

## Unity in Our Declaration Luke 2:8-14

It was in 1741 that composer George Frideric Handel supplied with the Scriptural text compiled by Charles Jennens, set out to compose one of the greatest oratorios of all time. What was to become his signature work, the 259 page score for *Messiah* was completed in just 24 days. While it initially received a modest public reception, it gained in popularity and has become one of the best known and most frequently performed choral works in Western music.

Although it resembles an opera in structure, it has no dramatic form, no impersonations of characters and very little direct speech. The text focuses on the Messiah beginning with prophecy concerning the virgin birth and moves through the life of Christ to His glorification and ascension. Like an opera though, it is set in three acts. Part I begins with the prophecies of Isaiah, including that most famous score taken from 9:6 *“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given, and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.”* It then moves to the announcement to the shepherds by the angels taken from Luke’s account, which is our text today. Part II focuses on the Passion of Christ that ends with the great *Hallelujah* chorus. Part III covers Christ’s resurrection and glorification in Heaven. Initially it was intended for Easter but we associate it most with Christmas.

The intent of Handel in writing this composition was for a modest vocal choir that would be reinforced by instrumental accompaniment. Following his death, it was adapted for performance on a much larger scale that included large orchestras and choirs. As a way of updating the orchestration Mozart revised and amplified it. Trends in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into this new century have been to return to the original intent of Handel’s composition, although there are still efforts at making it a grandiose production.

According to musicologist Donald Burrows, much of the text is so allusive as to be largely incomprehensible to those ignorant of the biblical

account. For the benefit of his audiences, Jennens printed and issued a pamphlet explaining the reasons for his choices of scriptural selections.

Jennens and Handel collaborated on other musical oratorios like Handel’s *Paul*. However, unlike them where he edited some of the text, Handel did not edit the text of *Messiah* as written by Jennens.

At the end of his manuscript Handel wrote the letters “SDG” – Soli Deo Gloria, “To God alone the glory.” Some have come to believe the Apocryphal story that the inscription and the haste in which Handel was able to complete this masterpiece that the music was considered divinely inspired.

If you are interested, you can download the entire 259 page score for free at [www.scribd.com](http://www.scribd.com).

With that as our introduction, please take your Bible and turn to the third Gospel written by Doctor Luke and to chapter 2. We’ll be looking at **Luke 2:8-14**.

Two months ago we began a series on unity. We considered the following topics:

- Unity in our decision
- Unity in our direction
- Unity in our diversity
- Unity in our doctrine (2 weeks)
- Unity in our desire
- Unity in our devotion

Today we conclude with unity in our declaration.

As a church we must be committed to a simple but single message. It is the message that was declared by the angels over 2000 years ago and still echoes through the corridors of time to today with the command that we as God’s followers take up and declare the same message without deviation. From our passage we will consider two important truths that were communicated by the angels.

There was a singular message

There was a shared melody

Would you stand please and honor the reading of God’s Word.

**I. THERE WAS A SINGULAR MESSAGE –  
v. 8-12**

## A. It Was A Message of Good News – v. 8-10

By singular I mean to convey two ideas. The first is the idea that it was a single, simple message. It wasn't mysteriously wrapped in a coded message that would be difficult to decipher by those who heard it. It wasn't clouded by additional messages in which the intended recipients needed to discern which had greatest priority or meaning. It was a simple message that stood alone.

The second idea I want to convey is that this message is remarkable, extraordinary, and unequal in its importance to the recipients and indeed to all humanity. It wasn't just your run of the mill news. This was something that was special and of special interest to people everywhere. People had been waiting for this news but were they ready for it.

Let's look more closely at the passage.

**Verses 1-7** frames the context of the scene we are considering. A census had been ordered by the Emperor in which all residents of the Roman empire were to travel to their ancestral home to register. There was an allotted time period in which to do they had to register. We have the advantage of Scripture to reveal to us the reason. It would have seemed most logical to do this early in the pregnancy, when she was still feeling well enough to travel, but doing so would have negated the prophecy of Micah which says that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. So it was in the last days of her pregnancy that they journeyed to Bethlehem, the home of their ancestors.

It was during this time that she gave birth to a son. Unhindered and unconcerned by the commotion of the registration or even of an unusual birth in the nearby town, some shepherds had gathered their flocks together for the night. Some speculate that these sheep were destined for the Temple to be sacrificed. That is unsubstantiated, but possible.

Sometimes shepherds would gather their sheep together in a common pen or area to minimize the risk of theft by robbers or loss by wild animals. It was also a way to have some company in an otherwise lonely occupation.

