

The Good News of Christmas

On this Christmas Eve, we look at the familiar story of the angels' announcement to the shepherds on the night when Jesus was born.

Our New Testament Scripture is **Luke 2:8-20**:

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 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: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

These shepherds, featured and honored in every Nativity scene, deserve our consideration as those who became the first evangelists, the first to proclaim the good news of Christ's birth, the good news of Christmas.

It seems that these days we've come to expect daily a breaking news story about another disaster. In these days of bad news, it's great to know that the greatest news of all can be examined with joyful hope and delight. After two millennia of history, the Christmas story is still good news. The angel of the Lord appeared to these shepherds, who were keeping watch over their flocks, quite unsuspecting of anything out of the ordinary, much less spectacular.

The good news of Christ's birth came to them as a heavenly appearing. Imagine the spectacular in-breaking that fell upon these shepherds! For them, heaven literally opened up. The shepherds were terrified, so the angel calmed their fear in the face of this amazing spectacle. There's but a thin veil that separates us from the unseen realm of the kingdom of the heavens. We think, erroneously, I believe, of heaven as a far-away place, remote from us where we live "down here" on tangible earth. But the New Testament speaks of, literally, the kingdom

of the heavens, of the sky and air all around us. If we could but see, there are angels all around us. And someday, the even more real and permanent realm of the spirit will become tangible to us. The risen Lord Jesus has but to “step out” to appear to us.

The good news comes to us from the eternal kingdom of God, and is beyond our full comprehension. If we could but see the glories of heaven we’d be startled, dazzled and in complete awe. The Virgin Mary and her fiancé Joseph had both received heavenly visits from the angel. And then Mary, in her Song (Magnificat) to Elizabeth, spoke about the great reversal that God would bring about in his kingdom (Luke 1:46-55). In this fallen world, we see one failed attempt after another to build a Utopia, a heaven on earth. But the birth of Christ ushered in a new era of the eternal kingdom of God, whereby God would begin the process of turning the fallen world right-side up again, one converted life and restored act of justice and peace at a time. Young teenage Mary spoke of how those that are the rich and powerful in this world order would be overthrown and the weak, humble and hungry would be vindicated and delivered.

For Luke, “all the people” (10) would have included all the Jews, all the nation of Israel. But when he became involved with Paul as one of his missionary companions, Luke understood the message of the angel—that the good news was universal in its appeal and application. The good news would not exclude anyone who would believe, from every people group, nation, tongue and tribe (Rev. 7:9).

The shepherds themselves were close to the bottom of the social scale. They were regarded as religiously unclean, outcast and unfit to worship in the temple. Indeed, the Old Testament prophecy was suddenly and dramatically fulfilled:

*“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.”*
(Isaiah 9:2).

The Good News was that in the town of Bethlehem a Savior was born. “Savior” was a title used often and sometimes loosely by the Greeks. There were, of course, political and military “saviors,” such as Caesar Augustus himself. But also physicians and philosophers were often referred to as “saviors,” as those who could offer temporal remedies and life philosophies for giving some meaning to life.

But to call Savior the one who also is Christ the Lord is to say everything that could possibly be said about a Savior. He is the promised Messiah, the anointed

of God, indeed the God-Man. What was announced to the shepherds that night is what we learn to cherish as the object of our faith and hope. Think of the faith of the shepherds that enabled them to believe that this helpless baby, lying in a cattle trough, was born to be such as Savior!

Caesar Augustus, called by his subjects a “savior,” was credited with the rule and reign known as the “Pax Romana,” the Roman Peace. By sheer military power there was a peace won and maintained during the height of that empire’s power, one that extended across continents. Yet, that peace was merely the absence of military conflict. The peace announced by the heavenly host was a peace with God and an inner health, wholeness and spiritual wellness. This word in the Old Testament is “shalom.” The biblical word for peace is essentially a synonym for salvation.

The Good News of Christmas, as the shepherds discovered, is to be examined but also is to be experienced. After the angel gave the Good News about Christ’s birth, he told them that a sign would be given to them to show they had found the Christ Child and that sign would be a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger (12).

We can only imagine the altogether uniqueness of the shepherds’ experience that Christmas night! Yet there is a sequence of grace and faith that is normative for us all. First, God took the initiative toward them and then they responded in faith and obedience. God sent the angel and the heavenly host to these shepherds, giving them this life-transforming experience. It was all God’s doing. None could have been more “out of the loop” as far as religious training and understanding as were these shepherds. When they saw the baby Jesus, they would never be the same again.

