

Three Strange Signs – It Must Be Christmas

We are getting close to Christmas. All the signs point to it. Holiday music playing on the radio and in the malls. Decorations everywhere. You can even tell by the increasing agitation of most of the shoppers in the malls. “It’s almost Christmas and I’ve still got seven people to buy for so get out of my way!” It sounds like we may have snow or sleet and ice and extremely cold weather this week, another sign that Christmas is almost here. And it’s getting close to time for bowl games, another sure sign that Christmas is here. But I have some other signs that pertain to Christmas that I want to talk about. Three rather strange signs that assure me it’s Christmas and that means good news for us. The first strange sign we can see at Christmas is found in Luke 2:1.

1. “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” Luke 2:1. How is this a sign concerning Christmas? **This is a sign that God is in control of this universe and is Lord over every situation we face.** I know when we look at the Christmas story it seems like a lot of things are spinning out of control. No room at the inn, Herod trying to kill the baby, the flight of the Holy family into Egypt, but the truth is God is in control. He rules and reigns, even when his power seems to be hidden in the background of the events taking place in our life. Let me show you what I mean.

I read something that George Wood, our General Superintendent wrote about the Christmas story and I need to give him credit for this thought. Have you ever wondered why Mary and Joseph arrived at Bethlehem so late in the pregnancy. Apparently they arrived on the very night she delivered. Doesn’t that seem strange to you that they would cut it so close? And believe me, it is a long journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, by donkey or by foot. Why didn’t they leave a couple of weeks earlier?

Think about it. The angel showed up, told Mary she was going to have a child but that was pretty much all the information she received. The angel said nothing about leaving Nazareth or going to Bethlehem for the birth. I realized I had never thought much about what happened next. Mary must have had all of these questions but the angel never showed back up again to answer her, to give her more info on what to expect. That seems to be the way the Lord often works in our lives. He speaks to us,

gives us direction perhaps and we really sense his presence in our lives, and then there is a long period of silence. He seems to trust us that we will figure this out, walking it out by faith.

The angel never told them to leave Nazareth. Joseph had a dream about the child and Mary and the angel assured him this child was of the Holy Spirit and he should go ahead and take Mary as his wife, but nothing was said about where the baby should be born.

I'm sure her parents and family would have been saying "stay here in Nazareth." So why did they make this last minute trip to Bethlehem? The angel didn't tell them to go. Joseph wasn't told in a dream to go. Their parents weren't telling them to go. They don't seem to be aware of the significance of the place where the baby was to be born nor of the prophecy concerning his birth in Micah 5:2 that says, "**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.**" **Micah 5:2.** That prophecy will be fulfilled, but not because Mary and Joseph set out purposely or consciously to fulfill it.

Luke tells us why they came to Bethlehem: because Caesar Augustus decreed it. Let me quote from George Wood. "It was that decree given across the water in Rome that on a certain day, by that day, all persons were to have gone to their ancestral homes for a head count of the number of people in the realm. It was that decree that brought God moving the whole world in order to get one family where he wanted them [to be]. It was an extravagant display of God's power, that he would move the world to their ancestral homes in order to get one family out of Nazareth to Bethlehem that the Scriptures might be fulfilled...What got into Caesar to issue such a decree and issue it at the very time in his reign when for the rest of history his administration would be divided into B.C. and A.D. The early Christians knew what had gotten into Caesar's head. God had put it in his mind. It was a due date established by Caesar and the family in Nazareth finally said, "We have got to get down to Bethlehem because that due date cannot be postponed any longer.".....God could have flown Mary by angel express had he so desired from Nazareth to Bethlehem but he had a different plan. He would use the decree of Caesar to show that his power was manifest through

an historical event where the participants in that event were not even conscious of the fact that it was God who had slipped the idea into the Roman administration. That's why we as Christians never become too troubled with what the government is doing. We know in the last analysis the Lord is in control and can do what he wills when he chooses to do it."

"Christians in the first century had a difficult time under a number of different Roman emperors, but they never doubted who the real power was. The real power was not Caesar Augustus under whom Jesus was born. It was not Caesar Tiberius under whom Jesus died. It was not under Caesar Nero under whom the early Christians in Rome suffered and Paul himself was imprisoned and perhaps executed. The early Christians knew this: there was a throne above Caesar's throne and it was the wonderful humor of the Christian church that they could open their Bible to Luke 2:1 and say in the worst of times, 'God motivated Caesar'. Even Caesar someday will realize that he is not the Lord and he is not the ruler. Behind every human scene is a divine scene. That is the way to approach the Christmas story."

