

**“Mary Had a Little Lamb”**  
(a sermon for Christmas Eve)  
Luke 1:1-20 and John 1:29b  
By John Gill

Last week (December 17) was the anniversary of flight. As you probably know, on that day in 1903 in Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first sustained, controlled flights in a motor-powered aircraft. They wired their sister, Katherine, with the exciting news: “We have flown 120 feet! (stop) Will be home for Christmas. (stop)”

When she received the telegram, Katherine ran down the street and breathlessly handed the telegram to the editor of the local paper. He read it carefully and smiled: “Well, well, how nice! The boys will be home for Christmas.”

We shake our heads in disbelief that someone could SO TOTALLY miss “the scoop of the century.”

Yet many people today seem just as oblivious to the biggest “scoop” of all time. Every year, we hear the words of the angels: “For unto you is born . . . a Savior, Christ the Lord!”

And most people simply say, “Well, well, how nice...” and go right on with their lives as if nothing had changed.

The vast majority of Americans observe Christmas (at least to some degree). But for most, Christmas is just another holiday, - no different than the Fourth of July, or New Year’s Day, or Halloween, or Groundhog Day. It’s a chance to get off work or school, to party, decorate our homes, sing songs, and get together with family and friends.

For them, Christmas has about as much meaning as a fairy tale or nursery rhyme. “And Mary gave birth to her first born son . . .” might as well be “Mary had a little lamb . . . .”

These people see only the secular side of Christmas – Santa and Frosty and Rudolph – with little thought to the real meaning of the season. As Ben Franklin once observed, “How many observe Christ’s birthday; how few his precepts!” I’m afraid his words are still true today.

Unfortunately, “religious people” are not much better. Even for many church-goers, Christmas has little real meaning. Lots of us have developed a “Christmas card theology” of what Jesus’ birth is all about.

In church, we often present Christmas as being about cute children in bathrobes and cardboard angel wings in Christmas pageants, gift-giving, decorations, parties, and sweets.

Now, nothing is wrong with all these things, and they are to be enjoyed – nothing is wrong . . . UNLESS we forget there is a much deeper meaning.

One of my favorite Christmas traditions is watching the Peanuts TV special, “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” As you probably recall, the kids decide to put on a Christmas play that reflects the true meaning of Christmas. They come up with lots of ideas, but their suggestions reveal that they have no grasp of what Christmas is all about.

Until, that is, Linus stands in the spotlight on stage, and says, “I’ll tell you what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown,” and then recites the Christmas story from Luke, just exactly as it has been read for us this evening.

It’s a passage so familiar that we seldom stop to think about it. - For instance, have you ever wondered why angels appeared to shepherds? I have!

There were lots of others who were much better candidates to hear the news: Why not the king of the land? Certainly the appearance of angels would have gotten his attention. Why not announce the news to the priests in the Temple? They were expecting a Messiah. If not the king or the priests, why didn’t the angels proclaim Jesus’ birth to the entire village of Bethlehem? They knew of the prophecy that the Christ would one day be born in Bethlehem – surely they would have bent over backwards to welcome Jesus.

But to shepherds? An unusual choice.

Our feelings about shepherds are quite different today than they were thought of in biblical times. When WE think of shepherds, positive images of pastoral scenes come to mind. We think of shepherds as hardworking noble people.

Not so in Jesus’ day! In the first century, shepherds were looked down upon as scum.

They were considered shiftless, dishonest people. Without asking permission, they would graze their flocks on other people's land. They were thought to be so unreliable that their testimony was not allowed in a court of law. The religious leaders despised them because they were unable to keep all the details of the ceremonial customs and regulations specified in the Jewish law.

Therefore, they were perpetually considered "unclean." - Shepherds were among the lowest strata of Jewish society. They certainly would NOT have been MY first choice!

Yet God chooses to reveal this earth shattering news - to shepherds. - It seems God could have made a better choice than shepherds. But it ACTUALLY is the perfect choice – more perfect than anyone that night could possibly have known.

Why? Because, while these shepherds themselves may have been ordinary, the SHEEP they were watching were anything BUT ordinary! Let me explain.

Bethlehem was not far from Jerusalem and the Temple. If you have ever been to Israel, you know that Bethlehem and Jerusalem are only a few miles apart. We now know that the flocks that were grazed around Bethlehem were owned – by the Temple!

You see, in the Temple every morning and evening, priests offered a sacrificial lamb without blemish, asking God to forgive the sins of the people. The sheep THESE shepherds were watching that night were the lambs destined to be offered as a sacrifice to God!

