here with these shepherds we see another example of faith. After the angels left, they look at each other and say, "What are we waiting for? Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." There is no debate. There is no procrastination. They don't decide to sleep on it. They don't go to the local library for research. They just figure that it's all true. That's faith. Put that one on your to do list.

Scripture says that without faith it's impossible to please God. The angel says "peace on earth among people *with whom he is pleased.*" Who is that? It's those who respond to God's gift by faith. Scripture says, "For by grace you are saved, through faith..." Faith means you say yes to all that God was doing through Christ. Yes, he is the Savior of the world. Yes, he came to die for my sins. Yes, through him I find forgiveness and new life. Yes, I want to follow Christ as Lord. Faith isn't a spectator sport; it's an active embracing of all that God has promised in Christ. God brings you to a point, and it's not a time for debate; it's not a time for sleeping on it; it's not even a time to do more research; it's a time act in faith upon what the Lord has said.

B. The work of obedience: That's why the second thing you should put on your list is obedience. We see obedience in the naming and the circumcision of both John and Jesus. Zacharias names his first and only son, John. It couldn't have been easy. He faced some pretty serious family pressure: "John? There's no one in our family named John! What kind of name is that?" There is a time to break with family tradition. Maybe the hardest time to do that is at Christmas. There is a time to say, "No. This is what God has told us to do. I know that's different than how it has always been done in our family, but I must obey him." Zacharias has learned that he doesn't call the shots, but neither does their family; God does. We see the same obedience in Joseph and Mary. They knew God was doing something new through their son, but not so new that they would ignore Jewish law and skip the circumcision. And without question, they called him Jesus.

We sometimes think of Christmas as a rather tame holiday. We think of sweet little baby Jesus asleep on a bed of hay; tiny little hands that could do no harm; a bright halo above his head. Everyone loves that because it's so innocuous, so safe. But Christmas isn't safe! That baby is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. He has come to usher in a Kingdom that rivals the kingdom of self. That's threatening. He bids those who would follow him to take up our own cross daily and follow him; to lay aside our own right to rule ourselves; to surrender to his rule. The world loves to celebrate the birth of Christ, but they hate to obey him as the Lord of their lives. Everyone wants to keep Christ in

the manger. But the manger is meaningless apart from the cross. As one writer put it many years ago: "This little babe so few days old, is come to rifle Satan's fold; all hell doth at his presence quake, though he himself for cold does shake." Christmas is a time for obedience.

C. The work of telling others: One of the things Jesus told us to do is tell others about him. That's the next thing to put on your to do list – tell others. We see that at John's birth. It says that when Zacharias' friends heard him praise God they began to talk all about it throughout the hill country of Judea. It was hot but holy gossip spread like wildfire.

But again, it's in those shepherds that we see it best. It says when they arrived in Bethlehem and saw the child lying in the feed trough, "they made known the statement which had been told them about this child." Observe the progression: they heard the angels; they went to Bethlehem; they saw the child; and THEN they made known the statement. You see, you cannot speak of what you have not seen and experienced in your own life. But when you embrace Christ, or should I say he embraces you, something happens to you. You know it. Paul says, "**the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who was given to us**" (Rom. 5:5). If you, like the shepherds, have experienced that, you have to tell others about it. By the way, they weren't preachers, they weren't missionaries; but that didn't matter. They had heard something. They had seen something. That something meant salvation for the whole world. If you saw a fire and heard a small child screaming in the window and likely to be burned alive, you don't wait for the professionals; you run in there and get that child out.

I'm not one of those Christians who thinks we should get rid of the Christmas trees and egg nog and exchanging of gifts. I like all that stuff. I like Christmas shopping...a little bit. But, do you know what? If we do all that stuff but don't talk about Jesus; if we fail to speak of the real meaning of it all; neglect to tell someone that this child was born as Savior and Lord; that he was sent by God to die on the cross to purchase with royal blood our own deliverance from sin, death and the devil; if we neglect to publish THAT abroad, we've failed to do Christmas right.

