

Luke 2:15

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[0 : 0 0] The incarnation, the enfleshment of God is a mystery. I think this is surely beyond dispute.

Only a very foolish man would claim an exhaustive understanding of the manner in which God became a man and yet remained God. What are we to do with mysteries? Perhaps we should heed the advice of the Reformer, Philip Melanchthon, who sagely suggests, and I quote, we do better to adore the mysteries of deity than to investigate them.

Now, our own John Ross, recently returned from South Africa, has provided some helpful reflections on this matter of exploring mystery in an article in this month's monthly record. Some of you have perhaps had the opportunity to read that article. And if you have, you will know that his thoughts revolve around the sense of wonder communicated by the shepherds. When they declare, as we have recorded in the passage that we've read, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened. And John draws attention very particularly to that word thing. Let's see this thing that has happened. And from that word delves into this whole matter of mystery, and very particularly the mystery of the incarnation. This thing, we might say a very inadequate word, and yet a word whose very inadequacy serves to illustrate the incapacity of human language to do justice to the mystery of the birth at Bethlehem. Are we then recognizing our limitations? Are we then to step back and conclude that we can go no further than simply echo the words of the shepherds, this thing that has happened? And as we simply echo those words, we draw a discrete veil over this thing that we cannot possibly understand. Well, that would not be the way to go. We don't need to step back and not even investigate or explore, while at the same time recognizing that our exploration will never be exhausted. Indeed, the title that John gives to his article, Exploring the Mystery, very much gives us an idea of his own conviction that yes, it is a mystery, but it is a mystery that we can, in a measure, explore.

Maybe if we return to the words that I quoted of Melanchthon and suggest that they propose an unnecessary dichotomy. Let's just remind ourselves what he said, we do better to adore the mysteries of deity than to investigate them. But of course, we can do both.

We can adore and investigate. And in fairness, I should say that the said Melanchthon did a great deal of investigation. He was one of the great systematic theologians of the Reformation, and so he certainly recognized that both were possible, adoring and investigating. Indeed, we can go further and say that reverent investigation will generate informed and therefore richer adoration. Not simply that we can do both, but that the two are connected as we investigate, as we explore reverently and carefully in the light of Scripture, then that investigation will fuel our adoration and it will become a richer and a deeper adoration, something that our God is certainly worthy of. How then can we investigate this thing that occurred in Bethlehem, to use the word that the shepherds used? Well, we can turn to the very passage of Scripture where the shepherds are recorded as expressing themselves with this sense of wonder. There in Luke chapter 2, verse 15, we have the words of the shepherds, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.

[4 : 53] In the passage that we've read, we're provided with considerable information concerning the thing that had happened in Bethlehem, and we can tease out at least some of the data under the following headings. First of all, the manner in which the thing is announced, the manner in which the thing is announced. Secondly, the message concerning the thing, the thing that has happened, the message concerning the thing that is delivered. Thirdly, we can note briefly the celebration that this thing provokes.

And then finally, the action that the thing demands. So, in the order that we've set out these headings, let's proceed. First of all, then, the manner in which the thing is announced. Well, we have that in verse 9 of the passage. In Luke chapter 2 and verse 9, we read, an angel of the Lord appeared to them, appeared to the shepherds, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. In these verses, or in this verse, I should say, we are told two distinct facts concerning the manner of the announcement. The first thing that we are told is that it was an angel of the Lord who appeared to them. As we were commenting this morning, a heavenly messenger is employed to deliver the news. His appearance is sudden, it's entirely unexpected.

He comes from heaven, and his message proceeds from heaven. The angel is the messenger. He's not the author. Well, that's very clear. But there is a second distinct fact concerning the manner in which this thing is announced. And that we find in the following words of the verse, Now, it is very important that this be distinguished from the appearance of the angel. We could put it this way. They are concurrent phenomena, that is, the appearance of the angel and the glory of the Lord enveloping, shining around the shepherds. They are concurrent phenomena, but they are also distinct phenomena. They're not the same thing. It's not the angel that is generating this shining light.

The bright light that shines is the light that surrounds and evidences the very presence of God. We know how in the Old Testament we have on different occasions the presence of God, evidence in this way, by bright shining light. We think of that occasion on Mount Sinai, where the presence of God is described as a devouring fire. And indeed, we can look forward and look forward to the book of Revelation, and how in the book of Revelation the new Jerusalem is described. And there in chapter 21, it is described as having no need of sun or moon to shine on it. Why?

