## Bible Study for Christmas Day

Psalm 97:1–12 • Isaiah 62:6–12 • Luke 2:(1–7) 8–20 • Titus 3:4–7

The theme for today is **Jesus is God's promise of rescue fulfilled.** The psalmist speaks of the glory of the Lord who reigns on high. Justice and righteousness are the basis of his throne. Fire consumes all those who oppose him and the mountains melt at his presence. The Lord rescues his people and preserves the lives of his faithful ones. The prophet Isaiah speaks of the promises made to Jerusalem and to God's people, ancient Israel, that they will be saved and redeemed. When their salvation comes, they will be a holy people, redeemed by God. The apostle Paul writes to Titus about the kindness of God and God's love for humans expressed in the generous and free gift of salvation offered to all in Jesus Christ. Luke's Gospel tells of Joseph and the very pregnant Mary as they travel to the town of Bethlehem. Soon after they arrive, Jesus is born and laid in a manger. An angel announces the birth of the Savior to shepherds in a field. A large number of angels glorify God. And the shepherds hurry to find the newborn baby so they can worship him. Then they share this good news with others.

### Jesus is God's Promise of Rescue Fulfilled

Luke 2:8–20 ESV

Many years ago, in a nursing home in Iowa, there was a woman in her 80's who had severe dementia. She had suffered with this for many years. Still, each morning, her husband would arrive at her room, take off his hat, and sit down beside her. He would reach for her hand and hold it. Sometimes she would sit in her chair and he would hold her hand. She did not recognize or know him, but he would come each day when he could. And he would sit and hold her hand and talk to her. It was a beautiful witness to all who saw them of a promise kept. He was faithful to her to the

end, even though she did not know him and could not respond in any way to his love.

Our message this Sunday is about a promise kept that God made to humanity and to his people, ancient Israel. Even when humanity turned away from God, and Israel was unfaithful to their covenant with God, our faithful triune God — Father, Son, and Spirit — kept his promise. The Lord kept his promise that he would save his people from the evil, sin, and death which held them captive.

Our reading today in Luke 2 tells us part of the story of how God kept his promise:

> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. [6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.
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> [8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. [10] And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

[14] “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

[15] When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” [16] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. [17] And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. [18] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:8–20 ESV

As we begin to look at our text, we want to reflect back on the context of this story. The reason we want to do this is because this is an important event in God’s story. And God’s story began long before time began and anything was made.

Before the foundation of the world, God chose humanity in Christ “to be holy and blameless before him in love” (Eph. 1:4 NRSVUE). When humanity was created in his image, after his likeness, to live and work before him, held in his love, God said they were “very good” (Gen. 1:26-27, 31 NRSVUE).

The story of humanity began with Adam and Eve walking in the garden with God. Humans were created for relationship, to fully share in the relationship between the Father and the Son in the Spirit.

But humans chose a different way. They chose to decide for themselves between good and evil. They allowed themselves to be servants of evil and the evil one. So, death entered the world.

But God’s love for humanity did not change. Even though humans became blind to the goodness and love of God, his love for them remained. He made a promise that

one day all would be made right. Evil would be struck down completely, even though the one doing the rescue would be wounded (Gen. 3:14–15).

Over time, God began to build relationships with different people. We read in the Old Testament about Noah, who was rescued by God from a great flood. And then there was Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or Israel through whom the ancient nation of Israel came. God promised their people a land and blessings, though for a time they would have to be in captivity in Egypt.

Then came Moses, and God sent him to lead Israel out of their slavery in Egypt. After ten great plagues on the nation of Egypt, the Lord freed his people from captivity. They left, only to face the waters of the Red Sea. But that was nothing for God — he was going to keep his promise to Israel. He simply parted the sea in two and his people walked through to the other side. And the water, returning when they were done, took care of eliminating the Egyptian army threatening them.

The Lord brought his people to Mt. Sinai, where he made a covenant with them. It was ratified through the sacrifice of animals. The covenant included the Law of Moses, which described how the nation was to live in right relationship with God. And it included instructions on sacrifices to be offered whenever that relationship was broken through sin.

The nation of Israel came to the bank of the Jordan River, where they would cross into the land God had promised to give them. But they were afraid and refused to enter the land. So, for forty years, they wandered in the wilderness. Even in their wanderings, God was with them. They knew his presence by a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. God provided manna or bread from heaven so they had food. And he provided water from rocks when they were thirsty. God was faithful to them and cared for them even when they didn't seem to realize he was there. Even when they were blind to him, he loved them and walked with them through the wilderness.

In time, Moses died. And Israel crossed the Jordan River into the promised land. Joshua took Moses' place and led the people as they took the land God had declared was theirs. As we read in the book of Judges, though, we begin to see a pattern emerge. The ancient nation of Israel, for a time, would live rightly. They would experience God's provision, blessing, and protection.

But then, the people would begin to do what was right in their own eyes. They adopted the gods of the nations around them. They followed ungodly ways of living. They broke the covenant they made with God. And soon they found themselves held captive by other nations.

They suffered for a time. Then they turned back to God and cried out for deliverance. And God, faithful to his covenant love, delivered them. He rescued them and blessed them again, protected them, and provided for them. However, after a while, they returned to their ungodly ways, and the cycle began again.

