

Jesus, Shepherds, and Angels: A Savior is Born

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes when you visit the home of your grandmother, or even great grandmother, you might see an old black and white photo hanging on a wall. Only the photo has hung there for decades, and for part of each day, the sun shines on it. So, now the photo is a bit yellowed and the images on it are washed out and faded a bit. Things are a little hard to make out. Well, sometimes very familiar Bible stories can be like that. They have hung on the walls of our hearts for a long time, and so, maybe some details have faded. It is easy to miss seeing some things. The Christmas story is surely like that, but today on *Groundwork*, let's dig into Luke 2 to see if we can bring back to our eyes things that have faded a bit. Stay tuned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we have come to the fifth program of our Advent and Christmas series, which means this is our Christmas program. We have looked at the Magi, John the Baptist's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the archangel Gabriel announcing to Mary she would bear the Messiah. We have looked at Jesus' earthly father, Joseph; and now, we go to Bethlehem: Luke 2.

DARRELL DELANEY

This story has a lot of verses to it, and there is a lot of detail that Luke himself, the historian, wanted to make sure that we didn't miss. I think that if we didn't have this story, we probably wouldn't have had a whole lot of the Christmas programs that our children have been in on Sundays. My sons have played sheep and shepherds and Joseph, even Baby Jesus at some point; but this story has those details in it that are central to the nativity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, good thing we've got Luke. Matthew just gives us a couple of short verses. We looked at that in the previous program. Mark skips Christmas altogether. He leap-frogs ahead to Jesus' baptism. John kind of talks about the incarnation, but he does it from such a lofty...

DARRELL DELANEY

Cosmic...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Theological...cosmic, yes...bird's eye view. You wouldn't get a Sunday school Christmas pageant out of that. So, other than the Magi from Matthew 2, which we actually end up weaving into Luke 2, even though they are not in there, Luke gives us everything we associate. We wouldn't have a manger scene in the world, Darrell. There wouldn't be any front yard creche if it weren't for Luke.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, let's pick up in verse 1: In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)³

And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, mostly, Darrell, what we know about the first three verses here is that a lot of children in those Sunday school programs have a dickens of a time pronouncing Quirinius, and usually we heave a sigh of relief if the kid gets through Caesar Augustus and Quirinius without tripping over their own words. And then the story really begins, we think, in verse 4. You know, Luke didn't throw in those historical details just for the sake of history. You know, it wasn't like...I mean, today if we said: Well, this happened when Richard Nixon was president. Well, if you know your history, that means early in the 1970s. But that is not what Luke was doing. He wasn't just fixing the date. He had something more clever in mind by putting in these bigwig, Roman names.

DARRELL DELANEY

The fact that he writes about these powerful and elite people is a strategy that he is using to get everybody's attention for this reason; and how we talked about in earlier episodes that God might be doing something unexpected here.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; Caesar had all the power. Rome ruled...it was the time of the famous Pax Romana—the Roman peace—and the reason there was Roman peace is that Rome's armies were so powerful nobody dared take them on—nobody dared challenge them. Rome controlled the trade routes, they levied all the taxes, Roman centurions and soldiers were everywhere. Marble statues of Caesar were everywhere. Every coin had Caesar's picture on it...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Along with the words: Deus et Dominus: God and Lord. Caesar! He was the guy. He is the man. He is in charge.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, Caesar and Rome are the world power at this time; they are dominating every situation, every circumstance affected the lives of those great and small; and Luke says that is not where you are supposed to be focusing your attention.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

You are supposed to be focusing your attention on this lowly baby born in a manger in the outback skirts of town in Bethlehem. You are supposed to be focused on him. His power is going to upend all those other powers, which is the irony of this passage, Scott.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; yes, we so often in history...we so often look the wrong way. We so often look the wrong direction. Everybody thought Caesar held all the strings. They were all puppets on the end of his strings, but somewhere out there in diapers, Luke is saying, somebody more powerful than all of them was getting quietly born, in a barn, of all places, to two ordinary, low-income parents. *This* is where the salvation of the

