

It's a Boy!

Luke 2:1-7

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Call to Worship

O mighty God, Your blessed Son was manifest in the flesh that He might destroy the works of Satan and make us to be the sons and daughters of God most high, and heirs of eternal life. And so we ask that You would grant us that, having this hope we may purify ourselves even as He is pure. That when He shall appear again with power and great glory, we may be made like to Him in His eternal and glorious kingdom, where with You, O Father, and You, O Holy Spirit, He lives and reigns ever as one God, world without end. We ask that You would meet with us this day, speak to us by Your word enable us to worship in spirit and in truth receiving all the glory to Yourself, for we ask these things through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

If you have your Bibles I'd invite you to turn with me to Luke chapter 2. We're continuing our study in four passages in the gospel of Luke, telling the story of the greatest story ever told.

Today we are in Luke chapter two in the first seven verses. Let's remember as we're here that Luke is telling this story to a friend. He is telling this story to a friend who is probably a Roman citizen. He was named Theophilus and You can sense Luke saying here in Luke chapter 2, "Theophilus, what a time we live in. What a time we live in, it's the intersection of the ages, it's a day in time when ancient prophecies have come to pass in our lifetime, Theophilus. And Theophilus, even the greatest empire in the world has become subservient to the purposes of God in the plan of redemption." You can sense the excitement in Luke's words as He shares this story.

And we've heard this story a hundred times and I trust that your familiarity, not to say your over-familiarity of it will not dull your sense of excitement and joy and the profundity of the message that's contained herein. In fact, two categories of truths stand out to me as I look at this passage and I want to focus your attention on them today.

The first thing is this; this passage is shot through with reference with our God's sovereignty and providence over every aspect of life. You can't miss this

emphasis in Luke's story. Whether He is talking about Caesar Augustus or Quirinius, or Herod, or any of the other various aspects of the story of Christ, You see God's providence weaving all things together to accomplish His will.

But the other thing You see in this passage is God's character. Yes You learn something about the surprising plan of God in redemption, but as You see that surprising plan of God You're actually seeing a window into the heart of God. You're learning not just what God is willing to do to save You, but You are learning something about God Himself, how He is when you see His Son incarnated, when you see His Son take on our poor flesh and our blood for our redemption. And I want to focus your attention on those things this morning. But first let's hear God's word as we turn to Luke chapter two beginning in verse one.

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.

Amen. This is the God's holy inspired and inerrant word. May He writes its eternal truth upon our hearts. Let's pray.

O Lord we thank You for this word, and we ask that You would open our ears to hear it. That You would shut out the noise and the clamor of this season and that You would communion with our souls by Your Spirit and through Your word. We ask that You would open our eyes to see the greatness of the truth of this passage. That You would keep us from being blinded by familiarity to it's glory and to it's meaning. And we ask O God that You would open our hearts to this truth that we might believe it, that we might love it, rejoice in it, worship the son for it, give You glory because of it, walk in the way of truth and light and obedience. These things we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Now we see God's sovereign providence and His character in various way sin this passage and I'd like to point to four different ways in which we see His sovereign providence and character. Let me direct your attention to four things. First, to the timing of Christ's birth, then to the place of Christ's birth, then to the manor of Christ's birth, and then to the method of our redemption. So the timing of Christ's birth, the place of Christ's birth, the manner of Christ's birth, and the method of God's redemption of us through Jesus Christ.

I. The timing of Christ's birth.

Let's start off by looking at the timing in verses one through three. These verses are provided for us by Luke and they enable us to understand the precise moment in history in which Christ came into this world. The combination of Luke's record of Caesar Augustus, Quirinius, who was the military governor in Syria, Herod, who later who will play a part in this story, and this census, provide us an intersection of historical events which are corroboratable outside of the biblical account and enable us to know exactly when Jesus came into this world.