Imagine the heavenly headlines that day. **"Pagan Roman Leader Caesar Augustus fulfills Old Testament prophecy."** Don't miss this sign of Christmas: God is still in control. The timing of Caesar's decree points to it. The birth of Jesus at just the right time and in just the right place testify to it. This sign of Christmas reminds us: God is in control!

2. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified." Luke 2:8-9. Here is a second strange sign. What kind of sign is this to us? **This is a sign that God has not forgotten any of us.** Of all the people in Israel to whom the angels could have made this announcement they chose a group of lowly shepherds.

The shepherds in those days weren't the cute little shepherd boys you see in your nativity scene at home. These were hardened fellows who lived a pretty difficult life. Living outside all the time, in all kinds of weather, following the flock and caring for them. They were considered something of a lower class element of society. Apparently their testimony was not admissible in a court of law as a witness. They were

kind of second class citizens. So why would the angels make the most important announcement in history to a rough bunch of shepherds on a hillside?

Couldn't they have found a better group to tell? Why not make the announcement to the innkeeper? Wouldn't that have made more sense? He may have told Mary and Joseph that he didn't have a room for them, but if a choir of angels showed up and sang in his lobby, announcing that the baby about to be born in his stable was the Savior, God's Son, the Messiah, I'm pretty sure he would be running out there to bring them in and give them the best room in the Inn, even if he had to give them his room. Why not announce it to the innkeeper?

Or what about announcing it to Herod? Surely the announcement by angelic hosts could have persuaded Herod to back off and would have saved the lives of the innocent babies that were killed and Mary and Joseph wouldn't have had to flee to Egypt with their infant son.

Perhaps they could have appeared to the wise men and made the announcement to them. They could have pointed them to the right place and they wouldn't have had to contact Herod or be so late in arriving. They could have made it in time for the birth.

Wouldn't it have made sense for the angels to announce this to some of the Jewish midwives in Bethlehem so they could have come to assist Mary in her labor and delivery? Or how about an appearance to the Chief Priests and the members of the Sanhedrin. It could have prevented a lot of trouble down the road. It seems there was a whole list of people more appropriate, or to whom the announcement would have been more advantageous, more helpful to the Holy Family and to Jesus himself, but the greatest announcement in the history of the world was made to a rough bunch of shepherds on a Judean hillside.

What kind of a sign is that? As I said, it is a sign that God has not forgotten any of us. If the announcement had only gone to Herod or to the wise men or the innkeeper, then it might have implied that only people of status, only people of power or wisdom or ownership could have access to Christ. It would have implied "business as usual" - the old power politics - it's about who you know and how much money and influence you have.

But the fact that the angels came to the shepherds lets us know that none of us have been overlooked or forgotten, regardless of our position or situation in life. The Savior that was born in Bethlehem was not just the Savior of the rich, the powerful, the connected, the wise, the famous, the interesting, but the angel said this message of good news and great joy was for “all the people.” The Savior born that night was the Savior of the whole world. It didn’t matter your color, your race, your IQ, your country of origin, your background, your social or economic status, your height, weight, your looks, your past – the angel said “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you: he is Christ the Lord.” A Savior was born so that anyone who would turn to him in repentance and in faith would be saved. Even all of us. Even Gentiles like us. Even rough old sinners like some of us. Even shepherds can find a Savior in Christ the Lord. The world may have overlooked you. Society may have passed you by but God has not forgotten you and he sent that message to the shepherds to let you know you have not been forgotten.

In Mary’s song, recorded in Luke 1, she testifies that God “**...has been mindful of the humble state of his servant....he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but he has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.**” **Luke 1:48-53.** Mary rejoiced because God had not forgotten those the world tends to forget. By making the announcement of Christ’s birth to the shepherds, the message was sent that all of us can come to the manger and behold the Messiah. All of us can hear and receive the good news of the gospel. The humble, the hungry, the poor, the powerless, the ones the world overlooks, the ones the world would never choose, we are on God’s invitation list. Come and see. Come and receive. Even for shepherds and ragamuffins and sinners like us.