Our text tells us that they were living out in the field nearby this town. We can surmise that for them it was just another ordinary night out under the stars of the middle-eastern sky. Nothing unusual or eventful. They had gathered their sheep, eaten a simple meal and were settling in for the night, maybe camped around a little fire to ward off the chill evening air that was blanketing the hillside.

Imagine the crackle of fire

The soft bleating of sheep

The chirping of crickets

The occasional dim light from a firefly

Their talk was low and conversation light.

Periodically there would be a pause in their conversation.

Someone may have yawned while another watched an ember from the fire drift upward into the night sky born on the winds of a soft breeze. To them it was just a typical night tending sheep. But to God it was no typical night. It was the night He chose to visit earth in the form of a little baby. God has a way of interrupting the mundane with the miraculous, the predictable with the surprising.

**Verse 9** tells us that an angel of the Lord appeared to them. **Have you ever wondered why the shepherds? Why not go into the town and make the announcement?** Any marketing agency will tell you that if you want to reach a big audience you need to get the message out to the greatest number of people. That's why you don't see many billboards out in the country. Few people see them. Before super highways, an occasional sign might be painted on the side of a barn, but to reach the masses, you need to go where the masses are. The town would have seemed like the most logical place for the angel to visit with the news he had to share. It was swollen with people there for the census. But maybe they were too busy with the details of the census to notice or care about his news. After all, they didn't seem too concerned about a pregnant woman about to give birth for any of them to give up their bed for her comfort. Would the people in town even take the angel seriously?

**Or why didn't the angel go to the synagogue or to the Temple in Jerusalem?** It was maybe only five miles away from Bethlehem. **Shouldn't the angel have gone to the religious leaders? Surely they would understand the message or were they too**

**caught up in their rituals to understand the magnitude of what he had to say?** It is conceivable to think that had the angel gone to the religious elite, that they may have interpreted it to mean that God's provision of salvation was only for the pious, religious class and not for the common folk, the sinners. But that the angel came to the shepherds is of significance.

Keep in mind that up until this time it had been 400 years since God had revealed Himself in any way to man. They may have responded the same way Moses thought Israel would respond before they were delivered from slavery. **"What is His name?"** But isn't that the message the angel came with the same as Moses? God is going to deliver you.

400 years is a long time of silence. But that's how long it had been. A year before this hillside visit God spoke through His angel Gabriel to an old couple that they would have a son who would be the forerunner of the Messiah. He would announce His coming **"Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world."** Three months later Gabriel would visit a young maiden and tell her that she would be the mother of the Messiah, and then he would visit her fiancé and explain to him that the child she carried would save His people from their sins.

Instead of appearing to any we might consider logical he appeared to a handful of shepherds out in the fields. **And just who were shepherds anyway?** They were a despised class in Israel because of their occupation. They were uneducated and unskilled. In post New Testament times they were not allowed to give testimony in court because they were often viewed as dishonest and unreliable. Their work made them ceremonially unclean and kept them from the Temple for long periods of time. Today they would be the ones in our society that we don't give a second thought to, the ones who are the social outcasts. They are the ones we avoid making eye contact with, the ones you avoided rubbing up against as they walked by so you wouldn't become ceremonially unclean yourself. Going to the shepherds was a way of saying that the message of the Gospel was for everyone.

Later on Paul would write **"But God has chosen**

**the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God has chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, has God chosen, yes, and things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are."** (I Corinthians 1:27-28)

It was to this group of outcasts that God elected to display His magnificence. Our text recounts that as the angel appeared to them that he was not like any ordinary man in appearance, otherwise their reaction would not have been so dramatic, so fearful. The glory of the Lord shone around them.

In the Old Testament it was called the Shekinah glory, that brightness or splendor that emanates from God because of who He is. It was displayed in the pillar of fire and smoke in the days of Israel's wilderness wanderings. It was displayed in the cloud that would appear in the Holy of Holies when He was present. It was seen on the face of Moses after he spent those 40 days and nights on the mountain alone with God.

The angel who appeared to the shepherds had just come from the presence of God. Imagine that for a moment. Had it been us we would have glowed with the same radiance. And so here is this angel coming from the presence of God sent to earth with an urgent message. From his very creation this angel had stood in the presence of God and now exhibited that glory to man. It was perhaps a way to substantiate that he was no ordinary messenger with no ordinary message. And they were afraid, and don't tell me you wouldn't be afraid at such a sight. The word literally means they feared a great fear. They were beside themselves terrorized by the presence of this angel. It reminds me of the account from Daniel when King Belshazzar saw the hand writing on the wall. He was so afraid Scripture says his face turned pale, his knees were knocking together and his legs gave way.

These hearty shepherds who had no doubt faced lions and bears as David had centuries before were scared out of their wits. At their reaction the angel gave them a simple command. Don't be afraid.

