

# The Glories of Christ's Coming

Rev. A. T. Vergunst - *Luke 2:1-20*

Sing: Psalter 394: 1 - 3

Read: Luke 2: 1-20

Sing: Psalter 427: 1, 7-8

Sing: Psalter 290: 1-5

Sing: Psalter 232: 1-3

We are here together this morning for the purpose of celebrating the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. I suppose that the story of His coming into the world is not new to you. Perhaps you have read or even memorized part of this chapter we again read today. In very simple words, God inspired Luke to write this amazing story about what happened more than two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. Can I ask you to consider this story as if we are looking at a picture book? The word-pictures Luke drew are so simple and yet so beautiful, so comforting and so full of meaning that each time we open this chapter, we see new things. May it so be for all of us this morning.

So let's look at the first picture that God sets before us in verse 1. Children, this picture takes us all the way to the big city of Rome. Rome was actually quite a beautiful city in the days that Jesus was born. There was a huge palace and many other impressive buildings. However, it was also a very wicked city. And right there in the middle of that city, sat the emperor Caesar Augustus. He was probably one of the greatest emperors of the Roman empire. One day, he put his signature, or stamp, under a certain decision that he had made. Together with all his wise men, he decided that the people of the whole world should be counted! The whole world here is not the entire earth, but that part of the world that was then called the Roman Empire. Caesar Augustus was probably a little proud of himself calling his domain "the whole world" as if there was no one living beyond the realms of the Roman Empire. But that's what he did. He decided that the people should be taxed. Today, we call that a 'census.' All the people in his empire should be counted so that he could determine how much money each country should pay. According to people who study history,

he had planned to do this census a couple of years earlier, but then became busy in a war that had to be finished first. So he was delayed for three to four years.

Isn’t that amazing?... What is amazing about that? Well, it means that God’s hand was in the timing of this census, and not the plans nor the actions of this great emperor. It had to take place on this day. When Luke wrote in the beginning of this chapter, “*and it came to pass*”, it may sound like “it just happened to be.” But that’s not true. It happened because there is a Almighty God of heaven and earth, greater than the Roman Empire and its great ruler Augustus. And so when that emperor stamped his seal on the decree, he had no clue what the results of his command to tax the world would be for the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. This will become clearer as soon we look at the other pictures set before us in this chapter.

But before we move on to examine the next picture, let’s think a little more about this first one. This picture should make us glad. Glad? Why glad? It isn’t that special, is it? Well, yes, it is. In a few simple words, Luke tells us that God is in control of everything that happens. It shows that God’s timing is always good. This mighty emperor, who could order around everybody in his empire, was in the hand of the Almighty like a piece of clay. We’ll see in a moment, children, why it was so important that the census took place at this exact time and not four years earlier. So what we need to learn this morning is that things still happen in this world because God is in control. That is no small comfort! That is a tremendous comfort! Things still happen in this world—good and bad—because God is in control. Let’s rejoice in this truth. Maybe you’re looking back or around you and you see things happening that are disappointing, hurtful, destructive or worrisome. But they are still happening because God is in control. That’s a solid and comforting truth of the Bible. We should often look at this picture, “*And it came to pass in those days...*” Just as then, so today God is moving His hand to write the history of each day in our world, in our nation, in our community, in our church, in our family, in your life. Rejoice in that always—yes, always!

Luke moves on to detail a second picture in verse 3: “*And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called*

*Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David).*” It’s a small picture of a man and his expecting wife who were living in the very small, simple village of Nazareth. Nazareth was nothing compared with the big city of Rome. There were probably not even a few hundred people living there at this time. There were no important buildings, beautiful palaces, rich-looking city squares or prosperous harbors. Actually, the place was so simple, it is hardly worth a picture. It was actually a settler’s town according to historians. Yet God calls us to look at this little village and particularly at two people living there, Joseph and Mary. They were not yet married. In our text it says he went up with his “espoused wife”. It says *wife*, but it also says *espoused*. Nowadays, we would say that they were engaged, which means they had promised each other to marry. When a couple was engaged in the Bible time, they were already called husband and wife.

