

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Isaiah 9:1-7

But there will be no gloom for those who were in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.

You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onwards and for evermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Doug: It's Christmas time. The decorations are up. The lights are up, the tree is decorated. The stockings are hung by the chimney with care. Depending on the rules at your house, there may be presents under the tree.

Here at Westminster, we've been preparing since mid-November. We've heard from Amos, and Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel and Ezekiel, about the light that was going to come into darkness and about what God wanted us to do about it.

This week, I was watching the Charlie Brown Christmas special, like you do, and I was struck again by how simple the words are that Linus recites. This is the only time in all of Peanuts that he drops his blanket. He doesn't need it, because, for this moment, he is not afraid.

Tonight, I'd like us to listen again to these words. They are simple words, but there's a lot there.

Lisa: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. This taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria."

Doug: The Emperor of Rome, the most powerful man in the world, has ordered a census and an audit of everything that he rules. He wants to know how much he controls and how to get the most money out of all of it. This is not a fairy tale set in some

vague time and place, long, long ago, and far, far away. This really happened at a specific time, in a specific place.

Lisa: “And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.”

Doug: Everyone has to go to their family hometown for this census. That’s how it’s organized, to make it easier for the Roman authorities. A carpenter named Joseph is descended from King David, so he has to walk nine days from his home to Bethlehem, David’s hometown. His fiancée, Mary, comes with him. Mary is pregnant, but it’s not Joseph’s baby. The baby is God’s son.

Lisa: “And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 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.”

Doug: There is no room in town for this young couple. They stay not in a house, or a hotel, but in animal space. Mary gives birth surrounded by animals, and lays her newborn son not in a crib or a cradle, but in a feeding trough for the animals. It is the closest they have to a proper bed for him.

Lisa: “And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. “

Doug: Shepherds are not important people. They are ordinary people, at best. They live out on the outskirts of town. Their work, taking care of the sheep, is important, I suppose, but nobody wants the shepherds themselves around. They’re poor, and they are not respectable.

Lisa: “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.”

Doug: I think that, if an angel of the Lord appeared in front of me, I’d be “sore afraid,” too. The Lord God, creator of Heaven and Earth, is sending an angel with a message for me? What did I do? What am I going to have to do?

Lisa: “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 Savior, which is Christ the Lord.”

Doug: The angels have good news all right. They tell the shepherds that the Messiah, the Anointed One, has been born in Bethlehem. He is the one sent by God to bring peace and to save the people from their sins.

He is the one whom Isaiah was talking about, the Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

Lisa: “And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”

Doug: The angel tells them that they’ll know the Messiah because he will be the only baby they find in Bethlehem who is lying in a manger.

Lisa: “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.”

Doug: Glory to God, and peace and good will toward human beings. That’s what this baby is here to bear.

This peace is not just a lack of armed conflict. The word they use here, is *shalom*. *Shalom* is peace, and having enough, and not being afraid. Having no reason to be afraid. You see, for you to have this kind of *shalom*, your neighbors have to have it, too. And that is what this baby is here to bring to everyone.

Lisa: “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.’”

Doug: Once the angels go home, the shepherds have got to see this for themselves.

Lisa: “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.”

Doug: The shepherds go to Bethlehem to see for themselves, and they see Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, who is, indeed, lying in the manger. They start telling people all the amazing things that the angels told them.

Lisa: “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.”

Doug: Mary thinks about all these things. Every baby is wonderful, but this is not just any baby. This is God’s baby, come to bring peace and love and to teach us how to live our lives as God’s beloved children.

The shepherds go back to the fields, praising God for how amazing God is, and telling everyone who will listen everything that they’ve heard and how wonderful it all is.

God wants all those people out there to have *shalom*, maybe not to be rich, but to have enough and to have peace. God wants that so badly, that God came down here himself as a baby to deliver it and to teach human beings about it.

Lisa: “That’s what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Doug: AMEN.