

We are gathered together this morning to celebrate the dramatic invasion of earth by our most sovereign and infinite God, who by the power of the Holy Spirit became flesh in the form of a human being named Jesus. His purpose was to personally reveal Himself to us, and to give Himself as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. This is the day that we remember that Jesus, the Son of God, the King of Kings, left His heavenly glory and became poor for our sakes, in order that we might become spiritually rich through Him. Last night we gathered together and looked the first seven verses of Luke 2 where we saw that Jesus was born in Bethlehem because Caesar Augustus had decreed a census be taken and everyone was required to register in the hometown of their ancestors. Now Mary and Joseph (Jesus’ mother and father) were from the line of King David, who came from Bethlehem – and so they travelled the 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, even though Mary was pregnant. And Luke 2:6-7 tells us that “*while they were there, the time came for her (Mary) to give birth. 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.*” And this is where we pick up the story of God coming to earth in Luke 2:8-20:

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 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!” 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.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Over the past month we have been going through the narrative of the birth of Jesus, the coming of God into the world – and in today’s text Luke now moves his focus on the birth of Jesus to the region around where the birth occurred – and it’s here that we see that the first people outside of Joseph and Mary to see this drama of the incarnation unfold were “*shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear.*” Now it is highly significant to note that just after Jesus was born, his birth was announced to “*shepherds*” because, while shepherding (which is taking care of sheep) had been traditionally known to be a good and noble vocation - by the time Jesus was born, shepherding has lost its nobility. Shepherds were considered to be one of the lowest classes of people; only lepers were considered to be worse – which made them religious and social outcasts.

Shepherds were also viewed with suspicion because they were constantly on the move looking for new pasture for their flocks - much like people today view gypsies or carnival workers. It was also assumed that because they carried few possessions, many of them were thieves. If something was missing, it must probably one of those shepherds. They had such a bad reputation that they were not permitted to give testimony in legal proceedings because they weren’t considered to be trustworthy. You would not want your daughter to marry a shepherd. And so shepherds would have been the last people you’d expect God to take notice of, but yet on the night Jesus was born they were the very first to be told the good news that: “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.*”

Why were the shepherds the first to hear of Jesus birth? Undoubtedly there were others in Bethlehem that night; merchants, laborers, Roman soldiers and officials in charge of census registration. Why didn't God reveal Himself to them rather than lowly shepherds? We looked at this issue last night in asking: "Why God came to earth in the person Jesus by being born in the muck and manure of a dirty stable and filthy manger?" The answer is *those who live toward the bottom of life tend to see their desperate need for God*. God prefers to reveal Himself to humble hearts. He uses those who know they are insufficient rather than those who are self-sufficient. God by-passes the proud who think themselves worthy of notice and reveals Himself to the contrite. Jesus said: "*Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven*" (Matthew 5:3). James 4:6 tells us: "*God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.*" This is what Jesus meant when he said "*Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick*" (Matthew 9:12) - "*For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost*" (Luke 19:10). He also made this clear in Luke 4:18-19: "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*" Jesus came to "*proclaim good news*" to those who are looking for *good news* beyond themselves. This is the same "*good news of great joy*" that the angels spoke of to the shepherds in our text for today.

What is this "*good news*"? It is the "*good news of great joy*" that Jesus' birth is the fulfilled promise of God to send a Savior into the world who would sacrificially surrender his life on a cross in our place to pay the penalty for our sins, so we might be forgiven, redeemed and restored back to the relationship with God that we were created for. The "*good news*" Jesus spoke of is the glorious "*good news of great joy*" proclaimed by the angelic choir that God the Father sent Christ the Son into the world to rescue shepherds and people like us from our fallen, sinful nature which is constantly at war with God. We see this in what happened after the angel told the shepherds the "*good news of great joy . . . for all the people*" that a "*Savior*" had been "*born*" and that he was "*a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.*" In Luke 2:13-14 we then read that: "*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!'*" The "*good news of great joy that will be for all the people*" is that Jesus came into the world so we might know peace with God, peace with each other and peace within our own hearts.