That's the same message for us when we face extraordinary circumstances that bring fear – don't be afraid.

Here was the message that would ease their fears. Here was the message that they had been anticipating. They woke up that morning and had no idea what would happen to them that night. It's the sort of thing you read about in the news happening to others but not to us. I want to say this before I forget. They may have been despised by the world, but they were devout before God. **How do we know that?** We know it by their reaction.

In verse 15 we read that after the angel left they hurried to Bethlehem to see the child.

In verse 17 we read that everywhere they went and to whom ever would listen they told the news.

Without hesitation and with willing obedience the angel rushed to earth and to this small audience with the news. Unlike the angel who was detained with bringing an answer to Daniel's prayers, this angel would not, could not be kept from delivering, from declaring this important message.

**"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."**

Good news is the same word used to speak of evangelizing. It literally would read "I evangelize to you a great joy."

We love to receive good news. Whether it is the engagement of one of our children or the announcement of a child to be born or that is born we like good news. We like good news about a promotion or about a job when we have been laid off. We like good news at the end of a very difficult day.

Maybe the shepherds had suffered under the tyranny of Rome. Maybe they felt like they were in a dead end job. Maybe they were tired of being on the bottom rung of the social ladder. But the news the angel had to declare to them was of greater significance than filling some empty void from difficult circumstances. This good news would bring them great joy, great rejoicing, great delight, that would be eternal.

But this news was not just for them. They weren't chosen as recipients of this news because they were

the lowliest people or the neediest or even because they were the most worthy. It was by God's grace that they were chosen to be the recipients of this news and to be the spokesman of it to others. This news was for all people, everywhere and throughout time. It was to this group that God elected to give His message, a message that they had longed to see come to pass for centuries.

It was a message of good news.

It was a message of God's Son.

## **B. It Was A Message of God's Son – v. 11-12**

**What news is good news if you don't tell what the good news is?**

**"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."**

There is significance in the word **today**. It marks a period of time. It doesn't mean that it occurred sometime in the past. It doesn't mean that it will occur sometime in the future. They already had those promises from the pens of Micah and Isaiah. It speaks specifically of this day and no other.

**"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born."**

Jesus used the same word when he told the crowd that **today** salvation had come to the house of Zacchaeus.

He used it again when hanging on the cross he told the thief next to Him that **today** he would be in paradise.

The long awaited promise of the Messiah had come. It was that day the Savior, the deliverer had come.

Man's true problem isn't addictions or failed marriages or unfulfilling jobs or any other social atrocities that exist from which we from time to time call on the Lord for deliverance. Man's greatest need and biggest problem is the issue of sin.

You may not have ever been through a failed marriage but you are a sinner in need of a Savior. You may have a wonderful and satisfying job, but you're still a sinner in need of a Savior.

You may never experience an addiction, but sin is still a major problem for which you need a Savior.

We are all guilty of sin and have been since the very first sin in the garden. That's why we need a Savior.

We all are sinners and we all need the same remedy, we need a Savior, but not just any Savior.

People under occupied Roman territory called the Emperor savior. They looked to him as their deliverer.

The Savior we need is not found in a political ruler or religious leader or even a scientist.

The Savior we need is not found in pop psychology.

The Savior we need is not found in yet another relationship.

The Savior we need is not found in a new job that can bring us a new status.

There is only one Savior. The Savior we need is the one the angel announced had come He is Christ the Lord. That Savior is the Son of God. He is the only remedy, the only cure from the wretchedness of sin. He is the one who fulfills the promises of God scattered throughout the Old Testament. He is the anointed one of God who could take away the sins of His people. He is the one who came to seek and save the lost. There is no other name given among men whereby we can be saved.

That is good news indeed. Without the Savior there is no good news. The Savior is the heart of the gospel. There is a Savior and Scripture tells us of one more TODAY, today if you hear His voice do not harden your heart. TODAY call on His name to be saved. There is no other name given among men by which we can be saved.

The sign they were given was that this Savior would be in the form of a newborn infant wrapped in strips of cloth. The sign was not to substantiate the validity of the angel's message; they already believed what he told them. The sign was a way for them to recognize Him. There was the possibility that in a crowd that size there may have been other newborn babies. The one in strips of cloth would be the Savior.

It was a singular message with extraordinary significance given to a group of lowly shepherds. It was a message of hope not just for them, but for everyone then and now.

*It was a message of good news.*

*It was a message of God's Son.*

*There was a singular message.*

*There was a shared melody.*

## **II. THERE WAS A SHARED MELODY –**

### **v. 13-14**

#### **A. It Was A Message That Touched Heaven –**

##### **v. 13-14a**

If one angel wasn't surprising and troubling enough, that angel is now joined with a multitude of angels.