For the glory of God gives it light. The glory of God gives it light. And surely this is the light that we are presented with here. The glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. This is the light that bathes and envelops the shepherd on this Bethlehem night so long ago. So, the message concerning the thing is not only from God, but God makes Himself visibly present at the moment of delivery. Such is the transcendence of the transcendence of the thing that God is present on the occasion of it happening there in Bethlehem. That then concerning the manner in which the thing is announced, but moving on to really what is the heart of the matter, which is the message concerning the thing that is delivered.

[9 : 26] And the message is related for us there from verse 10 to verse 12. But the angel said to them, and there follows the message, do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. The word count, if you will, is modest, but they are choice words, pregnant with content for us.

These words in two brief verses reveal to us the when of this happening, the where this thing is going to happen or has happened. They reveal what has happened, and they reveal very particularly who it is that has come. We can run through very quickly the preliminary questions and then focus in on the who of the message. When has this happened? Well, we're told. Today. Today in the town of David.

Today in Bethlehem. The when and the where. What has happened? Well, a baby has been born, and this baby. The angel informs the shepherds is wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Now, thus far, nothing really to write home about, nothing that would merit an angelic messenger. But of course, we now move to the crux of the matter. Who is the one who has been born?

[11 : 05] And here, the angel is very eloquent in his description. A Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. And these words, these descriptive words, these titles for the one who has been born describe the identity and also the mission of the one born. He is, we are told, by the angel, the Savior. Now, such a title, when subsequently recorded by, or reported, sorry, by the shepherds, would cause no surprise to Joseph. We know that the shepherds, as we're told, they made their way to Bethlehem, and they had this encounter with Mary and Joseph, and they told them everything that they had seen and heard, and they would have told them this. They would have said, well, the angel said that the one born is a Savior. Now, for Joseph, that would not have been a surprise. He knew that already. He had already been told by the Lord Himself that the one born was to be named Jesus.

Why? Because He will save His people from their sins. But notice also a very encouraging detail in the relaying of this truth that the one born is a Savior. We're told a Savior has been born to you.

A Savior has been born to you. And I imagine that for the shepherds, that was a thrilling manner in which the truth was presented. A Savior has been born to you, for you.

But of course, even for ourselves, as we read the passage, a familiar passage, certainly, the words are also encouraging, because they are also in a very real way directed to us. A Savior has been born to you. The Savior that you need, the Savior that I need, the Savior that we need, a sufficient Savior, the only Savior of sinners such as we are. The one born is the Savior.

But the one born is also described as the Christ. There is some debate as to what has been said by the angel or how it is best translated. That sentence or part of the sentence at the end of verse 11 where we read, He is Christ the Lord. That is the manner in which I think most of the versions do choose to translate it. He is Christ the Lord. In the original Greek, it's just two words, Christ the Lord. And so some wonder whether it would be appropriate, and it's certainly a legitimate way of understanding it, is that we should understand it as He is Christ and Lord, rather than Christ the Lord, but Christ and Lord. And that seems to me certainly a reasonable and a defensible way of understanding the message that the angel brings. And so certainly if we do go down that road, as it were, of interpretation, then we can think of these two words as being distinct. And we can think of them separately, though obviously connected. He is Savior, but He is also the Christ. He is the promised Messiah, the anointed one, and very particularly focusing on Him as the promised anointed King, the eternal King. We've been thinking about all that is said in the book of Daniel on this matter, and how Nebuchadnezzar is challenged as to his delusions of grandeur and his pretensions concerning his own kingdom, and how in his dreams he's made to see that there is another King.

[14 : 50] There is an eternal King, and there is a kingdom that is coming that will surpass any earthly kingdom and that will endure forever. Well, this is the one who has been born, the promised Messiah, the promised and prophesied eternal King. Now that this eternal King should appear on the scene of time at this particular moment is in itself filled with a purposeful irony, we might say, call it. And I say that because notice how the chapter begins there in chapter 2 and verse 1. We haven't read that part of the chapter, but notice there the historical reference in verse 1. In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree. Caesar Augustus was the emperor, the Roman emperor at the time of Jesus' birth. But he wasn't just any emperor. Caesar Augustus, like many before him, emperors and kings of different kingdoms, suffered from delusions of grandeur. His very name, Augustus, was a name that he was given, the Roman as Roman and the Roman, and the Roman. And the very name speaks of his own, at the very least, aspiration to divine status, the August one, the revered one. The name has religious overtones or undertones. And Caesar Augustus was the emperor who straddled the period, and indeed directed the period, when the Roman Republic became the Roman Empire. So, he was the first Roman emperor, we might say, and he governed unchallenged and supreme over all. That unchallenged rule is also hinted at, or if you wish, presumed by that historical reference in verse 1, when there is a reference to the census that was to be taken in the entire Roman world. And notice there in verse 3 how very matter-of-factly we're told, and everyone went to his own town to register. Well, of course they did, because when Caesar Augustus decreed that something needed to be done, then it was done.

