

## **Christmas Eve 2025**

### **Luke 2:1-20**

**Rev. Joy Laughridge**

Imagine that it's the year 100 AD, and you are a woman named Julia or Claudia, or a man named Stephen or Mark living somewhere in the Roman Empire, maybe in the big city of Ephesus or maybe Philippi. A friend of yours who is a Christian invites you to come to their house where they and their other Christian friends are gathering to worship and to share a meal they call a "love feast." While you're there, someone begins to read a story from a scroll, and as they start reading, you hear the beginning of the exact same story that was read here tonight, 2000 years later, from Luke 2.

As the story begins it all sounds very ordinary to your ears. The emperor, eager for power and revenue ordered a census to ensure that all due allegiance and taxes from his citizens would be coming his way. A young Jewish couple from a nowhere town within the bounds of the empire are compelled by the emperor's order to make the journey from their hometown to Bethlehem because that was where the man's family line was from. You find out that the woman who was betrothed to the man was pregnant, which is a scandalous detail since pregnancy before marriage was a religious no-no, but apart from the controversial nature of the pregnancy before marriage, pregnancy is a natural occurrence. While the couple was in Bethlehem, the baby was born – in humble surroundings, but possibly very similar to what the scene would have been like back in their hometown of Nazareth – minus the friends and family who would likely have been around.

You're wondering where this ordinary sounding story is going, and as you keep listening you begin to hear some surprising details.

On the night the baby was born, there were shepherds who had a supernatural experience when angels appeared in the sky and one of the angels spoke saying, “Do not be afraid! I am bringing good news of great joy for all people. Today a Savior, who is the Messiah, is born!” You’re unsure of what the angel’s words mean, but you are intrigued by the shepherd’s reaction to the news. They went running right away to find the baby. The mother pondered and treasured the story that the shepherds told about what they had seen and heard, and when the shepherds left, they were still praising and giving glory to God. What, you wonder, is the meaning of this story? Why are these Christians reading and telling it to each other? You begin asking questions. What did the angel mean that the baby was a Savior and the Messiah?

Your friends explain the extraordinary details about what happened before the couple went to Bethlehem and the baby was born. There had been another angel that had appeared to the young woman telling her that she would conceive even though she was still a virgin. The angel told her in advance that the child would be the Messiah that she and her people had long expected. Not everyone had believed her story, but Joseph stuck by her side after God spoke to him in a dream confirming that her claims were true. You begin to understand why she treasured the visit and the words from the visiting shepherds the night the baby was born. She must have received them as a special and personal message of confirmation that everything the angel had told her about the child was true. It is a fascinating story, but still, you wonder, what is the meaning if there is any of the story for *you*? You aren’t a Jewish person. The promises made for the people in the story and their hopes and expectations were just a part of their cultural and religious tradition, weren’t they? Why is this group of non-Jewish friends excited about this story?

Your friends tell you that just like the angel told the shepherds, the birth of this baby was good news for *all* people, people like you and them. They tell you that he *is* a king, but not like the kings that you know about who crave power, and wage wars, and exploit the vulnerable. They tell you more about the life he lived when he grew up- how he healed the sick, and forgave sins, and announced the arrival of his kingdom which is not like the kingdoms of this world. They tell you that in their community they practice loving and forgiving each other; they practice generosity so that everyone is cared for; and they are devoted to serving one other because that's what Jesus taught them to do. That all sounds nice, but what happened to the man you want to know? If he is their king, where is he?

Well, they tell you about how he was arrested and false charges were brought against him and how he was unjustly crucified on a Roman cross, but three days later, a miracle happened. He rose from the dead and all his followers and hundreds of other people saw him alive. This was how God confirmed that he is truly the Savior of all people that the angels announced and truly the king he claimed to be. They explain how later he ascended back into the heaven he came from – his disciples saw it – and then he sent the Holy Spirit – just as he promised he would – who filled the hearts of his followers and remains in them and with them as they wait for the day when he will come again to complete his kingdom. This is the good news, they tell you. The baby was born for all of us. He came to let us know that we are loved by God and to bring all who have wandered away back to God. He is the Light of the World who exposes the lies that lead us to destruction and illuminates the way of peace, so that we can walk it in and find true life. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords - greater than all earthly kings and powers - who rules with righteousness, justice, and love, and he is worthy of our trust, obedience, and love.

If you were Julia or Claudia or Stephen or Mark, you might wonder what do with all this information after hearing it for the first time. Would you believe that this baby was the Savior sent by God for you? Would you hear and believe that the baby is the sign that God's love is for you? Would you believe the testimony of the Christians who oriented their hearts and their life together around the worship of this King? Would you allow him to be the King of *your* heart and the Lord of *your* life, and would you seek to follow him?

In the year 100, there were certainly people like our Claudia and Stephen who heard the story about the birth of Jesus, and his life, death, and resurrection. They saw the counter-cultural and "strange" way that the Christians lived. They had their own personal encounters with the Holy Spirit who awakened faith in their hearts, and they believed, but the question tonight really isn't about them but about you and me. The good news that the angels proclaimed to the shepherds, and the good news that our imagined first century believers shared, is the same good news that is proclaimed to each of us tonight, and so the real question is, how will you and I respond to this story that has been told to us? Will we believe the testimony about the baby's identity? Will we recognize him as the Savior that he is and put our trust in him? Will we acknowledge him as King and give our allegiance to him?

For some in this room, the answer may be, I'm not sure about that yet. You may still have more questions and you want to hear more. If that is you, know that in this place you will find a community of believers and friends like the ones we imagined tonight, who will gladly walk alongside you and share more with you about what they know and have learned about Jesus. And if your response tonight is, yes, I do believe this story and I want to be a follower of Jesus, know that this community is here for you, too, to support you and to help

you as you begin to live a new life that is centered in a relationship with Jesus.

For many in this room, the answer to the question of believing, trusting, and following Jesus has long been yes. You came tonight to hear the incredible story of what God has done because you have already believed it, and your lives have already been changed by it. Those who have already believed make it a point—during a season so overrun with consumerism and stress—to pull away from the distractions and hear again the good news, a story we are sent, like the shepherds, to joyfully share with others. And as we listen to the story, our hearts well up with awe and gratitude—how could they not? Despite our sins and offenses, God has not abandoned us or turned away from us. Instead, God has come near, bringing love, salvation, and the gift of new and everlasting life. Like the wise men who knelt humbly at the foot of the baby's manger, it is only fitting that we bow our hearts before our newborn King and offer our deepest worship and adoration on this night of nights and always. Amen.