I want to pause here before I make the point that I am really desiring to make and just say of Luke, that the factuality, the historicity, of what he is saying is not peripheral to the story. And very often we hear Christians say something like this today, "Well, it doesn't matter whether the gospel writers got all the facts right; it's the spirit of the story that counts." Or, "It's the story itself, because it's what it symbolizes, it's what it points to, it's the spiritual meaning of it."

Well, I want you to pause and realize that that attitude, that mode of interpretations, that spirit of understanding, is alien to the thought world of the Bible. Luke was obviously extremely concerned that we know exactly what had happened. He desires to tell Theophilus everything in a consecutive order, in a logical way, to unfold what had happened. Luke spent much time with eyewitnesses so that he could tell us things, and in fact, Luke tells us things because of his interviewing of eyewitnesses, not the least of whom was Mary the mother of our Lord. He tells us things that the other gospel writers do not tell us. And so Luke believes that it is very important that this happened, and that it is very important that it happened just this way.

Why? Because Christianity is the only religion in the world, the only religion in the world, which says God intersected space and time and came into our history and dwelt among us, in flesh, and became one of us, like unto us, fully God yet fully human, and bore our sins and died and was buried and raised again on the third day and ascended into heaven as a portent and a promise that we will go there to be with Him too. And so the facts of Jesus' birth are vital to your belief in the promises that Jesus holds out in His gospel, not only of the forgiveness of sins but of the resurrection to the eternal life. And is that not what Paul is arguing in 1 Corinthians chapter 15? That if these things, if these things are not true, "if Jesus Christ is not raised from the dead then we are of all men most miserable." And if that's true, is not also true that if these things are not true about the incarnation of Jesus Christ then, we among all men are most miserable.

So don't buy that mess of pottage which says, it doesn't matter whether it happened as long as you understand sort of the spiritual truth of it. It matters greatly that this happened or the gospel writers wouldn't have spent so much time establishing it. And I want to suggest to you, my friends, whereas there are no reputable scholars, none, that I know of at this time or anywhere in history

who have denied that Jesus lived. Now, you may tell me of one afterwards, but I have never heard of a reputable scholar anywhere that denied Jesus that lived. There are plenty of reputable scholars that say, "Yes, Jesus lived, but it wasn't like this." And Luke is telling you, "Oh yes, He lived and it was like this." Don't, don't miss what Luke is telling you there. That's vital to understanding the rest of this most important story that was ever told.

But what I want you to focus on here in verses 1 through 3, is not the glorious historical research that has been done by a physician, by medical doctor Luke in his work and interviews; I want you to focus on the sovereignty of God in the timing of Jesus' birth. And this is seen in several ways.

First of all it's seen in the fact that Israel is at a low ebb. The nation of Israel is now a petty client state of the large and powerful pagan Roman empire. Israel is no longer a major power in the near east. Israel is no longer a factor amongst the league of nations, she is totally beholden to this foreign occupying power. Rome is the undisputed super power in the world of Israel's day. She is a blip on the screen. She doesn't have a king of her own, the line of David has been ended by five hundred years, and she is totally dependent upon this pagan occupying power.

And isn't it ironic, that it is at that very moment that God chooses to send the Messiah in the world, isn't it ironic that it is at the moment of Israel's greatest weakness, that into the world comes the Messiah.

And then there is the Roman empire itself. Caesar Augustus, and again this is a real historical person. You know about Caesar Augustus' granduncle, you read about him in school, Julius Caesar. In fact he was Julius Caesar's greatest grandnephew. When Julius Caesar was killed, Caesar Augustus found out that he was the major recipient and inheritor in his will. He was the one on whose eye Julius had fallen and said "Ah, that one, he's got potential." And indeed he did, He was a ruthless man, but he turned out to be a fairly beneficent emperor and he did many things for the world, not the least of which was establish what we call today, the *Pax Romano*, this peace of Augustus which allowed the gospel, by the way, to go throughout the world.