Such was his power. Such was his sovereign and unchallenged rule. This is the one who ruled, as he saw it, supreme over all, the great king like no other king before him.

And yet, as he ruled in Rome, in this forgotten and despised, far-flung pinprick of his kingdom, a child was born, who was the true eternal and supreme king of kings. Who is it that was born?

This message that is delivered concerning the thing that has happened, that identifies who the babe is. He is the Savior. He is the Savior. He is the Christ. But he is also the Lord. Either Christ and Lord, or Christ the Lord. But he is the Lord. And the title is a divine title. We know that the word, the Greek word, kurios, can be used in different ways. It does not always have that divine meaning. But I think on this occasion we can, with great confidence, invest it with that meaning. It's not that we are investing it with that meaning, but recognize that it carries that meaning. As I have mentioned on other occasions, this word, this Greek word, kurios, is the word that is used in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, to translate the divine name Yahweh. That reason alone would give us occasion and a good cause to recognize the title that the angel is giving to the one born as Lord, as having that divine significance. But we have further evidence in the passage itself that confirms that the word as used by the angel is invested with this divine meaning. I want you to just notice a curious twist in the passage, if that's the right way of describing it, in verse 15b. Well, it's really the words there of the shepherds. But notice something interesting that's going on there. We read there, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened. Okay, so far so good, very familiar words. We've been focusing on these words. But then if we just explore a little and say, well, on what authority do they report that they're going to do this, that they're going to go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened? They've no doubt that the thing has happened. They want to see it.

But on what authority do they know that? Well, we're told in what follows, which the angel has told us about. Well, is that what it says? Well, that's not what it says. It's maybe what you would have expected it to say. What you would have expected the shepherds to say. Well, let's go and see this thing that has happened that the angel has told us about. After all, it was the angel that had told them. But that's not what the shepherds say. The shepherds, simple men, not trained theologians, but simple men, pious, no doubt. What do they say? Which the Lord has told us about. You see, yes, they knew that it was an angel who had communicated the message, but they also knew that it was God's message. It was the Lord who had spoken to them through the angel. But the point is this, that the word that they use is that same word, kurios, that the Lord has told us about. So, in the very same passage where the one born is identified as Christ the Lord, in that very same passage, the shepherds, when they go and say, we're going to go and see this thing that has happened, that the Lord has told us about, that God has told us about. And so, you have this incongruity. It would appear that the Lord is the one who is sending them, and it is also the Lord that they are going to see. They are both sent by and sent to the Lord. So, this is the message concerning the thing that has happened. A

[21 : 38] Savior has been born, a Savior who is Christ the Lord, or who is Christ and Lord. But moving on to the third thing that I mentioned that we could notice in this passage concerning the thing, and that is the celebration that the thing provokes. And we have that described for us in verses 13 and 14.

And suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

You know, one angel just won't do. A heavenly host of thousands upon thousands of angels erupt on the living canvas that is the night sky above Bethlehem. And their appearance is to celebrate the thing that has happened. And their celebration involves praise. Praise of God. And this praise is indeed, as it must be, and can only be, and can only be, is God word. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God in the highest.

The angels recognize that God is the author of this unfolding drama, as He is also the one who is born, or in the person who is born, or in the person who is born. God is also the lead actor. And to Him corresponds the glory, and all the glory. And so this heavenly choir, it praise God. Glory to God in the highest.

And on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests. As mentioned before, concerning the, uh, how it was singularly appropriate that Jesus should come at this particular time, uh, when Caesar Augustus, uh, reigned supreme over the Roman Empire. And if we can just develop a little bit that, the contrast, the one who comes, who comes to bring peace, the one who is also identified to us as the Prince of Peace, he comes in the midst of what was recognized, and even to this day is, is recognized as the famous Pax Romana, the Roman peace. Uh, the peace that there was indeed throughout the Empire at this particular time in great measure. But of course, it was a peace that was the product of brutal subjugation. Why was there peace? Well, there was peace because of the, uh, brutality and the cruel and violent efficiency of, uh, uh, the Roman military machine. And so, yes, there was this famous Roman peace.

