

“Let There Be Joy”

By Scott Runyon

FBCB

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Luke 1:26-38

Luke 2:1-20

CHILDREN’S TIME

What do you put at the very top of your Christmas tree? Some put a star and that's a good choice. I talked with you a few weeks ago about the star that led the wise men to where Jesus was born.

Some people like to put an angel at the top of their tree. That's a good choice too, because angels also played a really important part in the Christmas story.

Angels are messengers from God. Today, I want to tell you about a very important angel by the name of Gabriel. Many years ago, the angel Gabriel was sent by God to deliver a message to a teenage girl named Mary who was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph.

The angel appeared to Mary and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

Mary was afraid and confused by the angel's greeting. Then the angel said to her "Don't be afraid,

Mary. You are very important to God. You will give birth to a son and you will name him Jesus."

Mary still wondered why God would choose her and how God would do this.

The angel told her that the baby would be holy and he will be called the Son of God.

So finally Mary said "Okay" and was willing for God to use her to have these wonderful things happen.

God could have chosen anyone to give birth to Jesus, but he chose Mary, a young girl of 13 or 14 years old who didn't think she was very important. But to God she was very important. God chose her to give birth to Jesus, God's Son.

God still chooses people like you and me to do important things. God has given you and me the task of sharing the good news of Jesus and God's love for the whole world.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus, let us, like Mary, answer God's call and be willing for God to use us.

SERMON

Today we are going backward in the story of Jesus' birth. We'll start by looking at this painting and reflecting on the colors, the shapes and the message that is written there: "I am bringing good news of great joy for all people."

Now listen to the scripture about Jesus' birth. We will hear it again this evening at our Christmas Eve service at 4:30 p.m.

READ LUKE 2:1-20

What do you hear? What do you see? How does what you see resonate within you?

We have heard of the good news of great joy and the hope that rests in the life of a helpless baby. Now we are going back to the prior chapter and hearing more of Mary's story before her pregnancy.

READ LUKE 1:26-38

We have all of this build up, and what does it say about this baby that will be born? Let's look at several phrases.

"He will be great"

This is not a typical birth, not a typical baby — there is greatness promised in the life of this baby.

And yet, in so many ways this is a normal baby to be born to a common woman in a common way. But greatness is promised for the present and the future of all people.

It says that he will be called the "Son of the Most High God" and then the passage repeats again that "he will be called Son of God."

It isn't talked about much, but the term "Son of God" was in Jesus' day a political term referring to Caesar and through him to King Herod — the same King who was looking to kill the baby he heard was going to be born.

Caesar, or the King, was thought to be of divine birth and it was common for people to address the king and say "may your kingdom last forever."

When Mary's yet to be born baby was given the name "Son of the Most High God" there is not a subtle overtone of political involvement, but an overt declaration that this baby will impact the political world in a major way.

It also says, "God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the throne of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end."

We have reference to David. Again here's a connection to political power.

Who was David? David was thought of as the greatest king of the Jews from their long history. He began as a shepherd with a vicious sword. He quickly became a warrior whose first act of violence was to kill Goliath and cut off his head.

The stories of David's power in war were legendary. He crushed the political foes of Judah on all sides. David lived and breathed violent war. He lived it, he wrote about it in the psalms, he sang about it playing the lute and harp. He became known as a character who was larger than life who went to war for God with this notion that war would bring peace for the people.

David conquered all of the armies around him, slaughtering thousands, and burned down cities.

The victors get to write the stories and there are many stories of David's conquests shed in the light of a God who led David into battle and gave him the victory.

However that isn't the whole story. In the middle of this war campaign, David had a change of heart. This

change of heart is what made him the greatest king in Israel's history.

He had a change of heart that some would say was his conversion. At this point David became humble and was then known as a man after God's own heart.

This is the David who asked forgiveness for the lust of his heart and the actions of violence he had enacted.

In Psalm 51 David wrote,

"Create in me a clean heart, o God and renew a right spirit within me."

Then in Psalm 32 we find where the grace of God led David.

While I kept silence, my body wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer. Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and I did not hide my iniquity; I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord," and you forgave the guilt of my sin.

This is the humble man after God's own heart. This is why David was great.

After David's reign there was a time not only without war, but of peace through the 40 year reign of his son Solomon.

However, as happens in history, within a couple of generations, David's throne was overthrown by neighboring armies leading to a divided kingdom, and for the next 1000 years Israel survived as a people who had been beaten into submission, enslaved, exiled from their homeland, persecuted by others, and had the boot of empire on their necks.

This is the long view of history. We do not only look at the violent warrior David, we also consider his later years of humility through the filter of God's grace.

During those thousand years, these same Jews had many prophets who helped direct them back toward God. They spoke of a promised redemption, a promised salvation. They spoke of a "savior" (by the way, this is another political term referring to the king) who would come up from the seemingly dead root of Jesse — the family line of David.

In their longing to get out from under the boot of empire, the people forgot the humility that made David great. They wanted

another warrior like David who could free them.

This savior they felt would liberate them from their political oppressors and provide the way to freedom for all generations, for all oppressed peoples.

But as God is known to do, God surprised them, not with the warrior David, but with the spirit of the humble David to establish a kingdom of peace that could truly last forever.

All of the political terms from Luke apply to this little vulnerable baby who is to be born in humble circumstances in Bethlehem to a teenage girl — for whom there is no guest room.

This baby is to begin life and remain on the margins of society with a bounty on his head. He will also be born and cultivate a new vision for peace after the Jews had suffered for a thousand years.

Imagine the hope for peace. Imagine the joy for all people that is leveraged on this one innocent baby.

Let's now come back to the angel Gabriel's announcement to Mary, that she, a thirteen or fourteen-year-old virgin, would be the mother of THIS baby — THE baby.

Everything rests with this child, the most important person to be born since King David.

Mary was told that she was highly favored and that God was with her and yet, as you can imagine, she was perplexed and stunned. She was hearing all of this and at first couldn't quite wrap her head or heart around it.

In her shock, the first thing Mary did was go for the obvious. "I am a virgin, I can't possibly have a baby." But Gabriel encourages her that these details are no problem for God, who makes all things possible, even allowing her relative Elizabeth to have a baby in her old age, recalling the miraculous pregnancy of Sarah with Abraham long ago.

Finally Mary, who I am sure still had no idea how God would work it all out, surrendered to the will of God.

"Here am I. If God is at work here, I am willing, as God's servant."

What began as fear, confusion, and perplexity was transformed into joy in the next chapter as the vision for God's grace grows.

Are you open, like Mary and David before her, to be surprised by a new sort of peace, by a new sort of joy? Not a peace that comes from

domination and violence, but by the renewing peace that rests on us regardless of the political landscape, regardless of the laws that are passed, or the party that is in power.

Scripture teaches us that kings, rulers, Prime Ministers, and Presidents come and go — but God's love remains and provides for us the grace that covers over a multitude of sin, and the hope for peace in all situations.

Now that is "good news of great JOY for all people, from all places, all backgrounds, throughout all of time."

Amen!