We read this story throughout the historic record in the Old Testament. The prophets were sent to warn the nation to repent and turn back to God. The people of ancient Israel were warned that the nation would end up in exile. The northern tribes, which kept the name Israel, were the first to go. They were taken captive and resettled by the Assyrians. They were spread out among many nations.

The southern tribes, called Judah, lasted for a time, but eventually were taken captive as well. Many of them were moved to Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem, which King David's son Solomon had built, was destroyed. It seemed as though God's promise would never be fully fulfilled.

Through many tumultuous years, the ancient nation came back to the territory of Judea. Although the temple eventually was rebuilt, the Jewish people suffered through many years of oppression and devastation. In the time of our reading today, they lived under Roman oppression and longed for a deliverer to come and set them free.

Among the prophecies , though, were promises of God establishing a new age of the Spirit. God would write his law on human hearts. He would send a Savior, a Suffering Servant, freeing his people from sin. There were hints in the prophetic Word of God of a child born of a virgin. The Word spoke of a seed and a branch — mysterious words which pointed to a savior who would come and rescue his people. No one really knew what this person would be like. Several men emerged during the Roman occupation claiming to be the "messiah" but each failed. The people prayed for a messiah to come and truly save them, and to reestablish the nation of Israel to all its glory.

Then God's story took a new turn. One day, a young girl named Mary was visited by the angel Gabriel. Gabriel told her she was favored by God. She was favored because the Holy Spirit would come upon her, and she would bear a child.

Even though she and Joseph had not married yet, she would carry and give birth to a child who would be the Son of God, "Immanuel," which means "God with us." His name would be Jesus. Joseph thought to divorce Mary quietly when he found out she was pregnant. But when he was told by an angel in a dream to marry her, that's what he did.

And now we move into today's text.

> [1] In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And all went to be registered, each to his own town. [4] And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, [5] to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. Luke 2:1–5 ESV

One of the prophecies, in Micah 5:2 about the coming of a ruler, said that he would be born in Bethlehem. The prophecies also foretold that he would be from the lineage of King David. So, here in this short paragraph, we discover signposts to the fulfillment of God's promise. And he is doing it through Joseph and Mary.

> [6] And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:6–7 ESV

Mary gave birth to her son and had no place to lay him other than in a humble manger. The God of the universe had sent his Son in answer to a promise. And his precious newborn Son was wrapped and placed in something which held feed for animals. God's Son was not born in a palace. He was not adorned with decorative garments. No, he was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger.

> [8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. [10] And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Luke 2:8–10 ESV

The angels could not keep silent at the birth of God's Son. But notice to whom they came. They did not come to a king. They did not come to the religious leaders of the nation. No, they came to the lowly shepherds out in a field. Like King David when he was a boy, these shepherds kept watch over flocks of sheep, protecting and caring for them.

The response of the shepherds, though, was "great fear." So often our response to what God is doing in our lives that is new and different is fear. The message of the

angel is good news: “Fear not.” What God has in mind for us comes out of his deep love for us. And in this case, God’s love sent this angel with a message of “great joy:”

> [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,
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> [14] “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:11–14 ESV

Not even the angels could be silent about this miracle. God kept his promise made millennia ago. He fulfilled his promise to send a Savior, “Christ the Lord!” **Jesus is God’s promise of rescue fulfilled.** So, a whole chorus of angels joined this angel to celebrate God’s gift of divine peace in Jesus Christ.

> [15] When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” [16] And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. Luke 2:15–16 ESV

It’s hard to keep still and say nothing when faced with an angelic chorus and the news of divine rescue. The shepherds went to see if what they had been told had really happened. Going into Bethlehem, they searched until they found Mary and Joseph with the newborn baby lying in the manger. Looking into the face of this infant, the shepherds saw only a tiny human baby. But the angels said he was so much more than this. **Jesus is God’s promise of rescue fulfilled.** He is God’s Son! Now that’s a story to tell!

> [17] And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. [18] And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:17–20 ESV

Today, as we reflect on the tiny infant in the manger, we stand amazed at the goodness and faithfulness of God. **Jesus is God's promise of rescue fulfilled.** The Son of God has come, as God in human flesh. He is here, the full expression of God's love, come to set us free.

We can learn from the shepherds and from Mary how we can participate in God's miracle of deliverance in Jesus Christ. Like the shepherds, we can praise God. And we can share with others the good news of God's salvation.

**Jesus is God's promise of rescue fulfilled**, and we can tell the story of his miraculous birth, life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We can tell others about how he came to save us from evil, sin, and death. And how he sent his Spirit so we can share in his own life with his heavenly Father in the Spirit. God has come to earth and brought humanity back home to live with him forever.

And like Mary, we can treasure this wonderful news. We can meditate on these truths, as we gaze on the face of God's Son. **Jesus is God's promise of rescue fulfilled**, and we are saved.

Our God is worthy of our trust — he has kept his promise. Even when humanity turned away, God came in the person of Jesus Christ. And he brought us all home to live with the Father and Son in the Spirit forever. We are eternally loved and blessed, for **Jesus is God's promise of rescue fulfilled.**

**Go Deeper** In Luke 24:25–27, 44, Jesus explains that the Old Testament scriptures are fulfilled in him. How does knowing this inform the way we read and study Old Testament passages?