Let’s picture for a moment that little village. This young couple was not married, and yet—Mary is expecting a baby! That’s not what should happen when they are unmarried. They became the talk of the town, actually the shame of the family, because it was very disgraceful when a woman became pregnant before she was married. We know that Mary was pregnant through a very special way. It was the Holy Spirit Who conceived in her womb the Child she carried. But who would believe such a story if she would explain her pregnancy this way? It is likely that Joseph and Mary told nobody! When Mary first told the story to Joseph, he also didn’t believe her. Thinking she had been unfaithful to him, he was planning to break the engagement. But God told Joseph in a dream not to do so, but rather to rejoice, for the little baby was Jesus, the Son of God and He was conceived by the Holy Ghost in Mary’s womb. So I imagine they quietly endured all the bad talk that went around about them while together they rejoiced. Oh, how hard it must have been *not* to share this joy!

So let’s ponder this picture of these two simple people in Nazareth. Both knew that they were expecting the most unusual baby that has ever been conceived, for the angel said that He was called the Son of the Highest. How impossible that is! How can this tiny baby growing in Mary’s womb be the Almighty God? I agree, that seems impossible. It’s beyond understanding that this helpless baby that was going to be born is the same one that created the entire

world and the massive universe around it. John wrote, “*all things were made by him.*” And yet He was as helpless as all small babies are.

But in the picture of verse 3, Joseph and Mary are no longer in Nazareth. They were on the way to Bethlehem. In some way, it was a journey Mary shouldn’t have been taking at that time. For look, she was *great with child*. When mothers are close to delivering their baby, you know they become so large; you can almost see it that the baby will soon be born. When mothers are close to having the baby, they usually stay close to home. That’s what Mary and Joseph also would have done! But now they were suddenly commanded to travel to Bethlehem. And yet, even though this trip was hard for Mary, there was joy in their eyes. Joy? Why would they be joyful?

The reason was because God had taken away all their doubts and fears. What fears and doubts? Well, the angel told Mary that the Child she carried was the promised Messiah, the Savior God promised to send. But God also foretold through the prophet Micah that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But they were living in Nazareth! And as the time grew closer for the baby to be born, they were still living in Nazareth. How could this be? Was Micah wrong or were they wrong? Was it all imagination? Did Joseph question his wife again about all she told him? Did he struggle to believe his own dream in which the angel spoke to him? Was all of it really true?

Oh, how often God’s ways are confusing to us. He promises one thing and then it seems that it all goes the opposite direction. God told Abram to leave Ur and move to Canaan with all his family and animals--but then a serious famine in the new land threatened his animals. God told the nation of Israel to flee from Egypt—and they met the Red Sea. When difficulties arise, then it is so easy to begin to doubt whether God actually spoke what He promised. Maybe you struggle with that also. Perhaps He called and encouraged you with a text from Scripture. But instead of bringing it to pass, nothing seems to happen or instead, all kinds of difficulties come up that seem to make it impossible.

Well, let’s look at Luke’s picture again and let’s rejoice: God is in control and God keeps His Word. For look, Joseph and Mary are traveling to Bethlehem. Do you see what is happening? That great man in Rome who stamped his decree didn’t know what he was doing. But his action forced Joseph and Mary to travel

from the north, Nazareth, to the south, Bethlehem, exactly at the right time. God is in control and will never fail His promise. Let’s rejoice about that.

So Joseph and Mary made their way towards Bethlehem. Then Luke wrote about the most beautiful picture that ought to bring joy in all the world. We read in verse 6 and 7, *“And so it was, that while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”* In many Christmas songs and scenes set up in towns, it looks like Jesus was born in a stable. I understand why we would imagine a stable with animals. For where do we find a manger, a feeding trough for animals? In a stable, of course, where cows, sheep and goats are kept. But that’s not the picture that Luke has in mind when he wrote these words.