world is found.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful that God would use a family...a small family...with a fixed income of a carpenter to bring the savior of the world in. It shows that our great God has a plan that starts small with ordinary, regular people. It gives me hope to know, because I am ordinary, I am an ordinary person and I have a lot of mistakes and flaws in my life, but that does not negate the fact that God can still walk and use me or you or anyone else to bring glory to his name, and that is what he does with Joseph and Mary.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, one of my favorite children's books...it is kind of mostly a picture book...it is by Eve Bunting...the title is *We Were There*. It is a clever book, Darrell, because it shows us some of the least desirable creatures on earth: a cockroach, a warty toad, a rat, a scorpion, a snake, and they are all going somewhere. In the story, it turns out all these yucky...what we would say yucky creatures are all going to Bethlehem; and in the story, they all find their way to the stable where Jesus was born, and they all stand off in a corner; and they say, you know, nobody noticed us standing here. Everybody saw the cows and the donkeys, but we were there...we were there. Eve Bunting, in that very clever story, was making a great theological point: Jesus came for scorpions and cockroaches, and for all the lowly creatures of the earth, as you just said, Darrell. That includes you and me, and really, all of us.

DARRELL DELANEY

What is interesting is that Jesus himself took on the nature of a lowly and despised person, which Isaiah 53 picks up. He is modeling this point, but he is also making room for us, because the world would say the rich, the elite, the powerful...if you are born in the right family, these are the ones you need to focus on...they are the movers and the shakers; but God is saying no; you are looking in the wrong direction. Look at the Messiah who is coming in a meek and lowly and humble situation; and it is really powerful to see that the lesser folks in history are the ones who God is using to bring glory to his name. Speaking of lesser folks in history, let's meet some in the next part of this episode. So, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, let's get right back into Luke 2 and pick up where we left off. Jesus has just been born, he has been laid in a manger; and we read, verse 8:

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we've got another situation where the message of the good news is going to, not the elite...not the powerful...not the ones who are in ivory towers or in the rich places...but they are coming to some common shepherds who are living out in the fields nearby; and so, God is getting that message into regular and common folks. It is another part of what Luke is trying to get across.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we said at the outset of this episode, Darrell, that we made the comparison to old, faded photographs on your grandma's wall; you know, the details have washed out. For a lot of us, this familiar story is like that. So, we tend to skip over stuff, but let's just stop on a line that we usually don't stop on: Living in the fields...the shepherds were living in the fields. Just stop right there. Would you want to live in a field? Do most of us live...do you know anybody who lives in a field? I mean, at most, if we think about living in a field, we might think about going camping...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we call it "roughing it," right? Because you don't have central heat or central air. You don't have your usual stove and refrigerator. You cook over an open fire. It is kind of fun for a week...for me, a day...but, you know, some people like to camp; but even people who like to camp say: It'll be good to get back home. I could use a hot shower. So, when you live out in the fields, you are disadvantaged. These shepherds weren't camping. This is where they lived; in the fields! We sometimes skip over that and don't realize what it implies for who they were.

DARRELL DELANEY

Who might they be? Might they be the homeless person who lives under the underpass of the bridge? Might they be the ones who live on the street corners with the signs? They are not the rich, they are not the elite, they are not the popular; and they have no roof over their heads, literally. These are the people God chooses to bring the message of hope to. It is a stark contrast to the elite people that Luke started this verse talking about; but the message of hope still comes to those who are on the fringes...those who have lack...those who don't have everything that they need and they don't look like they are successful according to society's eyes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The angel of the Lord didn't go to Caesar's palace. He didn't go to Quirinius's house in Syria. He went to the tents of these men who, as you said, Darrell, yes, maybe they would be like the homeless today. Maybe they would be like the destitute, the people living on the fringes of society. That is where the angels went to. It is just like what we saw a couple of episodes ago. We didn't expect Gabriel in Nazareth in Mary's bedroom, but there he was, appearing to this young girl. God is doing that all the time. It has really become kind of the theme of this series, actually, Darrell. Over and over again, God reverses expectations by revealing himself to the least likely of people.