Now it's interesting that Caesar Augustus, as he sends out this decree, and again, let me just defend historian Luke for a moment. Luke has never been shown to be wrong on any fact that he has ever told. Just bear that in mind next time somebody criticizes the authenticity and the historicity of the gospels. Luke's never been shown to be wrong. And in every area where he can be corroborated, he has been. Well there are many censuses of this kind which are recorded from about the year 300 AD, back all the way to AD 8. And we even have some of the details which match up from a census in Egypt to this particular census.

But Augustus is declaring this census for at least two reasons. One for money

and another for military. The poll tax and the registration would have been used not only to garner funding for the Roman Empire, but to garner military service from the young men of the empire. Now, Israel was exempt from that military service but she was not exempt from taxes. And so when Caesar Augustus made this decree for taxation, he had in view the enlargement of his own empire. He was looking to build up the Roman Empire, but little did he know that his action was actually laying the foundation for a kingdom that would be far greater than the Roman Empire and which, in fact, would never ever end.

Luke is telling you here, that whatever Caesar Augustus' designs were, whatever he intended to do by making this decree, however oblivious he was to this obscure family in Palestine, he was a tool in the hand of God for the working out of His providence at the specific time of the fulfillment of Old Testament prophesy. In other words, Luke is reminding us that the most powerful institutions and men in the world are but pawns in the hands of the providence of God in the work of saving His people.

And that is so important for us to remember. Even the timing of Christ's birth here is a reminder of God's sovereignty our times are in His hands. And just as He could use the Roman Empire and the reign of Herod and the rule of Quirinius and the census that is taken to bring about the right components for the birth of His Son at a particular moment in time which He had ordained, so also our times are in His hands and we must learn to trust in Him. God knows what is best, He rules and overrules and He knows just when to send relief.

And this is a very important message, I suspect, for many of you this morning. Some of you have been praying for relief for a long time. Some of you haven't felt that it's come and you wonder whether your prayers have been heard, and you begin to question the timing of the King of Kings.

We all love stories of when the cavalry comes riding over the hill right at the last minute to save us. Well, why do we like stories like that? I don't think it's because that's always the way it is in our experiences. I think there are sometimes when we are desperately waiting for the cavalry to come riding over the hill in our experience, and the horn never sounds.

But I wonder whether God has not set that in our hearts because that is the very thing that He does in His plan of redemption. At the right time, while we were yet sinners, He sends His son into the world to die for the ungodly. Just in the nick of time.

And friends it's very important to be able to trust God in the timing of His sovereignty in your life. You know, Martin Luther had a friend named Philip Melancton, and I relate to Philip Melancton, in at least one way and that is, I share a similar sin, the sin of worry. And one day Philip Melancton was worrying and Martin Luther said to him, "Philip, stop trying to govern the world, God is in

control.” Well I think that’s probably a message for You. J. C. Ryle says this, “Let us ever rest our souls on the thought that times are in God’s hand. He knows the best season for sending help to His church and new life into the world. Let us beware of giving way to over anxiety about the course of events around us as if we knew better than the King of Kings what time relief should come.”

If You are waiting for the King of Kings, wait in faith because our times are in God’s hands. You know that wonderful hymn that we sing from time to time written by William Lloyd, “My times are in Thy hand,” which, by the way is based on Psalm 31. “My times are in Thy hand, my God I wish them there, my life, my friends, my soul I leave entirely to Thy care. My times are in Thy hand, whatever they may be, pleasing or painful, dark or bright as best may seem to be. My times are in Thy hand, why should I doubt or fear, my Father’s hand will never toss His child a needless tear. My times are in Thy hand, Jesus the crucified, those hands my cruel sins had pierced are now my guard and guide. My times are in Thy hand, I’ll always trust in Thee, and after death, at Thy right hand, I shall forever be.” Is that a description of your faith? Do you believe that your times are in His hands and that He is sovereign over those times? That’s the first thing Luke wants us to see in this passage.