Every home in Bethlehem had a manger in the living room like today, we might have a food dish in the house for our pets. The houses in Jesus’ days were very simple. They had an upper floor where the family lived. By a few steps, you came to the lower floor where the animals were kept at night. Along the edge of the upper floor they would make a hollow place to hold food which the animals would eat from as they stood in the lower part. That shallow trough in the floor is called a manger. But what about the inn? Normally, guests would not join family on the upper floor, but were given the upper room. The word “inn” that Luke uses in these verses is literally the “upper room.” This upper room was on the roof and that’s where the guests would sleep. Since, however, many family members of Joseph and Mary had to return to Bethlehem to be taxed, the upper room, or the inn, was already filled. So Joseph and Mary were invited to join the family in their living quarters. And there, that night, the Lord Jesus was born. After the baby was cleaned, wrapped with baby clothes that all children were wrapped in, He was laid in the manger to sleep, for that was the safest place for a baby on such a floor that suddenly dropped off into a lower section.

But that *Jesus* was laid in this manger, that was very special! Though it was the normal place for all babies to be laid, it was not normal for this Child. No king’s sons or daughters would *ever* be laid in a manger, for their parents didn’t live in such simple homes. Later that night, when the shepherds were

told about the birth of the Savior, they were reassured by the angel that they would find Him in a place that they, and all common people, were used to: they would find Him in the manger! It made the wonder all the greater that the Savior came in the place where common people lived and were born.

Friends, children, let’s look a little longer at this picture. Here was the Son of God, the Son of the Highest... He was laid in a manger. God Almighty came to this earth and came in the place where most of us begin our journey in life: in a family home. How amazing was this humbling of God and His Son to have Him born there, in a common home! What moved God to do this? He was filled with compassion for sinners and love for this wicked world as Jesus Himself later testified, “For God (the Father) so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son ...” to be born in a lowly manger and from there to travel through a life of suffering to die on the cross as a cursed man. Look often at this picture of God’s heart. There is no more beautiful sight to be seen in all the universe.

Luke then draws out the third picture. It is outside in the fields at Bethlehem. *And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* The stars were out, but the shepherds were out also. Shepherds were rough and tough men. From the studies of history, we know that most lands were owned by great land owners. These landlords would hire shepherds, who were usually not the best of men in Jesus’ days. They were known to be untrustworthy. It was even one of the laws of the Jewish culture that you should never buy a lamb or a sheep from a shepherd. Why? Because you would probably be buying a stolen one. Whether these shepherds were like that isn’t known.

While these shepherds were in the field watching over their flocks in the darkness, suddenly they become startled. Why? Because the Bible says that “*Lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them.*” Suddenly there he was. You know that sometimes when you are busy doing something and all of sudden someone stands right next to you and you haven’t heard them coming, you get a fright. The shepherds were not only startled by such a *sudden* appearance, but also because it was the appearance of an *angel of the Lord*. We read, “*and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*” They were terrified; they were frozen to their spot. We all would be. Any close contact

with God in His holiness will make us fearful. And this was close contact with God. They saw the glory of the Lord. This was something very, very special. Maybe they were even more afraid because they were not such good men. If it is true what I read that shepherds in general were untrustworthy, then maybe their consciences immediately pricked them. We would feel the same. But angel said, “Don’t be afraid. Fear not. I’m not here to hurt or kill you. I’m here to bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people.”

As we sit here listening to God’s Word, then God is also saying to us, “Fear not.” Friends, there is no need to fear *this first coming* of God into the world. There was no need to fear His coming in Bethlehem, for He didn’t come to destroy the town. That’s what the devil would soon do when Herod sent his servants to murder all the children. But that’s not why God sent His Son into the world. Come, do not fear the tidings of great joy that you may hear again today. God is sending us this message to bless us and to turn each one of us away from our iniquity! Those are nearly the exact words Peter spoke to the people after Pentecost, to the very people who had taken Jesus and killed Him. Even to them, the Lord spoke about mercy and grace. So put away those fears this morning and let the message of God be heard and bring you hope.

The angel of the Lord said at Jesus’ first coming, “Fear not.” However, there is great need to fear His second coming into the world! Then Jesus will not send His messengers ahead with a message of “Fear not,” but He will send His angel ahead with a trumpet blast that will cause all men, great and small, to shake like children. But He is not sending a trumpet blast this morning, but the sweet Gospel tidings. God is saying to us, “I sent not my Son into Bethlehem to condemn the world; but that the world through Him might be saved.”

