

Sunday Evening Message

December 24, 2023

The Cast of Characters on that First Christmas

Text for Today's Message – Luke 2:8 – 20; Matthew 1:18 – 2:12

Congregational Reading – Luke 2:8 – 20

Introduction

Life is filled with people, all kinds of people. In our world, and even in our community, there are people of different cultures, diverse religions, and divergent ethnicities. There are rich people and poor people; there are educated people and ignorant people. There are a few talented and driven people who carve out for themselves a place of prominence among their peers; but mostly, there are people like us who are not as visible. We make up the multitudes who live and work and play without attracting too much attention. There are good people: people who love and work and produce and give in order to make the world a better place for others; but, unfortunately, there are also some not so good people: people who are takers, drainers of society. Our world is filled with all kinds of people – like characters in a grand play, they all have their part in our world. They altogether make our world what it is.

The first Christmas was no different – there were many different people – different kinds of people - that took part in that first Christmas over 2000 years ago: all of them somehow participating, affecting, and influencing the events surrounding the birth of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. The interesting thing is that you can see the same kinds of characters today as were the actors or characters in that first Christmas so long ago. It seems that human nature has not changed in the two millennia since the time that our Lord was born as a baby in that manger in Bethlehem.

Obviously, the main character – the star of Christmas then and now – is the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the reason for the season. I hope as you celebrate Christmas this year that your focus will be on the Lord Jesus Christ; God incarnate who came down from Heaven to a sin-cursed earth to be born of a virgin in a lowly stable for the primary purpose of redeeming mankind from their sins. As the song says “born to raise the sons of earth; born to give them second birth. Jesus came to die so that the atonement price would be paid for your sins and mine.

For this message, however, I want to look at the human players that had a part in the events surrounding his birth and see how they are like the people that we have in our midst today. Some of the characters that we will discuss this morning are like some of us; and some are like many people that we know in our world: people we meet in the marketplace; perhaps people that we work with; and even famous people or infamous people that we view from afar through the news broadcasts or through some other form of media.

The Servants (Luke 1:26 – 38; Matthew 1:18 – 25)

Mary and Joseph (The Deferential)

*"And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, To a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin's name was Mary. And the angel came in unto her, and said, Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women. And when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and cast in her mind what manner of salutation this should be. And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. And, behold, thy cousin Elisabeth, she hath also conceived a son in her old age: and this is the sixth month with her, who was called barren. For with God nothing shall be impossible. And Mary said, **Behold the handmaid of the Lord**; be it unto me according to thy word. And the angel departed from her." (Luke 1:26-38)*

*"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise: When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying, Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost. And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins. Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. Then Joseph being raised from sleep **did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife**: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS." (Matthew 1:18-25)*

Servants are willing to sacrifice their own comfort for the cause of their Lord. They are willing to sacrifice their own glory to glorify their Lord. They literally lay down their lives for the one that they serve. Joseph and Mary were servants. They gave up their lives to fulfill God's purpose.

They endured the scorn of devout friends and family who no doubt wrongly assumed that they had given birth to this child out of wedlock.

The Seekers

The Wise Men (The Diligent – Matthew 2:1 - 11)

"Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men (μάγοι from μάγος – magos) from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him. When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. And when he had gathered all the chief priests and scribes of the people together, he demanded of them where Christ should be born. And they said unto him, In Bethlehem of Judaea: for thus it is written by the prophet, And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel. Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. When they had heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh."

(Matthew 2:1-11)

These men were not wise in the wisdom of this world. They were wise because they feared the Lord:

"The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding." (Proverbs 9:10)

God had miraculously given them divine insight as to when and where the Saviour of the world would be born, and they came seeking Him. Many of you had a similar experience as these wise men. God first began working in your heart. You began thinking about the things of God; you began wondering about eternity, thinking about Heaven and Hell. He was drawing you in. He also used some external tools like the word of God and the people of God to lure you to Himself.

The Working Men - The Shepherds (The Dutiful – Luke 2:8 - 20)

"And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them." (Luke 2:8-20)

These Shepherds were not wealthy men. They were common, every day and ordinary, blue collar working men.

"And the common people heard him gladly." (Mark 12:37)

For the most part, the rich people weren't interested in Jesus; the religious crowd was not accepting of Him.

The Worshipping Men and Women - Simeon and Anna (The Devout – Luke 2:25 – 38)

"And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him. And it was revealed unto him by the Holy Ghost, that he should not see death, before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came by the Spirit into the temple: and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him after the custom of the law, Then took he him up in his arms, and blessed God, and said, Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel. And Joseph and his mother marvelled at those things which were spoken of him. And Simeon blessed them, and said unto Mary his mother, Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many in Israel; and for a sign which shall be spoken against; (Yea, a sword shall pierce through thy own soul also,) that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed. And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the

daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Aser: she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; And she was a widow of about fourscore and four years, which departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she coming in that instant gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spake of him to all them that looked for redemption in Jerusalem." (Luke 2:25-38)

The Skeptics

Innkeeper (The Distracted – Luke 2:7)

"And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7)

It was a busy season for the innkeeper. He was doing a booming business. Had Joseph been a wealthy man, I am sure he would have found a spot for His family. I am sure that he was an honest man, he may even have been a devoutly religious man; but I am also sure that he had no idea Who he was turning away that evening. He wasn't a bad man, not an evil man; just, a little skeptical about who this Baby was.

This is the category that most people out in our world fit into. Not bad people necessarily, probably just busy people; but they are not sure about the Lord Jesus, and they are not ready to place their complete dependence upon Him, and certainly not willing to sacrifice their time and their resources to accommodate Him.

The Scorners

Herod (The Dangerous Ones – Matthew 2:3, 7 – 8, 16)

"When Herod the king had heard these things, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. ... Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also. ... Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wroth, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently enquired of the wise men." (Matthew 2:3, 7-8, 16)

"Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful." (Psalm 1:1)

The Scorners are the dangerous ones. They are the enemy of the Lord and the Lord's people. They are in allegiance with the Devil and are at war with the cause of Christ. They often are not

open about their animosity toward the Lord or the Lord's people, and they may even benefit the people of God in some way because it benefits them to do so. They may give God lip service; they may say nice things about God and Christianity when it is expedient for them; when it will benefit them politically; but make no mistake; they are not God's friends.

As we draw closer to the return of the Lord Jesus Christ to this earth, more and more people will be emboldened to reveal their hatred for the Lord and His people.

Conclusion

Where do you fit within this group of people?

Are you a servant – willing to defer your goals and ambitions to fulfill the will of God – like Joseph and Mary?

Are you a seeker like the diligent wise men, the dutiful working men, and the devout worshippers?

If you are here tonight, you are most likely not a scorner, but who knows, there may be one. May I say to you if you are, you are very wrong about Christ, but it is not too late for you, and you need to repent and turn to Him before it is too late?

Are you still a little skeptical like the distracted innkeeper? May I encourage you to pause from the busyness of your life for just a few moments and consider what Christmas is all about, what Christ is all about. He loves you. He came to this earth for you, and He died for you. Won't you receive the gift that He came to give you – the greatest gift that you will ever receive – the gift of eternal life.

*"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."
(Romans 6:23)*

"But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name:" (John 1:12)

"Behold, I stand at the door, and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me." (Revelation 3:20)