II. God’s providence over the place of Jesus’ birth.

But there is another thing too and You’ll see it in verses four and five. We’re not only reminded of God’s sovereignty over the timing of Jesus’ birth, but we’re also reminded of God’s providence over the place of Jesus’ birth. I mean, Joseph was a carpenter in Nazareth. How are you going to get Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem so that the Christ child fulfills the prophecy of Micah 5:2, which even the wise men of Herod’s court knew was going to be the place that the Messiah was to be born? How do you get Jesus there to be born? Not to worry, because God is sovereign.

Here’s how You do it. You have a distant Roman Emperor, who doesn’t even know Joseph and Mary exist, has never heard a word of Micah 5. You have a local military governor named Quirinius. You have a scheming Jewish monarch named Herod who was afraid to give a straight Roman order to his people lest they rebel, so he sweetens it a bit by saying that the registration’s going to take place in your home town, so if you want to register for the poll tax, at least you get to have a family reunion, so head back home folks. And suddenly, this carpenter from Nazareth and his young betrothed, but as yet unconsummated wife, make their way, a long, hard journey at the end of a pregnancy, to Bethlehem. That’s how God gets them there. And in so doing He fulfills Micah 5:2, “As for you Bethlehem, too little to be among the clans of Judea, from you one will go forth for Me to be ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago and from days of eternity.” And so God’s providence is even over the place of Jesus’ birth.

But I want to say that that just because God is sovereign and providential, providentially in control of the place of Jesus' birth, doesn't mean that Joseph and Mary don't face hardships and struggles and trials. I mean, think of it. It makes perfect sense for Joseph to want to be with his wife when their first born child is born, But to take a woman who was eight months pregnant on that long journey, 90 miles to Bethlehem. That was a hard journey, and it wasn't popping into the SUV and heading an hour and a half up the road. As uncomfortable as that might be at eight months, that's a long journey on a mule, folks.

What in the world does that tell You about how things must have been in Nazareth, that there was no one that Joseph could have trusted to treat kindly his pregnant bride. Now there's a world of story behind that one. But the point again is that the true believer never need worry at hard circumstances, for all the circumstances of our lives are in His hands just like the timing of Christ's birth was in His hands, just like the place of Christ's birth was in His hands, our times are in His hands and we can trust Him.

Don't You love Anna Wearing's hymn, "Father I know that all my life." That's a hymn worth memorizing. When I was researching this week I found out that our hymnal, believe it or not, doesn't to have all the stanza's, you'll be relieved to know, but here they are. Here's what Anna Wearing sings and prays. "Father, I know that all my life is portioned out for me, and the changes that are sure to come, I do not fear to see. But I ask Thee for a present mind intent on pleasing Thee. I ask Thee for a thoughtful love through constant watching eyes to meet the glad with joyful smiles and to wipe the weeping eyes, and a heart at leisure from itself to sooth and sympathize." Isn't that a beautiful way of saying that you are not so wrapped up in yourself that you are able to give yourself to other people? She goes on, "I would not have the restless will that hurries to and fro, seeking for some great thing to do or some secret thing to know. I would be treated as a child and guided where I go. Wherever in the world I am, in whatever estate, I have a fellowship with hearts to keep and cultivate and a work of lowly love to do for the Lord on whom I wait. So, I ask Thee for daily strength, to none that ask denied And a mind to blend with outward life while keeping at Thy side." Is that not a perfect prayer for Christmas time? "A mind to blend with outward life while keeping at Thy side, content to fill a little safe if Thou be glorified. And if some things I do not ask in my cup of blessing be, I would have my spirit filled the more with grateful love to Thee. More careful not to serve the much, but to please Thee perfectly. There are briars besetting every path that calls for patient care, there is a cross in every lot and an earnest need for prayer, but a lowly heart that leans on Thee is happy anywhere. In a service which Thy will appoints there are no bonds for me, for my inmost heart is taught the truth that makes Thy children free, and a life of self renouncing love is a live of liberty." Now there's a woman who believes in the sovereign providence of God over every circumstance of life.

