

Wonderful, Joyous News

The problem with Christmas is we know the story too well. We have seen the lavish details year after year in movies, on concert stages and in magnificent works of art. But once in a while we catch the real magic of that moment in Bethlehem when eternity and this physical world witnessed the incomparable act of God.



Michael K. Olmsted

The wonder of God's love appears in unlikely places, such as New Salem Baptist Church in southeastern Oklahoma. It was my first church in my college days, when I didn't know what I was doing half the time! I decided the children and youth of those wonderful farm families could present a play about the birth of Jesus. I wrote the script and directed, grandmothers and mothers put together the costumes, bathrobes and sparkly halos, and those kids made magic that dark Sunday night on the Oklahoma plains. The faces of that congregation were marked by joy!

Luke was captivated by the story of Jesus' birth. This Gentile writer was educated, grew up in a world of multiple religions, had been exposed to philosophy and probably saw the Jewish religion as odd and pagan. Then Luke found a new faith and life in Jesus Christ, which changed everything. His combined writings of Luke and Acts reveal how captivated his heart was by Jesus and how deeply he wanted his fractured world to hear the good news.

Luke and Matthew do not recount the story of Jesus' birth in the same way, but they were from very different backgrounds and were writing to different audiences. Combined, they provide a richer picture of God's Son entering our world. Luke was acquainted with many religious fables, erotic pagan deities and the empire's mix of religion and politics.

Here, he is dealing with what seems a very ordinary event, with nondescript people, in a backwoods village, including inconsequential shepherds that had no importance until an angel and a host of angels appear to celebrate the birth of Christ the Lord.

Why would God send his Son to be born in such circumstances? Why not in a palace, surrounded by wealth, servants and an army? Shepherds are the first to know. Where were the Temple priests and scholars of Jewish Law?

There is speculation that the Bethlehem shepherds tended flocks that supplied sacrificial lambs for the Temple. Those shepherds are the first to know of God's ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the world! In spite of the romantic stories of David, the "shepherd king," shepherds in that first century were viewed as the dregs of society. Luke is fascinated that God's angels appeared to shepherds, announcing "wonderful, joyous news for all people ... your Savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord" (v. 11). "Joyous news for ALL PEOPLE" should grab our attention, for it signals the elimination of all social, ethnic and philosophical barriers – and the ultimate generosity of God's love. Luke continues to push aside all worldly evaluations when the angel announces the child will be found "wrapped snugly and lying in a manger" (v. 12).

Every year I wish our world will be as amazed as were those shepherds. I remember the joy on the faces of those farm families in rural Oklahoma as their children made the Christmas story come alive. We all respond to the birth of Jesus in our own way. The shepherds told everyone they met. The idea is that Jesus coming into our world must lead us to do more than celebrate Christmas inside church walls and venture out to distribute tracts or recite a witnessing plan that ends

Formations

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Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

with a rote prayer. The joy of our faith should be evident in how we live, our priorities, our attitudes and our love for the world – one person at a time. The "good news" is only good if we live by the example of Jesus.

"Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully" (v. 19). Was she afraid, confused, overwhelmed? Yes! She had to revise her thinking about God and she had to confront her role as the mother of this "promised child." The prophets had foretold a Savior, but who could image Mary's baby was God's answer to the world's deepest need? God surprises us with more than Jesus' birth. His teachings, testaments of people, his example of grace above all legalism and rituals all demands we see life from a new perspective. We often see children as a reflection of their parents, saying, "He/she is just like [insert parent or grandparent here]." Consider that God entrusted his only begotten Son to a poor family from Galilee. Children learn powerful lessons by example, more than from books.

In Joseph and Mary, Jesus learned about love, respect, morality and the centrality of faith in God. Jesus' life began in an atmosphere of fear and uncertainty, but his parents never wavered in their faith. Perhaps in the example of Mary and Joseph we can discover how central it is for our children, and the world, that we live faithfully for God each day. Christmas is the perfect season to model God's love. Share the wonderful, joyous news. Show the world that all the selfish, brutal, crude, dishonest, violent stories that assault us daily are less than a footnote to God's gift of Jesus!

Retired after almost 50 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.