If you have studied the Bible, you might recall that the Old Testament law required the sacrifice of a perfect lamb for the forgiveness of sins.

In our day, we don't really understand the sacrificial system, but it was an essential part of Jewish life. It was the method God provided to bring forgiveness of sin and a restored relationship with God. You see, because of our sin, we deserve death. As Paul wrote, "The wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

The system of sacrifices was not some barbaric practice. It was God's way of showing mercy, because it allowed a substitute to take the place of the guilty – exchanging blood for blood, life for life.

But there was a problem. The Old Testament sacrificial system was never adequate to atone for ALL our sins. The sacrifice had to be repeated over and over again (In fact, in

the Temple on high-holy days literally thousands of lambs were sacrificed.) All the lambs on all the hills of Bethlehem would NEVER be enough to atone for all our sin!

But on Christmas morning, all that changed. On that holiest of nights, God sent His Son to offer HIMSELF as the perfect sacrifice, the ultimate “spotless Lamb” – a sacrifice once, for all.

As Paul put it in his first letter to the Corinthians: “Christ our Passover Lamb, has been sacrificed for us... ‘ (1 Cor. 5:7). Or, John in Revelation: “Worthy is the Lamb that has been slain, to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing...” (Rev. 5:12).

NOW do you see why angels might go first to THESE particular shepherds?

The world expected a political and military Messiah. If the angels had appeared to the king, the priests, or the ordinary folks of Bethlehem, the message would have been misinterpreted (as it later was).

But perhaps THESE shepherds – these keepers of the sacrificial lambs – might put two and two together. Perhaps THEY might come to realize that the baby whose birth the angels announced was, not ONLY to be the long awaited Messiah of God, but the perfect Lamb of God, whose blood could do what a million lambs could never do.

Without putting it in so many words, its as if the angels were saying to these temple shepherds what John the Baptist later proclaimed at Jesus’ baptism in the Jordan: “For unto you is born . . . the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”

My friends, at Christmas each year, you and I are privy to the biggest scoop of all time – that God has acted, once for all, to take away YOUR sins, and to give YOU a chance at eternal life – but only IF you can recognize who the baby in the manger really is.

That’s what Christmas all boils down to – that’s the question of the ages: “Who is Christ – to YOU?” Or as the old carol asks, “What Child is This . . . ?” Each of us must answer. And HOW we answer has eternal ramifications.

Be honest. For you, - is Christmas nothing more than a fairy tale or nursery rhyme – a nice tradition to be observed, but not to be taken too seriously?

Is Jesus just a cute little baby we can give lip service to one day a year, and then forget all the rest?

Or is he more? Could it be that the baby we celebrate this night is the “very Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world?” Could it be that this Child IS who he says he is? And IF he is, then what are you going to do about it?

You may be asking yourself – Why is the preacher talking about a Lenten theme at Christmastime? Because, the only way to understand Christ’s birth is to understand his life, death, and resurrection.

Our “Christmas card” picture of Jesus in a manger makes a beautiful scene, but we cannot leave him there. For, over the manger of Christmas morning is cast the ominous shadow of the cross.

You see, God didn’t send his Son simply to be a baby in a manger – he sent his Son to be a Savior on a cross. As the Bible says, “Jesus came into the world to save sinners.”

Jesus was born for one purpose – to die on the cross in YOUR place – to give his life, not just for the world, but for YOU. He would have done it JUST FOR YOU! If we miss that point, we will miss what Christmas is all about.

My friends, I hope and pray that this Christmas is more to you than simply a fairy tale or a nursery rhyme. I hope that Christmas is more than Santa, and Frosty, and Rudolph. I even hope it is more to you than a cute baby in a manger.

It is my most urgent desire That, this Christmas Eve, as you journey with the shepherds to the stable and peer into the manger, you will see – NOT a baby lying there, but a man hanging on a cross, the sacrificial Lamb God has provided so that you can have your sins forgiven and live eternally with him.

This Christmas, may you realize that “Mary had a little Lamb – who died for the whole flock.”

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Let us pray:

Loving God, this Christmas, may we recognize that the manger and the cross are inexorably linked – that Christmas has no meaning without Good Friday and Easter. Change our hearts this Christmas, O God. May we present our very lives to the Christ Child in gratitude for his sacrifice – willingly made – so that we might have the opportunity to live eternally with you. Amen.