Is that how you look at the circumstances of life, with that kind of faith and trust in God's providence? Luke's reminding us of that here.

III. The manner of Christ's birth.

But there is a third thing I want You to see, You'll see it in verses six and seven, here's the manner of Christ's birth. "While they were there the days were completed for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her first born son and she wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

Friends, I want to suggest to you that we learn here something about the character of God. We've been talking about God's sovereign providence, and now I want to look at the character of God for a moment because the manner of Christ's birth is not simply a temporary expedient for the sake of redemption; it is a window into the heart of your God.

Do you remember Phillip asking that ridiculous question in John 14, "Jesus, show us the Father and it is enough." Just reveal the Father to us, Jesus, and that's all we need. And you remember Jesus' response. "If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father." In other words, if you want to know what My Father is like, look at Me.

And so my friends, the condescension of Christ, the humiliation of Christ, the humility of Christ in the incarnation is not just a window into what God is willing to do to save you, it's a window into the character of God, it shows you what He is like. In other words, we are reminded of *God's humility*. I use that phrase carefully. We are reminded of God's humility in the manner of Christ's birth. The birth is a window into the heart and character of God. When we see the grace and condescension and humiliation of Jesus the Savior in the incarnation, we're seeing what our God is like. God humbles Himself in the humbling of His Son for our sake, and so when He calls you to humility, that greatest of all graces and that most practical of all graces, when He calls you to humility, He is not calling you to something that He is not prepared to do Himself. And in fact, He is not calling you to something which is inconsistent with the glory of His own character. In fact, His glory is revealed all the more in His humility, and we ought to be moved by that meekness and we ought to be moved by that humility and we ought to be moved by it to desire to emulate Him and how practical that is.

We're called, as brothers and sisters in Christ, to dwell with sinners. I don't know what it is but over the last month I have just stepped on toes left and right, and every time it has been my fault. I have blown it over and over, and you know that it takes humility for you to live with people who are stepping on your toes. We are sinners and we sin against and we are sinned against, and it takes humility to live in a community in that setting. Oh my friends, emulate the Savior, emulate the

Father, and emulate your God in His condescension, in undeserved condescension, in unmerited condescension, in condescension in the face of rebellion. We see it in the incarnation.

IV. God's power is displayed in the method of redemption.

But there is one last thing I want You to see; look again at verses 6 and 7. We not only learn about the character of God from the way that Jesus is born into this world, but we are reminded of the irony of God's power displayed in weakness in the method of redemption. "While they were there the days were completed for her to give birth and she gave birth to her first-born son and He was placed in a manger, in cloths." Is that how you are expecting that sentence to be completed? I mean this is the King of Kings after all. Surely Mary had been preparing the nursery for months. Sure the Father would build him a palace unrivaled by any prince in the history of the world.

You see, it's not just the timing of the incarnation that's surprising, it's the method. God's power is being displayed in weakness. There are things in this story that just don't go together. I mean think about it. The angel comes to Mary and here are his words, "Greetings highly favored one, the Lord is with you." Ok Mary, God himself has drawn near to you, His favor is upon you, and He is with you. The next thing you hear, "Sorry ma'am, no room tonight." God's with me but I can't find a place to lay my head. God's with me but there's not a decent, at least a clean environment in which I might birth the Messiah? And then there's that word from the angel, "He shall be great and shall be called the Son of the highest, Emmanuel, God with us." And then there's, "She wrapped him in cloth and laid Him in a manger." Friends those things don't go together.