As the shepherds were still trying to grasp the message of great joy, all of a sudden we see another scene in this marvelous event. A choir of angels appears in the sky. They are singing and praising God. Why are the angels so full of the worship of God as they praise Him? Because of what their Lord is doing. He is sending peace on this earth. They know this earth. These angels are going back and forth between this world and heaven. They know very well what goes on in the dark. Out of all the corners of the earth they have seen the evil, hatred, fighting, wars and violence. But mostly they are appalled by the enmity and hatred that they see and hear these earth-dwellers show to their

beloved and magnificent Lord. Even though He overloads the world daily with His gifts, sending sun and rain on the just and unjust, yet they fill their mouths with evil words and reject Him. I think the angels must have been the most amazed as they bring this message to the sinners on earth. That their God would send peace on this earth and their Lord has goodwill toward sinful man! They have seen that He doesn’t have that goodwill to the sinful angels who rebelled against Him. The devil and all his demons receive no good will. But sinful, fallen, rebellious, unthankful and hostile man does. The angels are amazed and they are lifting their voices to praise God in this whole beautiful setting on this dark night. Shall we sing with them? Is God not worthy to be praised with heart and mouth? Shouldn’t we be singing louder and longer than these angels?

Let’s look at the last picture Luke sets before us in this chapter. It is another picture of the shepherds. “Let us go and see *if it is true* what we have just heard the angels say”. I hope you listened well to that sentence. Is that what these rough shepherds said? Did they say, “Let’s go check it out to see if it’s true?” No, they didn’t. They said, “Let’s go and see **what** we have heard.” They believed what they heard even though they didn’t understand it all! They want to go and see it. “*Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord has made known unto us.*” And you can imagine them hurrying through the darkness to the town of Bethlehem. How they ever found Joseph, Mary and the Baby, Luke doesn’t tell us. No doubt God guided them somehow to the Baby lying in the manger. So God still does. As we obey His Word, He will guide us by His Spirit to find Jesus.

That was the fourth picture. Let’s sing first before we look at one other picture that is set before us in the Word of God. We sing Psalter 290: 1-5.

*Praise ye the Lord, for He is good;  
Give thanks and bless His name;  
His lovingkindness changes not,  
From age to age the same.*

and what follows in Psalter 290 stanzas 1 through 5.

I have tried to describe the four pictures that Luke has drawn in simple words before us. To really appreciate the beauty of Jesus’ birth-day, I should let

you look at some other pictures. They are not nice; as a matter of fact they are terrible. But we can only see the beauty of white when it is placed in the middle of black. That's why a light always looks sweeter and more attractive in the dark. So what pictures do we see around the ones Luke drew out?

I see people suffering from other people. They are fighting wars. People are abusing children, men and women. They are shooting and looting. Even religious leaders are unkind, proud and angry. Kings are sending thousands to their death because they want more land and more honor. People are worshiping idols instead of the living God. There is very little real love in our world. Most people live for themselves and really don't care about others around them. The strong are using their power to oppress those weaker than themselves. Big boys are teasing young boys and hurting them. Big girls are mean and catty toward other girls. *Everyone* is suffering--for those who hurt others are also hurting themselves. Why are they all suffering? It is not caused by God. We suffer because we have sinned and ruined God's world and brought His righteous curse upon ourselves. And even though God came looking for Adam and Eve after they had sinned and spoke a beautiful promise about salvation, mankind didn't want to know about it. The picture is a world full of stubborn, selfish, wicked, careless, ungodly and fighting people. In this world was Jesus born. It was a world where all were lost and the lost were living without God and without hope. They couldn't find their way back to God and were even unwilling even to return. Into this broken and soiled world Jesus was born. That's an amazing event. John, the apostle, also wrote about Jesus' birthday but in a different way than Luke. John wrote that Jesus is God and yet that *"He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not"*. That the world "didn't know Him" doesn't mean they didn't know His Name or didn't recognize Him, as if He were a stranger. It means they didn't receive Him, didn't want to know Him, and rejected Him and His message. They didn't love Him and didn't rejoice in His coming! Isn't it still the same today? By nature, we don't welcome the true Jesus of the Bible. After Jesus grew up and began to preach, at first the crowds were very excited about this new Rabbi's preaching, but their enthusiasm soon dwindled and they marched Him off to the cross. Why? His message was not welcome because He told people that they

needed to be saved from their sins through Him. What a world and what a people did Jesus come to?

