

Good News of Great Joy!
Luke 2:1-14

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Imagine for a moment I am a shepherd standing on a Judean hillside.

It's a beautiful night, sitting around the campfire on a hillside with my fellow shepherds. It is a bit cool this evening, but the coffee is sure helping to keep the chill away. I can hear the sheep wandering around nearby and I see some are lying down; in the dark they look a bit like big fluffy cotton balls.

All of a sudden, the night sky is lit up bold as day, "What is that, standing before me, glowing in splendor and glory?" Shielding my eyes, I try to discern what I am seeing. I know only too full well what I am looking at; it is an angel. No, I have not seen one before, but I know because its holiness is blinding.

I fall to my knees cowering in fear as my life flashes before my eyes. How can I stand before the holiness of God's angel, knowing the wayward thoughts that have crossed my mind? How can I do anything but cower in fear, knowing I must answer to God for not having loved to be in His house and hear His Word as I should each week? How can I expect anything except God's wrath, since I am still holding that grudge against Sylvester Schmedlap - unwilling to forgive him and reconcile with him? Oh, how sad am I, this angel has come to call in my marker, hold me accountable to all my sins.

And then the angel speaks, "*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people.*"

What's this I hear? Did the angel say that he's bringing, "Good news of great joy?"

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Be still my heart! Messiah has come? God's promise through Moses and the prophets in finally finding fulfillment? God has come in human flesh? He has come to redeem me? He has finally come to purchase my forgiveness, and be the sacrifice for my sins.

"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

What an amazing thing, that God would humble Himself to come into the world in such a manner. It is even more incredible that He would send one of His holy angels to announce such a thing to us, lowly shepherds.

Whoa! What's happening now? The whole hillside is lit up - they must be able to see this light show all the way to Jerusalem.

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 among those with whom he is pleased!"

Not one angel, but a whole flock of them. "John, who are we that God should send such a message to us? Who are we that God would desire us to know such a thing? Did you hear, the Savior is born? God's wrath is appeased in this little Child, and in Him we have peace with God. Death no longer means anything. We have freedom from our sins. Let us go and see this thing which the angels have made known to us."

Dearly beloved of God, I hope you did not mind a moment indulging me as I played the role of one of the shepherds that night so long ago, but that is what Christmas is all about.

Did you notice, God did not send the angels off to the palaces of the great kings of that age - He sent His angelic heralds to shepherds - to the working folks. But let us not get confused, this is not the enactment of some social program to bring about equality and the redistribution of wealth. Nor is this angelic message about the ending of global warfare.

What did the angel say? "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The good news of great joy is that a Savior is born. That's what this whole Christmas celebration is all about! Gift wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger is the One whom God has sent to save people from their sins.

It is just another poor mother who could not get a room at the Bethlehem Holiday Inn because there was no vacancy. The owner was kind enough, however, to give them space in the barn where the animals are kept. And it was there, in that stable, that the Lord and Giver of all Life came into the world as one of His creatures.

He does not look like much. He does not exude great power and might. The angels He created strike more fear into the hearts of the Shepherds than He does, lying there in the manger cooing.

Jesus, however, did not come to bring fear into the hearts of men. He came to bring forgiveness and healing. He came to appease God's wrath against sin and deliver peace unto men. To do so, He had to humble Himself and take on human flesh. He was born of a virgin, by the miracle of the Holy Spirit's making her pregnant, so that there would be no sin in Him.

From the moment of His birth, this Holy Child, God in human flesh, was without sin in all His thoughts, words, and deeds. He had to be, for only as fully man, and completely holy and without sin, would His death be a perfect sacrifice for the sins of all mankind. And so, this child was destined to die upon a cross to guarantee and deliver peace from God. In His resurrection, that peace was sealed.

Today we gather to give thanks to God for the gift of His Son, come to free us from our sins. In the word we hear, the forgiveness purchased by that Holy Child is delivered into our ears and

cleanses our hearts from sin and death.

Each week we gather together to unwrap this same Child and the same gifts of life and salvation. Each week, our Sunday gathering is a sort of Christmas, for as swaddling clothes and a manger hid the very Son of God that first Christmas - so each week, word and bread and wine are the swaddling clothes and manger that hide the forgiveness of sins this child purchased with His innocent suffering and death. Each week we unwrap that gift when we hear the Word proclaimed and eat of Christ=s body and drink of His most holy blood.

So, let not our Christmas celebration be a one night event. Let us come often and celebrate Christmas, let us hear and eat of the good news of great joy that God desires to give unto all people. And in our hearing, eating and drinking, receive we God=s peace - goodwill toward men. Amen.