John said it like this, “**The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God...**” **John 1:9-12.**

What a powerful sign. We can come to him. All of us – regardless of our

background, regardless of our status, regardless of whether you have a dollar to your name, you can come to him in repentance and faith and receive him as your Lord and Savior and to all who receive him, to all who believe in his name, all will become children of God, heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ himself. I'm thankful for the sign of the shepherds.

Finally, the third sign was one announced to the shepherds in the field that night.

3. “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:12 Could there be a stranger sign – a baby in a manger? Can you imagine the response of the shepherds? They were expecting the Messiah to come as a ruler, a king that would liberate them from Roman oppression, a deliverer with mighty strength and power. What a shock when the angel explained the sign that a Savior had come - that Israel's Messiah had arrived – and the sign is a baby in a feeding trough! What kind of sign is that?

I have to admit I struggle a bit with the signs God often gives us. I mean, to be honest, it seemed like a host of angels singing in the heavens and speaking to shepherds is more amazing, more dramatic, appears more miraculous, more life altering than a baby lying in a manger. What's the big deal about a baby and a manger?

I like major signs. I like the big signs that you can't miss. I want clear direction, obvious indications of what's next, of what I am to do. But God often shows us little signs, almost obscure events that if we see them, if we are paying attention and we tune in, those signs point to his involvement, his purpose, his grace at work.

Why the tiny, seemingly unspectacular sign? I realize a virgin birth and God becoming flesh is certainly not unspectacular, but the sign seems so common, so earthy - a baby in a manger. The truth is God uses little signs - strange signs - to call forth our faith and to reveal his mighty works. Think about it. David versus Goliath, Gideon and Israel facing the Midianites, Moses facing the armies of Pharaoh - and the signs we have are a boy with a sling shot, a handful of men with torches, pitchers and trumpets and an old man holding a stick. Small signs, unspectacular at first appearance, but when faith examines the signs – when we exercise our faith, when we look with faith, we see God at work in every sign.

I search for big signs and God points me to sling shots and men with pitchers and trumpets and torches and loaves and fishes and a baby in a manger and a cross and an empty tomb. Why? Because he delights in our faith. He delights when we put our trust and faith in Him and in Him alone. You see, I can't put much faith in a stick with Pharaoh's army behind me and the sea before me, but I can put a lot of faith in the God who told Moses to stretch that stick out over the sea and it would part before them.

I can't put much faith in fighting a battle with torches, pitchers and trumpets but I can put faith in the God who told Gideon to "shout for the Lord has given the Midianites into your hand."

It is the God behind the sign that gives me confidence. I can trust Him and I can look at the sign with eyes of faith and see something far greater than I expected.

And what was this sign – this baby in a manger – telling us? **God is with us.** Look with eyes of faith and we see the sign spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. He said this baby in a manger would be called "Emmanuel – God with us." A Savior, the Son of the Most High, born of a virgin and wrapped in swaddling clothes. This baby in the manger is the sign of his presence. John said it like this, "**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.**" **John 1:14**

That baby in the manger changes everything for us. One moment we are alone, in the darkness, wondering if there is any hope and in the next moment – there is a sign. A virgin has conceived and has brought forth a son and his name is Emmanuel – God is with us. Could it be true? God is with us and if he really is, then anything is possible now. Everything changes.

The baby in the manger is a sign that God has come among us and rather than coming to overpower us, to dazzle us with his might and power, he comes as an infant, weak and vulnerable, to draw us to himself through love. George Wood said, God makes his appeal to us, not on the basis of power, but on the basis of love. That love is seen in his laying aside his power and glory and becoming flesh, born into this sinful world. That love is seen as he risks everything by being born as a baby, vulnerable and helpless. And that love is seen as he laid down his life upon the cross to atone for our sins.

Are you looking for a sign? You'll not find many greater nor of any more

meaning and significance than these. God is in control so don't be afraid. God has not forgotten you. You are of great value to him and he cares about you. God is with us so it doesn't matter what you are facing today, you aren't facing it alone. God has come down and dwelt among us. He is with us now.

Do you need a sign? Come to Bethlehem and look into the manger and behold his glory. John said, "**We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**" **John 1:14.** Come to Bethlehem in your mind and spirit again today and see the sign. Let that sign draw you in with cords of love. Come and see and worship and adore this king in a manger. And remember - he is in control, he has not forgotten you and he is with us, now and always.

O Come Let Us Adore Him