

### What the Shepherds Heard

Perhaps this narrative of the birth of Jesus, found in the gospel of Luke, is the most well known Christmas story in America. It is this passage of Scripture that Linus recited in the TV special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

*A Charlie Brown Christmas* was the first prime-time animated TV special based upon the comic strip *Peanuts*, by Charles M. Schulz. The special aired on CBS from its debut in 1965 through 2000, and has aired on ABC since 2001. It was one of CBS's most successful specials, winning awards, and airing annually more times on that network than even MGM's classic motion picture *The Wizard of Oz*.

Network executives were not at all keen on several aspects of the show, forcing Schulz and the producer (Melendez) to wage some serious battles to preserve their vision. The TV executives did not want to have Linus reciting the story of the birth of Christ from the Gospel of Luke; they assumed that viewers would not want to sit through a passage of the King James Version of the Bible.

[When the half-hour special first aired on Thursday, December 9, 1965, 50% of the televisions in the United States were tuned in. Linus' recitation of the birth of Jesus was hailed by critics (such as Harriet Van Horne of the *New York World-Telegram*). One newswoman said, "Linus' reading of the story of the Nativity was, quite simply, the dramatic highlight of the season." This Christmas special won both an Emmy and Peabody Award.] Charles Schulz was adamant that this scene - the one in which Linus recites from the Gospel of Luke the story of Jesus' birth - be kept in the production, remarking that, "If we don't tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?"

...We will... Again, as in years past, we will tell the true meaning of Christmas for it is our task and mission to do so. And that is why we read this wonderful, and perhaps all too familiar, story; praying and hoping each time that God's true word will be heard. We recall all the familiar scenes in the story: the census and the travel it demanded; no room at the inn and the rustic accommodations for the birth; the mother and the earthly father; the child himself - who he was or destined to be; and the shepherds out in the fields.

It was those shepherds who saw and heard something extraordinary. The Bible tells how an angel of the Lord stood before them and they were terrified - and who wouldn't be, if suddenly an angel of the Lord burst forth? Remember what the angel said? "Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord...[.And suddenly there was with the angel a heavenly host, praising God and saying 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'" I'd think that was enough to get their attention; what might get ours?] What the angel told them was that the birth of this child in Bethlehem was mega-important, something to get excited about, something good, because of who he was: Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

Those titles - **Savior, (Christ) Messiah, Lord** - tell of his purpose; God's purpose. **Savior** - σωτηρ - means deliverer or redeemer; someone who will deliver us from our difficulties and troubles. In those days, like these days, human society had gone astray - there were, and are, all kinds of troubles and problems that prevent us from living in peace, prosperity and harmony. As people analyzed their problems the wise ones realized that Someone was needed to save humans.

Much of the trouble that assails our world, much of the trouble that comes into our lives, is, one way or another, the result of humans trying to live without God. A savior is the only one who can deliver us from the mess we're in. It begins in acknowledging our part in the mess and asking our Creator's forgiveness for turning our backs on the One who made us; the One who can help us truly live and live truthfully.

If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; if our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist or engineer; if our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; if our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; but our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior. As it is written, "...the grace of God has appeared bringing salvation to all... He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us all from iniquity..." (Titus 2:11-14).

The angel says, "We bring you news of great joy, a Savior has been born to YOU!" I know there is someone here tonight who needs these words; someone who is greatly troubled in soul and mind; perhaps someone who has for years heard only the wind, and no angel voice; sometimes it is the wind of our own rushing and striving activities. It may be someone who is lost in loneliness. Or it could be someone whose heart has become calloused and says, "I don't need a savior." Perhaps someone here tonight is not really happy, deep down, not sure of his or her own worth, yet maybe too proud or afraid to ask for help... Whoever you are, God whispers: the Savior has come for YOU!

The second name the angel gave the baby Jesus was **Messiah**. In the original New Testament, which was written in Greek, it is rendered **Χριστος**, from which we get "Christ." Messiah is a Hebrew term that means "anointed," and there is a history behind the title. Messiah refers to a person whom God has called to special tasks and has given certain powers. In the O.T. the term could be applied to anyone who was called to do God's bidding in a special circumstance. Hence it is used to refer to a priest (Lev. 4:3, 5), the Patriarchs (1 Chron. 16:22), and even someone outside the house of Israel, in the case of Cyrus the Persian king (Is. 45:1) - called by God to free the people of Israel from their Babylonian captivity.

In time, the term "anointed" came to be most often used with regard to the king of Israel, and in particular David and his dynasty. Even long after David and the collapse of the kingdom, the prophets were still sure that God's messiah would come from the house of David (Ezek. 34:23ff).