You see the method of our redemption is surprising. This account indicates the low estate, even the deprivation of Christ when He comes into this world. But through His humiliation, Jesus purchases us a title to glory and we're to rejoice and to worship and to learn from the mystery of redemption wrought in weakness. I mean, were you appointed the Savior of the world, what would be your plan? Would you send armies to accomplish it? Having known of the cosmic rebellion of Satan and his angels, having known of the rebellion of Adam and Eve and the countless millions of sins in the history of the world, what would you have done to bring about the redemption of the world? Send a baby, to be born in a cattle stall, in a feeding trough, to two obscure peasants in Palestine? You never would have thought of it, and that's exactly what God did. And there's one more thing: it worked. Let's pray.

Our Lord and our God, in Jesus we see the supreme principal of Your power perfected in weakness. Capture us by this story so that we might sing with the herald angels, "Glory to the new born King." This we ask in His name. Amen

Guide to the Morning Service

The Worship of God

What is worship? Well, the Psalmist tells us succinctly. It is giving unto the Lord the glory due His name (Psalm 29:1-2). Where do we find the substance of and our direction for our worship? The Bible. Thus, at First Presbyterian Church, our motto for worship is: "Sing the Bible, Pray the Bible, Read the Bible, Preach the Bible." So we strive to be sure that all that we sing is scriptural, that our prayers are saturated with Scripture, that much of the word of God is read in each public service, and that the preaching here is based on the Bible.

Our Congregational Singing in December

Our worship will be chock full of familiar and beloved carols, as well as new ones this month. I hope that you will all use the occasion not merely to enjoy the sentiment but to reflect upon the profound theology contained in these hymns. Our singing ought to be lifted up to God, from hearts filled with gratitude for grace and from hearts praising Him for the glorious gift of the Incarnation. So as you sing well-known songs and tunes, make a double effort to concentrate on the words. Aim to understand them and to "make them your own" as you sing to the Lord. You may even want to discuss the words around the dinner table at home or during family worship. The reflection will not only prove to be of personal encouragement: it will also help you in your intelligent and fervent participation in corporate worship. May we be good "carolers" for our gracious and sovereign Lord this Christmas. "

The Greetings and Announcements

We welcome all to this service of worship. If you are a Christian visiting with us this morning, we greet you in the name of our common Lord. If you are not a believer, we greet you as a friend and trust that you will sense the warmth and genuineness of our reception. We also hope that this guide will help you understand the various components of our service, and thus make you more comfortable and familiar with it. By the way, we try to present most of our announcements prior to the service in order to avoid interrupting the flow of our worship of God with distractions that take our minds away from our central purpose: giving to the Lord the glory due his name.

The Prelude

This instrumental piece, usually played by the organist, provides a contemplative backdrop for our personal preparation for worship. It also serves as a musical dividing point between the profane and the sacred, separating the hour to come from the rest of our week as wholly given over to the corporate praise of the Lord.

The Introit

Our choir usually prepares us for worship with a musical introit. This short piece, usually drawn directly from Scripture or reflective of a biblical truth, ushers us into the service proper and is designed to evoke from our hearts a spirit and response of praise.

The Call to Worship

All of our worship services begin with a “call to worship.” This “call” is taken directly from Scripture. It is usually a short portion of Scripture quoted by the minister and declared to the congregation, often from the Psalms. Why do we begin our services thusly? Because biblical worship is always a response to God's gracious revelation of Himself to His people. He takes the initiative to come to us in grace and seek us out, before we ever respond to Him. Hence, all our worship services begin with a scriptural “call to worship.” In this “call” we are reminded that God always takes the initiative. He always comes toward His people first, in grace. Our worship is a reflexive response to His gracious call.

The Prayers

The ministers who lead in prayer during worship at First Presbyterian seek to fill their prayers with Scripture and assist the congregational prayer to God by praying from the heart to the Lord. We do not write out prayers and read them, or simply reuse set forms, nor is our public prayer without forethought. We practice “studied prayer.” We usually outline our prayer beforehand and then pray by memory and heart. Through each of the two main prayers today (the opening “Prayer of Adoration and Invocation” and the “Morning Prayer”), the minister will cover the main points of prayer: adoration, confession, assurance of forgiveness, thanksgiving, intercession and supplication.