Now I suppose you might ask the question, “Why would God sent His Son into *such* a world? And what moved the Son of God to humble Himself to be born in the small village of Bethlehem, not even in a palace, but in a house where he was laid in a common manger, wrapped in common clothes? Why would God do such a thing?”

The answer on those questions is the main message of the birth of Jesus. In some way it would be the last picture we are to ponder although this truth cannot be pictured. Yet the words of the Bible picture before our mind the reason why the angels sang, “Glory to God in the highest.” The first truth to ponder is the amazing glory of the Father’s goodness in bringing His only Child into such a world. Though Mary brought forth her first born son, He is really God’s only begotten Son Who stepped into being a human. John wrote, “*He was made flesh and dwelt among us.*” Among *us*! Among a world so evil, among people so hostile! Do you see the beauty of this? Let us consider the Father’s goodness in bringing His Son into this world. Young and old, consider this deeply. The Father loved His Son, more than you or I will love any of our own children. But the Father was willing to humble His Son. Do you hear what He did? It pleased Him to bruise Him, to humiliate Him to the deepest humiliation. This first step of His humiliation started when He was conceived in Mary and after His birth, to be laid in a manger. Come and let us worship! God humbled His Son, whom He loved so intensely, and gave Him to be born as a Child to be laid in a manger and later to die on the cross. Oh, parents, would you ever send your son to a dungeon? Would you? Your dear son or daughter? Would you ever send him to live and to die on a land fill? In or by a sewage pond? I’ll let you think about these images, because it was much worse for Jesus to come into this sin-filled world. Would you? Would any of us think of sacrificing our child for the most rebellious, selfish wretches who have no problem with even using God for their own selfish purposes? That’s what you and I are! There is nothing pretty about you and me! Would you be willing to send your child in such circumstances for such people? This is the glory of Christ’s birth-day: Glory to God in the Highest for His love to a rebellious, wretched world!

Now let’s consider the glory of God’s grace He sends us the message of these good tidings. It’s amazing that you and I get to hear God’s message of peace and goodwill toward men. The angel’s message that John brings later in these chapters is good for every ear in this world, my friend, but not every ear gets to hear it. Why did I get to hear this? And why do I get to hear it again and again? I see the glory of God when He sends His message into my ears. Every heart here may take courage about the message of God’s amazing grace. You know God did not send this Child into the world to proclaim condemnation on this place. Amazing! He did that in Genesis 3. He said, “Cursed is the ground for thy sake.” As result we are born as a cursed people. We are condemned and are in essence on the deathrow awaiting the day of our execution. He could have left us in that ‘cell of our condemnation’ without any message of grace. He could have banished us outside Paradise without any ray of hope. He could have left us separated from Him. He could have left us doomed to die forever in a world gone rebellious. In all that God would have been perfectly just. Do you agree with that? Does He owe us anything? But this great Creator God did not leave us there, congregation. He is sending us a message this morning through the angel’s mouth, *“And Lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not – the Savior is born!”* Fear not, these are tidings of hope! Yes, but that’s only for those shepherds for they were good men! No, they were no good men; there are no good men. None is righteous, no not one. The reason we don’t need to fear is because God’s coming into this world through this Babe of Bethlehem it to announce that He came to save sinners. Sinners who have every reason to fear if they look at themselves. But no reason to fear when we think of why God send His Son into our world this first time! He came to save sinners like you and me.