In the N.T. the Gospels clearly reflect the expectation that the messiah would come from the house of David. At his birth (Luke 2:11), Jesus is proclaimed by the angel to be the Christ or messiah, as he was born in the city of Israel's greatest and most beloved king - Bethlehem, the city of David. [In John's gospel Jesus acknowledged the title early in his ministry (John 4:26).] When Jesus was called "Messiah" by his disciples, he admonished them not to speak aloud of his title and role, perhaps because of the political situation at the time (see Matt. 16:17, 20; Mark 8:30). He knew he needed to prepare them to understand how he would fulfill that title through his passion and resurrection, rather than through the establishment of a worldly kingdom. His was a unique task to perform - for us and for our salvation.

At his trial he was expressly asked by the High Priest, "Are you the Christ?" (Mark 14:61ff) and he replied in the affirmative. After his resurrection he explicitly taught that he was identical with the messiah of the O.T. (Luke 24:26ff). And yes, he is the leader of a nation, "a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light," (1 Peter). Are you ready for his leadership? Will He lead you into this holy nation, a people belonging to God?

Lastly the angel called him **Lord - Κυριος** - meaning "master or owner." This term "Lord" is used 244 times in the Gospels; though we do not always see it in the English. It is sometimes translated "master" (Mt. 15:27), or "sir" (Mt. 21:30), or "owner" (Lk. 19:33). The title describes someone who has power or authority over persons or things and often it implies ownership. [In Greek the verbal form is **κυριευω** - meaning to have power over, rule over, dictate the terms of.]"

When the angel named him Lord to the shepherds it is as though an addition to "Christ" or Messiah. "For unto you, is born this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Perhaps the angel of God wanted all to understand what has happened and to grasp the full meaning of "Christ" or Messiah. It is the same reason that when Jesus, the man, appeared before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate, he is called "Christ, a king" (Luke 23:2). The claim that Jesus was "the Christ" or messiah, had no meaning for the Roman governor. "Christ" had to be interpreted to him as "king" - i. e. a lord who had power over others - before he could receive the charge as an accusation. ["Lord" also used as a title of courtesy in direct address to, or as a name for Jesus. His disciples addressed him as "Lord" as did Peter when he said, "Lord if it be you, bid me to come to you on the water..." (Mt. 14:28). Jesus also used the title himself when he said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven." (Mt. 7:21). In time "Lord" became a title of Divine honor in regard to Jesus. Lord is also the term for God - as in Luke 2:26 "The Lord's Christ."]

In his preaching the apostle Peter proclaimed that "...God has made that same Jesus...both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Some might not have understood that in receiving Jesus as Savior and Messiah, one was receiving him as ruler and king. Of course this confession - that Jesus is Lord - got Christians into trouble with later Roman emperors, and in the last century with Nazi leaders, and even today in some places. Confessing Jesus as Lord still causes negative reactions today among some who are threatened by that claim. Christians know him as the "Lord of life;" the One who can bring guidance and wisdom to daily living; the One who can lead us to bring justice and mercy to those around us; the One who finally holds the power over death. Is he lord of your life?

To the Jewish Christians, Jesus was the "Messiah," to the Greek-speaking Jewish-Christians, Jesus was "the Christ." And to the Gentile Christians he was, "the Lord." This enabled all to understand their Savior was the Sovereign who had Lordship over all. The Savior is the Lord, the Possessor and Ruler of the Kingdom of God.

Is he *your* Savior, Messiah and Lord? When he saves you from a life lived outside God's purposes, when he leads you into God's family, when he becomes your sovereign, you will know your God-given purpose. In him will we be trained "to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly..." (Titus 2:12)...

"During the early decades of the twenty-first century, while Barack Obama was the President of the United States and Arnold Schwarzenegger was the governor of California, within a local congregation in Bakersfield, the Lord God came to a woman stricken by cancer and sustained her and her family and friends in their grief. The Lord came to a young businessman who would not sacrifice his moral principles to gain an advantage over his competitor. The Lord came to a family that had lost a loved one and they were comforted. The Lord came to a couple whose child suffered a difficult illness and they found strength. The Lord came to an old farmer and his wife who shared the produce of their land with people who were unemployed or going through tough times, and the Lord was born here, and the angels in the church choir sang, 'Glory to God in the

highest, and on the earth peace and good will!' and the shepherds in the congregation told this story, and Jesus was Savior, Christ, and Lord among all of them."

So often God does really big things in small ways. The birth of a babe long ago in Bethlehem... God speaks words of life-giving grace and world-transforming power; words that spill out into human history like a bolt from heaven; words directly from God's heart, each carefully chosen to speak truth and love to God's own creation. And God's creation - that's us - distracted, busy, bored, restless - do we yawn as the word of God streaks by? Or do we simply not notice because of its smallness?

Long after the presents have been unwrapped, after the lights and decorations come down, even after all the gifts and celebrations have been paid for, God is still saying, "Do not be afraid. A Savior is born to you."

Here is God who steps into life, reaches right down to that deepest place in your life with Good News that your life is for a higher purpose; a God-appointed purpose. And He pulls you up and comes along side of you to fulfill that purpose. This is what I mean by a Savior.

He will do that for you and for me, because he *is* Messiah and Lord.