The Reading of Scripture

Paul told Timothy “give attention to the public reading of Scripture” (1 Timothy 4:13) and so, at virtually every morning service, a minister reads a substantial section of Scripture. We are gradually, Lord's Day after Lord's Day, reading our way through Isaiah in the morning services. Today's reading, Micah 5:1-6, contains a messianic prophecy fulfilled in Luke 2:1-7 – the passage we are studying in the sermon.

The Presentation of God's Tithes and Our Offerings

We worship God with our giving, too, Lord's Day after Lord's Day. Let us remember that “to whom much is given, much shall be required.” If you have not yet presented your pledge toward the support of ministry in the church for 2003, or have forgotten or have misplaced the card sent to you by the Stewardship

Committee, pledge cards are provided in the pew. Simply deposit them in the collection plate during the offering. And do it as an act of worship.

The Carols

O Come, All Ye Faithful

One hymnologist says this of Wade's carol "its popularity in all English-speaking countries is universal: hardly a congregation fails to sing it at every Christmas time. Such popularity is testimony to its genuine worth. In the first place, the method of presentation is dramatic. The poet takes us by the hand and leads us with triumphant song to the cave of the Nativity in Bethlehem, shows us the Babe, and bids us adore. Next, in a stanza that many hymnals omit or modify, we are given an explanation of what we see: it is not a human infant, but God. Here the language is taken literally from the ancient Greek creeds of the fourth century. The choirs of angels now burst upon us, urged on to further song by our own exuberance. The shepherds enter the cave; they join us as we kneel in adoration. We speak to the child direct and make our offering of love and praise. This is all so simple, so vivid in imagery, so sincere in emotion, that barring a few theological phrases a child can understand it and enter sympathetically into the experience of worship and joy."

God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen

The point of the opening refrain is not to exclude all but happy English gentlemen from a Christmas greeting, but to pronounce a benediction, to wish a joyous repose to other Christians at the very thought of the incarnation of Christ. "When Scrooge, in Dicken's *A Christmas Carol*, heard this cheerful carol, he grabbed a ruler and the singer fled in terror. It is traditional English going back to the 16th or 17th century."

Hark! the Herald Angels Sing

Another of Wesley's great hymns. The tune is from Mendelssohn (his cantata *Festgesang*). This carol is full of biblical and theological allusions. Savor them as you sing it to God's praise. Here are four stanzas of this carol that we don't often hear. Ponder them:

Come, Desire of nations, come,
Fix in us thy humble home;
Rise, the woman's conquering seed,
Bruise in us the serpent's head.

Now display thy saving power,
Ruined nature now restore;
Now in mystic union join

Thine to ours, and ours to thine.

Adam's likeness, Lord, efface;
Stamp Thy image in its place.
Second Adam from above,
Reinstate us in thy love.

Let us Thee, though lost, regain,
Thee, the life, the inner Man:
O! to all thyself impart,
Form'd in each believing heart.

The Sermon

Dr. Thomas and Dr. Duncan are currently preaching a Christmas series, called "The Greatest Story Ever Told," on four selected passages in Luke 1 and 2. Today, we consider Luke's account of the actual birth of Christ. Tapes of all sermons are available for check-out or purchase in the Church Library or Bookstore. See also <www.fpcjackson.org>.

The Benediction

As God has the first word in worship, so He has the last and so all of our services conclude with the minister pronouncing the Lord's benediction upon His people, using a scriptural word of blessing. Benediction simply means "blessing."

This guide to worship is written by the minister and provided to the congregation and our visitors in order (1) to assist them in their worship by explaining why we do what we do in worship and (2) to provide them background on the various elements of the service.

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