This is a "*peace*" that was painful and costly. While we sing *Silent Night* during this season, we often forget that Revelation 12 tells us the night Jesus was born was far from peaceful. When the angels proclaimed "*peace . . . on earth*" there was an all-out war being waged behind the scenes on earth and on the stage of heaven, as Satan and all his demons were fervently and aggressively opposing this birth. In fact, they had been working since the fall in the Garden of Eden to prevent the birth of Christ, and now that it has happened - the angels proclaimed the victory of His birth and they sang great praises of the anticipated victory that would come through his death and resurrection - fulfilled in the words of Colossians 1:19-20: "*For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross.*"

"*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*" We need not fear because Jesus came to replace fear with *joy*. Faith in Christ is all about *joy*. This is more than just the joy of being rescued from the deadly consequences of our sin - this is the abundant joy we can know through a deep, intimate relationship with God in Christ. Jesus said: "*These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full*" (John 15:11). That doesn't mean that everything in life will be joyful, but rather that in the face of struggle, trial, suffering and death - we can know a joy in God through Christ is superintends everything we face in life. This is what the apostle Paul meant when he wrote: "*Rejoice always, and again I will say rejoice.*" Always? Yes, always! Even with tears of grief and pain; "*as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing,*" Paul would say (2 Corinthians 6:10).

We can know joy in the face of bad news because the birth of Jesus is good news: *“Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”* A farmer went into his banker and announced he had come to bring bad news and good news. “The bad news” the farmer said, “is that I can’t make my mortgage payments. And I can’t pay off my crop loan. And I won’t be able to pay you the couple of hundred thousand I still owe on my tractors and other equipment. So, I’m going to have to give up the farm and turn it all over to you. The banker asked, “What’s the good news?” to which the farmer said: “The good news is that I’m going to keep on banking with you.” That’s really not the *“good news of great joy”* Luke writes about here, but the principle is the same: *the good news of great joy is that God is still with us in the midst of bad news.* The angel said that the *“good news”* is that, *“unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”* This is the *“good news of great joy that will be for all the people”* because it had been long anticipated. It was the *“good news of great joy”* because this was the promised Messiah, the Savior of the world, who had finally arrived.

Consider what it meant that God announced the greatest and most important news in all of history to a bunch of religious and social outcasts, who were considered to be unclean and unworthy by human standards. But God does not see us according to human standards; *He measures us by His heart.* Psalm 96:13 tells us God *“will judge the world in righteousness, and the peoples in HIS faithfulness.”* 2 Timothy 2:12-13 says: *“If we deny him, HE also will deny us; if we are faithless, HE remains faithful, for HE cannot deny himself.”* By choosing lowly, unworthy shepherds to be the very first to receive the glorious *“good news of great joy”* of Christ’s birth, God was sovereignly demonstrating that Jesus was going to be the Saviour of *all kinds of people* - regardless of race or intelligence, education, wealth, profession, political power, social standing, experience or any of the other human values or standards. God offers His love and mercy and grace to *“all people”* who know their desperate need for God and trust in Jesus and surrender their lives to him as Lord and Saviour. That is the glorious *“good news of great joy.”*

*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.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Luke 2:15-20

What is striking in these words is the response to the good news of the birth of the long-awaited Savior in that *the good news of great joy resulted in praise both in heaven and on earth.* We can only speculate how much the angels knew about what would take place when Jesus was born, but there’s no question that they were overwhelmed with joy when it finally happened. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Creator of the universe left the glories of heaven and allowed himself to inhabit the womb of a woman. At his birth one angel gave praise to God by proclaiming *“the good news of great joy for all people”* had arrived – and right after we read that *“suddenly there was with the angel a multitude”* of angels *“praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth PEACE among those with whom he is pleased!’”*

Our text tells us that after the shepherds saw the heavenly choir giving glorious praise to God they went and found Mary and Joseph, and Jesus – and they could not stop talking about it to anyone and everyone they met. *“And all who heard it WONDERED at what the shepherds told them . . . And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.* The birth of Jesus joyfully glorified God in the *wonder* of how God had fulfilled His promise to send a Savior into the world. The birth of Jesus was joyfully glorious in its fulfillment. Daniel foretold *when* Jesus would be born. Isaiah prophesied *how* Jesus would be born of a virgin. The prophet Micah told us *where* Jesus would be born. In different ways, all of the prophets pointed to the coming of Jesus.

