

## **“Good News of Great Joy”**

Date: December 24, 2014    Text: Luke 2:8-20  
Place: Lakewood UMC        Occasion: Christmas eve  
Theme: Joy, Angels, Christmas

Sometimes when we look at the Christmas story, it can seem like a fairy tale. There are lowing cattle as Mary gives birth in a barn, while the little drummer boy looks on. There are shepherds beckoned by flying angels.

And soon Gaspar, Balthasar and Mechior, riding their camels, follow the star to the barn to present their gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. This version of the story makes for good Christmas carols, but did it really happen just this way?

For the past four weeks we have been examining the birth narrative of Jesus our Lord. As we look at this story in the light of history, geography, archaeology and human experience, we begin to see that the story is anything but a fairy tale. It is gritty, difficult and very real.

The first to come and see the baby born to Mary, the future Savior of the world, are shepherds. First-century shepherds were at the lower end of the socio-economic ladder. They were typically uneducated, usually poor, and since they lived among their animals in the elements, they sometimes smelled of dirty sheep.

When Luke tells us that shepherds were the first to be invited to see the Christ Child, the people of the first-century would *not* have found this to be endearing, or cute, but rather shocking! But when the child born in a stable became a man, he would describe himself as “the good shepherd,” who would lay down his life for his sheep.

Once again, we find the story of Jesus' birth not to be like a fairy tale or myth, but instead quite "earthy" and marked by humility. I suppose one of the things that make the story of Jesus' birth seem a bit mythological to many is the inclusion of angels. Let's talk about them for a while.

We picture winged creatures flitting about in the night sky, singing *Gloria in excelsis deo*. Or, maybe we see cute babies with wings – cherubs – who are singing to the shepherds. I've never seen an angel like this, nor does it seem that *this* is what the shepherds likely saw that night when the angels appeared to them.

If not little cherubs singing, then what was happening that night? Most often in the Bible, angels simply appear as people. You will remember from some of our earlier discussions, or if you weren't here for those, let me tell you: Both the Hebrew and the Greek words for "angel" mean *messenger*.

In the book of Hebrews, the writer encourages his readers, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2) Angels typically appear as strangers, not as winged cherubs.

In Luke's account of that first Christmas, several night-shift shepherds were watching their sheep when a stranger appeared among them. This alone might have frightened them that night. But Luke tells us there was more:

"The glory of the Lord shone around them." (2:9) So, what *did* the shepherds see that night? Luke doesn't give us any more detail, and some would say that *even this question* is taking the story a bit too literally. Instead, the mention of "the glory of the Lord" is simply

Luke's way of telling us that God's glory was being revealed in the birth of Jesus.

Whether a bright light flashed from heaven, or the moon burned particularly bright, or the stranger reflected light, we can't really tell from the text. And it isn't Luke's point to have us focus on this. Luke wants us to notice the *words* of this stranger:

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (2:10-11)

Good news of great joy for all the people – this is what the birth of Jesus is. How we crave for good news of great joy! We turn on the nightly news and hear of wars and earthquakes, more shootings, tsunamis, global warming, oil spills and economic woes.

Unlike any previous generation, we have constant access to bad news – news that produces fear and anxiety. How can we not live our lives with a constant fear buried in the recesses of our minds?

The angel announced to the shepherds, "I am bringing you good news of great joy!"

Today, Christ is still good news of great joy. Why? Because he is "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Perhaps the shepherds thought he would deliver them from the Romans, and he would sit on the throne like King David, in Jerusalem. However, Jesus was not only Messiah, the long awaited King, he was also Savior.

But if he wasn't going to save the people from the Roman occupation, what was he going to save them from? What does Jesus save *us* from? I've asked myself that same question, many times. I know he is saving me, and he's not finished, yet.

Jesus is saving me from a life of complete narcissism. He has saved me from a life that is only focused on “more.” He has saved my marriage from almost certain ruin when I was younger and more selfish. Jesus has saved me from becoming my worst possible self.

To whatever degree that I am a more compassionate man, a less angry man, a less self-centered man, a man who cares about others, I owe it to my Savior, Jesus. All of it is largely his doing.

Jesus saves us from guilt and shame, from hopelessness and despair, from fear and death. He “breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free.” I have seen him save addicts from their addictions and give them a new life. I have seen him save men and women from their self-absorbed life and transform them into joyful, loving and caring people.

Jesus came to save us from the broken-ness of our shared human condition, and to deliver us, lead us, and send us out in his name to bring healing and hope to a broken world. And, take note, this good news of great joy was for “all the people.”

We all need saving, and salvation is available for all through the child whose birth was announced that day to the shepherds. The glory of the Lord, whatever it may have looked like that night, was most clearly seen in the child who lay in the feed trough.

Jesus came to save us from the bad news that seems to be all around us, and to be for us “good news of great joy.” May you hear the good news and discover your hearts filled with joy. God has come to us in humility, in the birth of baby, lying in a manger. Glory! Amen!

Adapted from Adam Hamilton’s book, *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, pp. 110-119.