[24 : 38] But how had it been brought about? Well, at the cost of, of many lives and at the price of, uh, tyranny, uh, being exercised over, uh, many peoples. But the peace that the one born in Bethlehem had come to bring is of another order, peace with God, the peace that accompanies forgiveness and adoption into the family of God. It's interesting, uh, to notice something that was said by a contemporary pagan writer of the first century. In fairness, a little after the events described, uh, a Greek philosopher by name Epictetus. And in really commenting on the Roman emperor, in fairness, he would not have been speaking about Caesar Augustus, but his successor. He says something that is perhaps surprisingly, uh, incisive. And I quote, while the emperor, that is the Roman emperor, while the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea. He is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart, for which man yearns more than for outward peace. This is a pagan writer, but what he writes is very, uh, incisive and very, um, discerning. That is indeed so. Uh, the peace of the soul, that inward peace, that peace with God to develop, uh, a little further from what this particular writer, uh, pens is something that the one born in Bethlehem can bring. No emperor can bring that kind of peace.

Just as a curious and almost humorous historical anecdote said, Epictetus, along with many other, uh, philosophers, uh, philosophers was banished from Rome. Uh, perhaps for writing things like this, I don't, I don't know, but he, he ended his days far from, uh, Rome.

And so the, the angels recognize not only the identity of the one who has come, but also the mission and the purpose of his coming. He has come to bring peace. But we can also notice one further thing that they say concerning his coming that with his birth, a new people are also birthed, if we can put it that way. Who are to enjoy the peace that he brings? Well, they are those on whom his favor rests. And the, the manner in which the, the more modern translations translate this verse, I think is very helpful in that it, it highlights very much that it is the favor of God that is at issue here. Uh, the peace that comes is a, a, a, a divine favor. It is a gift of God upon whom he chooses. This peace that God grants on those on whom his favor rests. It's not a peace that is, that one is able to secure on the basis of, of merit, but it is a peace that is secured on the grounds of grace and, uh, grace alone. And so, uh, this one who comes to bring peace with his birth, he, he gives birth to this new community of peace, of those upon whom God's favor, uh, rests. And we are that people. We are that people, uh, of, uh, peace. And so the, the angelic host celebrate the thing that has happened. The birth of the prince of peace and the consequent, uh, birth of a people of peace.

But then finally, let us just note that there is also, uh, communicated for us in this passage, the action that the thing demands. Now, the shepherds are going to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened. Well, what is the action that this thing that has happened, uh, demand?

Well, let's put it this way, or let's introduce what we want to say with, with this question. Were the shepherds sent to Bethlehem? Well, and as far as we can tell, and if what we have here is an exhaustive account of what was said, and it seems reasonable to me to presume that it is, in terms of the message that they received, they're not explicitly told to go to Bethlehem. It's true that the angels almost take it as a given that they will, particularly when they speak of, um, finding this child or of seeing this child in cloths and, and lying in a manger. Nonetheless, they're not ordered to go. But is it conceivable that they would fail to go, having received this message? Well, of course not. It's, it's inconceivable to imagine that they would hear the message and remain where they were. The thing described imposes on them what we might call a necessary, but also a happy obligation. They must go to Bethlehem. They must see the child. They must bow down in worship. They must gladly tell others the good news. These are the actions that the thing demands.

[30 : 03] And as we draw this to a close, can we just close on that note of challenge to ourselves, that the thing also demands of us a response. We cannot hear this good news and remain unmoved, and carry on looking after our flock of sheep, or whatever our own particular responsibilities are.

The thing, this wondrous event that has occurred demands that we too seek that child, seek to, to know him and to relate to him, to worship him, and with the shepherds to tell others about him.

This is what the event demands of us who are his people. And so, as we enter into this week that will close with Christmas Eve, and then next Lord's Day we will have Christmas Day itself, is it not right and fitting and appropriate that in this week we would seek to follow in some measure of the footsteps of the shepherds who, having heard this message, having had this thing described, hurry their way to Bethlehem and tell all who are willing to listen concerning the one who has been born.

Well, let us pray.