

Bible Study Guide: Week of 12-19-2022

Note: This study guide was originally written in 2021. My commentary and the reflection questions are just as valid this year as last year.

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Luke 2:1-20

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 her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn 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 the 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.

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 her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

As is typical in Luke’s gospel, this story begins with people in power (in this case, Augustus and Quirinius), but quickly shifts to unexpected and “less important” people. Luke does this when introducing Zechariah (Luke 1) and John the Baptist (Luke 3). Here, Jesus comes into the world in the same way. While Caesar undertakes a massive counting of “the whole world,” Jesus, the true king, is born in a tiny and forgotten town. Luke doesn’t explain why it would have been important for people to return to their ancestral hometowns, but evidently that was required of Joseph and he complied. His “engagement” or “betrothal” to Mary signified a marriage contract had already been drawn up and agreed to by both families (as was the custom at that time), but their marriage celebration had not yet occurred. It was common for a couple to exist in this contract for some time. Certainly Mary’s being pregnant would have factored into this timeline, as well. Unlike Matthew, who goes to great lengths to explain Joseph’s role in the story, Luke shows little interest in Joseph other than to introduce him and his lineage back to David.

Note that two characters we commonly associate with “the Christmas story” are absent here: the donkey and the innkeeper. Every Christmas play I’ve ever been to it seems has a donkey and an innkeeper. These are creative liberties that various authors have used to embellish the story over the years. Luke simply doesn’t mention either of these characters. In fact, the word for “inn” here means simply a guest dwelling place. That could describe an inn or a guest house, but more commonly referred to a guest room in a house. See, for instance, Luke 22:11 where Jesus tells his disciples to prepare a guest room for them to enjoy the Passover feast and share their last supper together. The word for “inn” or “hotel” is a different word altogether and comes up in Luke 10:34 in the parable of the Good Samaritan. This other word refers specifically to a publicly available boarding house or hotel. The word used in Luke 2:7 to mean “inn,” again, more likely refers to a guest room of a house. Joseph and Mary were likely staying with family in Bethlehem. Because everyone was in town for the census and room was scarce, they would have been welcomed into the main floor dwelling place of the family home. Homes had a main or ground level where the animals were kept and then another level on top for the guest room. Apparently, there was no more room in the upstairs area normally saved for guests, but Mary and Joseph were afforded a place in the home nonetheless.

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 the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

This passage which started with a focus on the highest of the high—Caesar himself—has shifted to focus on the Holy Family in Bethlehem. Now it shifts once again. The focus now is on the lowest of the low—shepherds. Curiously, the biblical images of shepherds are usually positive: Think of David, the shepherd-turned-king, Jesus as the Good Shepherd, and Psalm 23. Contrary to these images, however, shepherds were usually reviled in antiquity. They were thought of as dirty, smelly, and dishonest. They grazed their flocks on other people’s property, causing damage and destruction. These shepherds, apparently, had no intention of complying with the census that was ordered since they were out in the fields instead of in the city being registered. It is to such as these that the birth of the Messiah is first announced.

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.

The shepherds are the first to hear about the gospel of Jesus and they welcome it eagerly, rushing with haste to see what the angel told them. They also glorify and praise God, which will be the hallmark of those who have had a life-changing encounter with Jesus throughout Luke and Acts. Mary’s contemplative act is in stark contrast with the frenzied reaction of the other people in the house or place where Jesus was born. They all are amazed, but Mary meanwhile, reflects on the words of the shepherds. She has already heard and already knew what they were saying was true about Jesus.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. Why do you think it matters that Luke begins with Caesar, but quickly shifts to the Holy Family and then to the shepherds? What expectation does this set for us about Jesus’ coming ministry?**
- 2. Why do you think it matters that Joseph was descended from David? How does this shape our understanding of Jesus’ ministry and identity?**
- 3. You’ve probably heard this story many times over the years. Is there anything that struck you differently this time reading it? How does God speak to us in new ways through something we’ve read many times before?**