The birth of Jesus is joyfully glorious in its “*wonder*.” The whole story of the incarnation is full of wonder. God promised Eve a son who would crush the head of Satan. The entire Old Testament is the story of God preparing a people for the coming of Christ. The virgin birth is a wonder. That the King of kings would be born in a stable for animals is a wonder. That God would sleep in a feeding trough is a wonder. The greatest of all is why God would choose you and I to be part of the wonder of the story of Jesus. You see the angels did not proclaim the birth of Christ to royalty nor to men of wisdom. They appeared to shepherds, who were of low esteem and social position. And when they were told, then they went to see – and they “*returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*.” Imagine what it must have been like as the shepherds left with great joy in their hearts, knowing they had just seen the salvation of Israel - the Promised Messiah, the Son of God, the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the sovereign and holy God of all the universe, who came in the human form of a baby, before their very eyes! C.S. Lewis once said: “I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but *completes the enjoyment*. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the *delight is incomplete till it is expressed*.” We see this in our own lives. We all praise what we delight in and what we enjoy. Fisherman who love to fish - love to tell stories about the fish they catch. Hockey fans who love hockey - love to talk about the hockey game they just attended. When grandparents love their grandchildren, they love to tell people about their grandchildren. We praise what we love by telling others our joy in what we love. If Jesus is our greatest treasure and deepest joy, we will communicate that to God and each other and everybody. “*And when they saw it, they MADE KNOWN the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*”

When we give our hearts and lives to Jesus, we are invited into this story. The angel proclaimed: “*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*” The words “*this day*” are not only for the shepherds but for us also. On “*this day*” – *today* – we need not look any further for the fulfillment of God’s promise for a Savior. Christ has come – He is “*with us*” *today*. *Today* the Holy Spirit is extending to each of one us the opportunity to see Jesus Christ, as Lord and Savior. *Today* he is not in a manger nor is he on a cross at Calvary. *Today* Jesus sits at the right hand of the throne of God awaiting his Father’s command to return to earth and finish the work he began long ago. The birth of Jesus, the incarnation of God in Christ in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, was only the first of two visits Jesus will make to earth. On that first visit he came to rescue us from death and offer us eternal life. Jesus came to live and die and rise from the grave to pay for our sins. His invitation is for each one of us to be reconciled back into the relationship with God that we were created for - by turning our lives over to him and trusting in the work that Jesus did on the cross. God forgives and cleanses and redeems and restores when we place our faith in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Someday Jesus will return to take us home – where we will worship and praise and give him glory forever and ever.

In December 1903, after many attempts, Orville and Wilber Wright were successful in getting their “flying machine” – the first airplane - off the ground. Thrilled, they telegraphed this message to their sister Katherine: “We have actually flown 120 feet! Will be home for Christmas.” Katherine hurried to the editor of the local newspaper and showed him the message. He glanced at it and said, “How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas.” In the midst of any great news of human endeavor - the “*good news of great joy*” is much more glorious. On this day when we celebrate the coming of God to earth through the birth of Jesus Christ - I pray you would not miss the joy of the wonder of the presence of Jesus in your life and in the world around you. May this Christmas day – and your life - be filled with joyful praise in response to the presence of God and cross of Christ and power of the Holy Spirit. We all praise what we delight in and what we enjoy. The birth of Jesus resulted in great praise from everyone involved because they delighted in the glory of “*the good news of great joy for all people*.” When the angels and the shepherds got a glimpse of who God was and what God was doing in their midst and in their lives - they rejoiced and praised God. May that be true for all of us! Amen? Amen!