That angel said that this is good news of great joy which shall be for all the people. All the people. Did you hear that? Not just religious people, not just Western people, not just poor people or rich people or smart people or not so smart people; for ALL people. So don't let Christmas go by without telling some people about HIM.

D. The work of holy wonder/pondering: The fourth thing to put on your to do list is what I would call the work of holy wonder. We see it in the people who heard the news about John's birth. In v. 66 it says, "**All who heard them kept them in mind, saying, 'What then will this child turn out to be.'**" We see a similar reaction when people heard what the shepherds were saying – all who heard it wondered. It's a good thing to wonder. It's a good start, but you don't want to stop there. You get the feeling that Mary took it even a step further. That's why it says, "BUT Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."

When you write your to do list, put that on there too. Amidst all the activity, I need to just stop and treasure all

these things. I need to ponder them in my heart. I need to engage in some holy wonder. How do you do that? Maybe that means you stop in the middle of your shopping and sit down and pull out your Bible and just read the Christmas story. Maybe that means you gather your children around a nativity scene each night this week and unwrap a different piece and talk about the role it plays in the Christmas story. Maybe that means you wake up really early one morning this week and find a place you can watch the sunrise and meditate on Zacharias' words: "The Sunrise on high will visit us, to shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace." Maybe that means you write the words of the angel on a 3x5 card and pull it out every time you eat: "Behold I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people..." The work of holy wonder is the work of treasuring and pondering the fact that God invaded planet earth on a perilous rescue mission; it's rolling it around in your heart like you would finely cut diamonds in your hand.

D. The work of glorifying and praising (2:20):

When you do that, when you really let it sink in, you'll find yourself doing exactly what the shepherds did next. Verse 20 said they went back glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. You can put that on your to do list as well. GO BACK! Just because you have seen the Christ doesn't mean you stay in the manger. You go back to where you came from, but you go back glorifying and praising God. You don't just wait until Sunday to do that. You go back and do that. You do that in the place he's called you.

Corrie Ten Boom tells a story of working with mentally disabled young people after WW II.

Henk was a boy who was a member of my Bible class for mentally disabled. He came from a family with eleven children, and it was difficult for his poor tired mother to give him much attention.

Once I visited Henk at home, and his mother received me with such a thankful manner. "Henk talks so much about the stories you tell in his Bible class. He never remembers anything about any other class, but when he comes from your class he talks to his brothers and sisters about it."

"Is Henk at home?"

"He's in his room upstairs...in the corner of the attic. He's there most of the time...he's really my easiest boy. We know he'll never become a professor or anything important, but he does work for a salary—he's in a government workshop where he makes clothespins the whole day. Dear Henk, he's so satisfied, but when he's at home the house is so full of noise that he goes to his attic room."

I went upstairs and found Henk on his knees in front of a chair. Before him was an old dirty picture of Jesus on the cross. I stopped at the door to listen, for Henk was singing. His voice was soft and hoarse.

He sang:

*Out of my bondage, sorrow and night,
Jesus, I come,
Jesus, I come;
Into Thy freedom, gladness and light,
Jesus, I come to Thee.
Out of the depths of ruin untold,
Into the peace of Thy sheltering fold,
Ever Thy glorious face to behold,
Jesus, I come to Thee.*

I've heard Bach played by Schweitzer, and anthems sung by gigantic choirs, but at that moment I felt as if I were in a cathedral with angels surrounding me. I tiptoed back downstairs without disturbing him, praising God again for the love He brings into the lives of "even the least of them."

Sometime later I heard that Henk's mother had gone into his attic room and found him before the chair, with the picture of Jesus in his hand. Henk was home with the Lord. When I heard about his death I wondered if he had been singing, "Jesus, I come to Thee" at that last moment.

The work of Christmas is the work of kneeling before the Lord Jesus, praising him. But it doesn't start there. It starts with faith and obedience and telling others and taking time for Holy Wonder. Don't leave out one of those things.

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