*“Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.”* Undeserved! Unworthy! As God’s messenger, I am called to bring you the exact same tidings as the angel was allowed to bring: *“Fear not: for behold, I bring you (YOU!) good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.”* The word in Greek translated here as “All people” means all *kinds* of people: young and old, bad people, worse people, and the worst people. Wherever you sit today, whatever you’ve done, whatever dwells in your heart, you belong to this group of “all kinds of people”

who may hear this message of God’s amazing grace. For *unto* you is born—it doesn’t say “for you is born”—you have to read it well: *unto* you is born. This is the general proclamation of the gospel that all God’s servants must bring forth to all people. “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour.*” He didn’t say *your* Savior, but *a* Savior – it’s a general proclamation. There is only one Savior, and He is the only One Who is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by Him. Unto you, O sinner, is born a Savior and He is the only One Who is able to save you. That’s a tidings that ought to bring joy in our hearts! Even though you have every reason to fear on account of sin, there is a Savior Who was born to save sinners, even the greatest.

Glory to God in the Highest. Peace on earth. How can He do that? How can God say peace on earth when this earth is guilty and rebellious? How can He say peace on earth when we’ve declared war? That brings us to the third and last part of this truth of God

I see the glory of God in the wisdom of providing such a Savior as Jesus Christ. Congregation, this Jesus Christ, as a little babe in Bethlehem, is a mysterious Person. He is God and He is man at the very same time. That truth is a spring of joy. Only such a Person can be a Mediator between a holy God and a sinful and guilty man. As the God-man, He can bring these so opposite parties together. Maybe you sit here thinking, “How could God have anything to do with me? I even hate myself for who I am and for what I’ve done. I can’t forgive myself for what I have done in my life and what I have been thinking and saying. How can this holy God have anything to do with me?” Fear not, my friend, behold His glory as He laid His Son in the manger. That’s why it is possible for Him to have anything to do with you! He came to take the place of His sinful people. None of His people are good, holy, worthy or even promising. No, they all are of the world!

A few verses later in this chapter of Luke 2, we read of a man called Simeon whom God led to this Child like the shepherds. Simeon took this Child in his arms and while holding this Child, blessed God and said, “Mine eyes have seen Thy salvation.” For this child, in Whom God has come on this earth, he saw the Mediator and Savior.

The way to God is Jesus Christ. There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved. Many people rejected Jesus as the way to God. Why did they reject Him? They thought they were good enough in their religion. They didn’t like to hear His preaching that their religion amounted to nothing and that their righteousness amounted to nothing. They didn’t want to hear that there is nothing that I can do to bring to God as merit. They didn’t want to hear of the truth that salvation is all of God and nothing of man.

And dear congregation, what do we do with these joyful tidings today? Where are you in your relationship to God? The question that you need to answer this morning is what have you done so far with this gift of God that He has brought into your life? Christmas without Christ is a total empty event, no matter how cosy the family times may be. It may be a moment of joy as you come together, but tomorrow you will face the same reality that we are all a dying people in a dying world.

Will the picture of the shepherds be our picture today? They heard the message; they believed the message; they followed hard to find the Savior they had heard about. For hearing about Him isn’t enough. We need to come to Him, as empty-handed, unworthy and needy sinners. And what they found is what they spoke about. For they *“returned glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them.”* As they went about their usual business again, they shared the good news. How many believed their words we don’t know and don’t need to know. But the real question, dear friends, is *“Will we believe God’s message as they did?”*

Oh, but that wretched unbelief that has bound my hands to receive and closed my eyes to see. If that is your struggle this morning, then be like the father who later came to this same Jesus to heal his son, who confessed, *“Lord, I believe”*; oh, I believe that Thou art come not to condemn, but to save; I believe that Thou art able to save even me, to pardon my sins, to change my heart. Yet, *“help Thou my unbelief”*; my doubt is whether that is now truly said also to me. Oh, enable me not only to believe that Thou are the Savior. Help me to believe that Thou are *my* Savior.

Amen.

Concluding Psalter 232: 1-3

*O Lord, to us Thy mercy show,*

*And Thy salvation now bestow;*

*We wait to hear what God will say;*

*Peace to His people He will speak,*

*And to His saints, but let them seek*

*No more in folly's path to stray.*

and what follows in Psalter 232 stanzas 1-3.