

The Voice of an Angel and a Sign of Great Joy
Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)
Christmas Eve

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:.) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

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

As Luke tells the story of Jesus' birth, he invites us into a startling contrast. The contrast between a world that is breaking open with excitement and a woman who is taking the pieces and pondering them in a way that deepens her joy.

On the one hand, we have a world breaking forth in excitement. God has peeled back the thin layer of sky so when the shepherds look up, instead of seeing stars, they see angels. The sky is filled with a glorious light and angels speak to mortals. Angelic choirs break forth in praise and when the shepherds hear this heavenly music, they think they are in the presence of God. But the angels sing about God's presence among the shepherds.

So the shepherds run to check out what they've been told them. They visit Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, and then Luke tells us they return telling everyone what they have seen and heard.

So, on the one hand, you have a world breaking forth in excitement and yet, on the other hand, you have Mary, who as Luke tells us is treasuring these things and pondering them in her heart. Mary's life has been shattered to pieces by God's work.

The visit by an angel that complicated her engagement. The birth of her child without a home and with only a manger for a cradle. And now shepherds with their story about a broken sky and angels singing. While heaven and earth are breaking forth in excitement, Mary takes all of these pieces and tries to hold them together. She tries to put them together in a way that deepens her joy.

We are going to join Mary this evening. We are going to take the pieces of this story and join them to our lives so that we might have a deeper sense of God's abundant joy. To do that, we'll consider one small part of this story.

The part of the story we'll focus on is the message of the angels to the shepherds. On the Sundays of this Advent, we have been preparing for this evening with a series of sermons. Sermons that listened to various people. Voices from the edge. People whom God sent with a message for his people, preparing them for an experience of grace.

Here, on Christmas Eve, we have another voice from the edge. Before the heavenly chorus appears in the sky, one angel first appears to the shepherds. That angel says: *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people* (LK 2:10 NIV). "A great joy." What is it that makes God's joy so great?

Normally, when we say that something is great, we usually think of that greatness as self-evident. You go to work and at lunch someone asks you if you were able to see the game this weekend. You say, "Yes" and he says, "Wasn't that a great play?" There is no need to try to figure out which play he's talking about. There's only one play that stands out, one play that was shown on instant replay at least five times, one play that was talked about after the game, one play that made the evening news, and one play that was in the paper this morning. When we say that something is great, we tend to mean that it is obvious. A great play, a great book, a great movie, a great restaurant.

But that's not true for angels. Right after the angel talks about a great joy, he gives the shepherds a sign: *And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger* (LK 2:12 NIV).

If this joy were obvious, the shepherds wouldn't need a sign. They could just go into the city and ask the first person they see and that person would point them in the right direction. Instead, the angel offers the shepherds a sign and that sign leads them to a place they would never go: that sign leads them to Mary, placing her baby in a feeding trough – the least obvious place for joy.

Think about the circumstances of that birth. Because of the census, Mary had just traveled 65 or 70 miles, during the last days of her pregnancy. She had been forced to

leave her home and travel to Bethlehem. When she and Joseph arrived there, they found there was no room for them. She went into labor, birthed her first child, and the only bed her baby had was a feeding trough. You would think the birth of God's Son, would have had better timing. It looked like everything was working against them.

Isn't that how we often think? If something goes well, we say, "It's a God thing." But if something is going wrong, we think, "Maybe God doesn't want me to do it." We often feel God is either for us or against us depending on our life circumstances. With that reasoning, you could certainly argue that God was against Mary and Joseph. Yet the angel says that this is God's plan and that God is "for you." That, you see, is the point.

God's joy is great because it is not limited by human circumstances. You don't look at your life and decide whether God is for you or against you. You listen to God. God has promised that he is for you even in the most trying circumstances.

The joy God brings does not depend on our circumstances. It depends on his love. For that reason, his joy can be found in the most unlikely places. Because the joy God brings depends on his love, that joy can happen anywhere, even in the poorest circumstances and the smallest of places. It can enter into the lowest, most common places and claim these things as the working of God. That's a comfort for us, especially at Christmas.

A pastor once saw this comfort in a very real way. He had a parishioner who was spending her Christmas at the bedside of her daughter who was dying. The daughter was in one of the first weddings he performed when he came to the church. And this year, she was dying. What started out as breast cancer had spread to her brain, then her bones. Now the young woman was at home in hospice care.

One day, when pastor came and visited, he told the mother, "I'm sure it's difficult to go through this, especially this time of year."

She agreed. She told him how she and her husband were getting Christmas cards from friends who didn't know what was happening. Since she was staying at her daughter's house, her husband would bring over the mail and she'd open card after card. Each one wishing her a Merry Christmas.

She told the pastor, "I'd like to send out cards this year but I just can't." He assured her that if she didn't send cards, people would understand. But she told him, "No pastor, you don't understand. I want to send out cards this year because this year I know what Christmas is really about. I just don't have the time to do it."

Her pastor asked what she meant and she told him that Christmas is about God being with us. She told him about how she sleeps when her daughter sleeps and gets up when her daughter wakes. How she gives her morphine and turns her and changes her and bathes her, and she said, "I know I wouldn't be able to do any of this, if it wasn't for God. I know he is here with us and he's taking my little girl to be with him."

That Christmas, this mother was picking up the pieces. She was taking the excitement of her friends at Christmas, the cards and the letters, and the suffering of her daughter, and she was holding them together, pondering them and discovering a holy joy. She was trusting in the true joy of Christmas. God came to be with us so that in the end we might be with him.

Often, when it comes to Christmas, we spend too much of our time wanting to make everything perfect. We search for the perfect gift, we try to cook the perfect dinner, we look forward to the perfect family gathering. We have a picture in our mind of what we want Christmas to be and that picture is perfect.

Now there's nothing wrong with that. It's good to want to rejoice and celebrate Christmas. But, in the end, none of us is perfect. We are all sinners. There are arguments that never seem to go away. Perhaps it's a divorce or a death or just an emotional detachment this year. And when those things come, they threaten to ruin our perfect Christmas. But they cannot ruin the work of God.

When we sit there with our perfect Christmas broken to pieces, we begin to recognize the true message of Christmas. God has seen our sin and our suffering and has chosen to have compassion. It's a choice he has made. A choice to be with us. A choice to love us, regardless of our circumstances. That's why he became human, so he might live among us, and offer his life for the forgiveness of our sin. He has lived, died, and rose again, and he has promised: *I will never leave you nor forsake you* (Heb 13:5).

If you find yourself taking a moment this year to pick up the pieces, remember tonight's text. Remember this voice from the edge, this message from an angel. God has given you a great joy. This joy is great not because it's obvious. It's great because it is based on God's love.

Because God loves sinners, because God died and rose for sinners, his joy can enter into any life situation and bring comfort. His joy is deep, rich, abundant and, tonight, his joy is here for you. Listen to this voice from the edge, this angel, pointing to the sign of God's love for you. *Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger* (Lk 2:12 NIV). God has come to be with you, so that, in the end, you might be with him forever.