After their experience of worship, the shepherds “*made known what had been told them about this child;*” And they “*returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them* (17 & 20). These lowly shepherds became the first evangelists in the New Testament, announcing the Good News, the evangel. Out of the experience of worship we’re empowered and motivated to go and tell others about what we have found and experienced.

In a former ministry, I was asked to perform a wedding ceremony for a young lady in our church, whose father was a part-time music minister in a Kansas City, MO church. His secular job was as a sales agent for a travel company. When I inquired of Wendell about his travel sales job, he told me that his specialty was in selling tourist trips to Australia. “O, good, I replied.” I’ve never been to Australia. What’s it like to travel there, what is it like in Australia, and what does it cost?” I asked. As he began extolling the virtues of Australia, I became suspicious and

asked him about his most recent trip there. “Well,” he confessed, “I’ve never been to Australia. If I can sell enough trips, I’ll win my first free trip there!”

Unlike Wendell, we don’t want to have to admit that we haven’t “been there,” that all we know about Christ is second hand, that our faith is merely intellectual knowledge about Christ, rather than a life changing experience with Christ. Maybe Wendell hadn’t yet made it to Australia because of a lack of real passion for Australia. He was working at it half-time, so maybe he was half-hearted. But these shepherds were whole-hearted. Christ may not change your occupation but he can become your new preoccupation.

We don’t know what kind of a world the shepherds returned to, but the life of a shepherd was a difficult one and generally not respected. It might have been to a life of hardship that these shepherds returned from their worship “mountaintop” experience. But remember, Christmas is the story of God’s coming into this world to bring us his presence—“Immanuel”—which means, ‘God with us’” (Matt. 1:23). What condescension it was for Christ to come to earth, to live and to suffer and die for the sins of the world! And since his earthly mission and atoning death and resurrection are accomplished, he’s sending us into our mission field.

Christmas means that God sent his Son to us; but as with the shepherds, he calls us to go into our worlds, our hurting worlds, with his presence with and within us. And, as was true for the shepherds, in our going we’re giving glory to God.

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (20). These shepherds had been caught up in the glory of God. The glorious, terrifying light of God burst upon them at the appearing of the angel (9). Then they heard the glorious heavenly chorus singing “Glory to God in the highest (14). If they knew anything they now knew that God is a God of glory, of worth and honor, majesty and beauty that is beyond our comprehension. And yet, amazingly, we are privileged and even called to add to his glory with our lives of holiness and with our words of witness and praise. When another soul enters the kingdom of God and becomes a worshiper, then God receives more glory. When we live lives that reflect the holiness of God, when we bear the fruit of holiness, God is glorified. When we sing and share and extol his virtues he is blessed and glorified

On this Christmas Eve, we have the good news which alone has the power to change lives in this land of spiritual darkness, so in need of good news. There are those who do not understand the peace that Jesus gives, and who think that wars and rumors of wars discredit the announcement of the heavenly host (14). These in our land of spiritual darkness need to understand that the peace of God’s reign takes place in the human heart and from there spreads to the rest of the world. Somehow we must convey to those around us that the story of

Christmas is good news that can change their world. One thing is for certain: they will not listen to our words if they do not see authentication in our lives.

Donald Grey Barnhouse, the pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia in the mid Twentieth Century, was a popular and powerful preacher. One Christmas he was the guest speaker for a Christmas convocation at a large university in Pennsylvania. As he was walking toward the chapel in a procession of professors, who traditionally sat together in the front of the chapel during convocations, Barnhouse was asked by an unbelieving professor what he was going to speak about in his address. "You aren't going to preach that old Christmas farce again, are you?" asked the cynical academician. "What do you mean by the Christmas farce?" asked the great preacher. "O, you know, that farce about the birth of Jesus bringing peace on earth."

Barnhouse replied that he had not planned to preach that text from Luke 2:14, but after the professor's question he changed his mind. Quite out of the inspiration of the moment the great pastor changed his sermon to "Christmas: Force or Farce?" In his sermon he declared that if the good news of Jesus' birth does not make a difference in our lives and in our world, then it is a farce, a mockery; a ridiculous or empty show.

This Christmas Eve, we're God's people who've seen for ourselves the glory of Jesus, and we have good news to share. If we haven't seen for ourselves, it's a farce. But if we've been there, it's the good news about the life-changing, world-changing force of Jesus.