DARRELL DELANEY

The ones who society would say are least likely, the ones who society would say are least worthy, are the ones who God is doing his upside-down reversal thing again with; and he is showing the best plan...the redemptive plan...the world was shunted over to the side and moved to the margins. That gives me hope, Scott, because sometimes I compare myself...which I shouldn't do...I compare myself to the people who have more than me...that do more than me...but I realize that it is because of God's grace that anyone can come to him and anyone who receives that message with humility God can use, great or small.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, a lot of us are probably familiar with the Charlie Brown Christmas special...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, sure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Going back to the early 1960s, when I was born. So, it has been around a while. A lot of us have seen it; and I remember that one of the characters...one of the lesser characters in the Charlie Brown cast was Pigpen. This obviously, maybe, I don't know if he was a homeless boy, but he was from a poor home, and he was dirty...he was dirty. Whenever Pigpen moved, clouds of dust would go up from his shirt and his body. The woman who played...the little girl who played his wife was the little girl with naturally curly hair, and she complained in the special. She didn't want to act with Pigpen because the dust from him was taking the curl out of her naturally curly hair. Charles Schultz, the cartoonist, I think knew what he was doing, Darrell. He was reminding us shepherds were undesirable. Well-groomed people in society, also back then, didn't want to hang around with shepherds; they smelled; they had body odor; they were dirty; they were despised; and they were God's kind of people.

DARRELL DELANEY

And there is something else, too, Scott, that we sometimes miss in the verses. If we look again, and we listen to what the angel tells these lowly fellows, here is what he says in verse 11: Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

The words, *to you*, are the very distinct thing that I think we glaze over quite a bit.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; it should pop out at us, but again, we have become so accustomed to reading this, we kind of forget it; but that is an odd way to put it: A baby has been born *to you*. When our first child was born, while I was serving as a pastor at my first congregation, she was born at six o'clock on a Sunday morning. So, I didn't make it to church that morning. So, the head of our elders stood up and made the announcement: This morning, Scott and Rosemary had a baby girl, and everybody was glad. But it would have been weird if the elder had said: This morning, a baby has been born to you, O church. No; the baby wasn't born to the congregation; she was born to me and my wife; and yet here, Darrell, the angel says this Savior was born *to you*! To you shepherds, out in the fields...to you shunted-aside shepherds. He is born to you. That is amazing.

DARRELL DELANEY

Again, we are pointing back to the irony that Luke is bringing. He is trying to make sure that everyone knows that Jesus is the Messiah to the world; to those who are put on the margins; to those who are put on the fringes; and he says this Savior has been born to you and not to the ones that the world thinks are successful and not to the ones who have all the accolades and all the nobility; not the elite. This Savior is born to the ones who are lowly and destitute. He is the good news.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is born to you because he was born for you. It is not here in Luke, but we can flash back to the previous episode in Matthew 1, that that is why Jesus is Immanuel. He is God with us; and the us is everybody. It is not, first of all, Caesar Augustus and Quirinius and all the other fat-cats and bigwigs of the Roman Empire then, or all the fat-cats and bigwigs today. He is born for all of us; born to you; to you; to me; to everybody who God calls. But there is one other little detail we sometimes miss. So, as we are picking up on little details, we have one more to go. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and let's do what we do best here on *Groundwork*, Darrell; let's dig back into scripture. We are in Luke 2, now picking up where we left off in verse 15: When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has

happened, which the Lord has told us about.” ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is beautiful to see that not only did the shepherds* go see what was happening, in the story they were told this good news. They were like, we gotta go see what is going on. So, they went down and they spread the word when they came back. It was beautiful to see that, but also it is beautiful to see how Mary treasured all these things in her heart, which probably will come up later at some point.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and again, if Luke did meticulous research for his gospel, as we have mentioned in previous episodes in this series, and he interviewed Mary, that is the kind of thing only Mary could have told him...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I treasured those things in my heart. I have been thinking about them ever since. Those shepherds; and boy, the story they told about the angels. Isn't that something? But what is interesting here, we have been picking up on details we slide over. In my preaching class at seminary, I always tell my students: Step one when you are writing a sermon is the Bible passage you are going to preach on...go somewhere where you can read it out loud, and go super slowly. Break all the reading habits you have ever had, and go super slowly, because something might pop out at you. When I did that years ago, as I was writing a sermon for Christmas Day or so, I did a full stop on a line we usually rush over, and that is just this: The shepherds returned... Now, we usually speed over that because we want to get to the next part. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God. We punch the glorifying and the praising God for all they had seen and heard. But what about just that much, Darrell? The shepherds returned.