Now there are those who say that the angels didn't sing, but the word used here can also mean that they sang. These angels knew Christ in heaven and now they proclaim Him on earth. Their praise was to God in heaven. God deserves all the glory and honor and praise.

Isaiah was a witness to the exaltation that angels give to God when he records the vision he saw of heaven. **Isaiah 6:1-4**

John attests to the same in his vision of end times.

**Revelation 4:8-11; 5:13**

The angels never cease to give an outpouring of praise to God. Their voice and song is filled with adoration. One cannot help but be in the presence of God and be filled with praise for who God is and for what God does.

Their joy wasn't just because they knew of Christ before the incarnation or even because they were witness to the marvel of His birth as wonderful as that was. Their joy was because they knew, even though they did not understand, what Jesus was to do as an expression of God's love. Jesus was God's greatest gift to man to meet man's greatest need of a Savior because of sin. And so in the highest place that can be touched, that being heaven, they give God praise and glory.

To praise God is to give a commendation. In this case it is given to God on account of His glory – who He is and what He does.

Glory is a word that originally meant opinion or estimate and developed into a word that meant honor. God's glory correlates with His holiness and

is an expression of His holiness. It is intrinsic to His nature as it belongs to Him just as light and heat belong to the sun. When we think of the sun we think of the heat and light it gives. They are an intrinsic part of the sun. You cannot take either away from the sun. In the same way when you think of God in a proper way you cannot help but think of His glory or that glory is due to Him. It is a part of His nature. This summarily means that there is also a declarative glory attributed to Him as well where we as created beings rightly ascribe to Him glory or honor to Him as we declare His worthiness in what we call worship or His worthship. And while the heavens declare the glory of God, it is His people who will praise Him.

The message that the angelic host declared touched heaven. It was directed to the only Being in existence worthy of such adoration. It reached up into heaven. Only the unfallen angelic host and the people who have accepted this Savior will give Him this kind of praise.

This was a special night that required the voices of angels giving God praise. It was the night the Savior was born and while the angels cannot experience it, they are overjoyed by it.

It was a message that touched heaven. God received glory.  
It was a message that touched earth.

## **B. It Was A Message That Touched Earth – v. 14b**

It does not mean that earth was now blanketed with peace in the absence of war but that now we could have peace with God. The Savior who came would bring peace to man. We are the objects of God's good will, not any other part of creation. We are the objects of God's love and we are the recipients of God's peace.

John Walvoord writes "God's peace is not given to those who have good will, but to those who are recipients of God's good will or favor."

Peace is something we long for as a world. We sign peace treaties hoping it will end years of blood shed or the hope of deterring future escalated animosity

between nations. But secretly we don't really believe or trust that the other nation or people group will hold up their end of the bargain. There aren't any real guarantees and so they don't last.

At the birth of Christ the Roman Empire had been under the Pax Romana or Roman Peace accord that had been in effect since 27BC. **The Stoic philosopher Epictetus wrote "While the Emperor may give peace from war or land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart for which man yearns more than even for outward peace."**

While he might have the political or military arm to enact, even force peace, he could not provide peace of heart that came because like today they experienced high taxation, high unemployment and low morality. Greek philosophy, Roman law, and even Jewish religion were all insufficient to meet the lack of peace experienced by the human heart that prevailed because of sin.

Only Christ the Savior can offer such inwardly desired peace. After all, that is how Isaiah described Him, the Prince of Peace. It is fruit that is born in us when we yield to the work of His Spirit.

This is the text from which we get the oft sung carol Gloria in Excelsis Deo, from the first words of the Latin Vulgate.

The angels recognized the glory and majesty of God by praising Him. The angels proclaimed a deeper, abiding peace that the Roman government could not offer: peace of mind and soul only offered by the Savior, a peace He offered His disciples.

One moment the shepherds were listening to the night sounds and the next to the voice of an angel. One moment they were enveloped in the darkness of night, the next they were surrounded by the brightness of an angel displaying the glory of God. One moment they were engaged in conversation with one another, the next they were captivated by the praise of an angelic host declaring the glory of God because the Savior was born.

**What is our response to this message of good news about God's Son?**

Perhaps like the angels, like Handel's Messiah, your response is one of Hallelujah.

Because of what Christ has done in coming to earth to be our Savior and bringing us peace with God we are to be in unity in our declaration of a simple message of that hope that is for all mankind. Christ is the only way to have peace with God. To have this peace, He must be your Savior. Then at the end of our life we can have inscribed the letters "SDG" – Soli Deo Gloria, "To God alone the glory."