DARRELL DELANEY

Of course, we know they are shepherds. They have a job to do. I don't know who they left their sheep with while they were going to see Jesus, but the idea is that they had to return back to what was normal; back to what was their regular life. It is interesting that we often glaze over that actual phrase, but we think about the praising and the worshipping and all these other good things, but there is a real important message in the fact that they are returning back to what is the normal, what is the ordinary. It is not that they are getting an improved situation...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

A super, better, happily ever after. They are going right back into the mundane repetitiveness of the nine-to-five that is shepherding. So, that is really interesting to see.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Back to the fields, back to their tattered tents, their smelly sleeping bags, meager food that they had to cook over an open fire. They went back to what was normal. You know, that is kind of Christmas for all of us. We all...every year, now, those of us in the Church, we go back to Bethlehem in our minds and hearts. We visit the cradle of the Christ. We go to the manger. We worship and adore him: *Oh, Come All Ye Faithful; Joy to the World; Silent Night*. We sing it all, but then Christmas ends, and we all return to work, to school, to our home, where our spouse still has dementia, to, you know, the ordinary, the mundane. We return. We all do;

but the question is: Do we return the same, or do we return changed?

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, I would say the latter is true, Scott, because in the situation before, the shepherds are doing what they normally do. It is a hard job, it is a lonely job, it is a thankless job, and they continue faithfully doing what they feel called to do; and the angel interrupts the program and speaks to them. So, it is really powerful that even in the situation with Mary and Joseph, they are in the backwoods of the world in Bethlehem, and this message comes to them. So, they are being noticed by God, who is paying attention to small details. He is not overlooking them, but he sees them and he notices them.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The Savior has been born to you. That is again amazing. He has been born to you, to me, to us, to all people, including, again, these men on the margins of society who went unnoticed. As you just said, God noticed them. That had to be striking for lots of reasons, because most people didn't notice them; and if they did...you know, if these shepherds had a...and they probably did...if they ever had to go into town and buy some fruit or vegetables at the market, yeah, probably most people, if they noticed them, they noticed them and said: Get what you need and get out of here, okay, because you smell. We don't like associating with you. Get what you need and go. That is how they got noticed by everybody else; but not God, right? They were given...wow, Darrell...they were given an all-expenses-paid ticket to the greatest concert in the world; an aria sung by flights of angels in the sky. Wow! How could that not change them?

DARRELL DELANEY

You know, it gives me hope, because there have been times in my life where I felt like I haven't been noticed, or there have been times when I felt discouraged, even though I was doing what God called me to do, because life gets complicated when you say yes to Jesus; but really, it is encouraging to know that God says I see you; God says I am paying attention to you; God says I know that sometimes you struggle with sin and problems and difficulties, but I am actually working out salvation for you and I am giving you a gift in my Son. So, it is really powerful that grace can interrupt our program to help us, but also to shine a light on us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, hopefully for us, as for those original shepherds, our annual trek to Bethlehem changes us, gives us that hope again. So, yes, we go back; but hopefully, we go back like the shepherds did. They were drenched with grace; they were drenched with glory; they were rejoicing and praising God; and hopefully that, you know, our trip to Bethlehem at Christmas every year can remind us of the waters of baptism that drench us, right? That drench us in grace, that give us that new identity. No matter who we are, we are the noticed people; to connect it to the previous program in this series, Darrell, we are the people who receive Immanuel...God is with us.

DARRELL DELANEY

And the God who is with us is the one who we are now charged with a message to tell everyone about. So, not only do we return differently, but we return differently with a message that Christ is the hope of the world; that he can speak into situations that are meek, that are meager, that are unfortunate. He speaks to those who have situations that are pushed out on the margins of society, and he notices and he does something about it because he loves us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The shepherds told everybody, and they were amazed, but their being shepherds, Darrell, I cannot imagine everybody bought what they said. They are shepherds; they've been living in the fields; they've been out with their sheep too long; you know, they probably dreamed these angels. Not everybody believed them, but that didn't stop them, right? And so also, as you said, Darrell, with our witness. Not everybody is going to believe us. Not everybody is going to think we know what we are talking about. That is okay; we keep talking about it; we keep telling the good news of Immanuel...God with us...the Savior born to us. Thanks

be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information.

***Correction:** In the audio of this episode, host Darrell Delaney misspeaks and says “angels,” when he meant to say “shepherds.”

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/jesus-shepherds-and-angels-a-savior-is-born>

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