

The Voice of an Angel and Great Joy for All People  
Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)  
Christmas Day

Last night, we listened to the Christmas story. We heard the voice of an angel, an angel who spoke to the shepherds about great joy. This morning, we're going to return to that story and consider something else the angel said.

*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 Judea, 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 Savior, 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.*

On the night Jesus was born, Luke tells us the heavens were opened. God peeled back the thin veil that separates what is visible from what is invisible and the shepherds saw a sky filled with angels. However, the angels weren't interested in the shepherds looking up into heaven. They wanted the shepherds looking down here on earth.

The glory of God filled the night sky and the shepherds were awestruck with wonder. But the angels wanted the shepherds to see the glory of God in the person of Jesus. He was their Wonderful Counselor and his work of salvation would soon fill the earth.

One angel first appears on the edge of heaven and says to the shepherds: *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people* (Lk 2:10 KJV). A great joy for all people. God was about to fill this world with joy. A joy that comes from sins forgiven, death defeated, and life everlasting. And this joy is for all people. It even

comes to you, today. In Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, God saves you from your sin and gives you a great joy.

Because we've heard this story so often, we can miss out on the strangeness of what is happening. We hear that the angels appeared to shepherds in the field and we say, "Oh yeah, there's the shepherds." But there's question here. Why would the angels make this announcement to shepherds? Doesn't it seem odd that it would be shepherds who would be told?

When Jesus was born, there were two kinds of shepherds – peasant shepherds and nomadic shepherds. Peasant shepherds lived in town. In the morning, they would take the flocks out of the town to the surrounding pasture and then they would return to the village at night.

On the other hand, you had nomadic shepherds. Nomadic shepherds didn't have a permanent home. They wandered about from place to place, constantly seeking pasture for their flocks. They were a distrusted class of people. Because they didn't have a permanent village, they were thought to be liars and con-artists, who could say whatever they wanted and move on. For that reason they weren't allowed to testify in court. These are the shepherds who would be out in the fields at night. Why is that important?

Luke just told us that Caesar Augustus was conducting a census of the whole inhabited world. The Roman emperor was counting all people. That's why Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth to Bethlehem; Joseph was a descendant of David. All of the people were being counted, except the nomadic shepherds. They wouldn't be counted. They weren't part of the Roman people and they weren't part of the Jewish people.

Yet, the angel appears to them and tells them a Savior is born for all people. God is paying attention to the very people that fall through the cracks in this world. People who are not considered important are the people God watches over. The joy that God brings is not a joy that only comes to one certain person or to a Jewish clan or to the Roman empire, it is a joy that extends to all people – even to the people that the rest of the world tends to forget.

What does that mean for us today? Christmas joy is for all people. But our culture wants us to forget that or, at least, ignore that. Our culture is conditioning us to think about Christmas as a holiday celebrated only by Christians, as if the joy of Christmas was only for Christians.

Everyone else, they have the joy of the holiday season. They have holiday lights, holiday trees, and holiday cards. That creates a real temptation to send Christmas cards to those who are Christian and holiday cards to everyone else. Our culture would like for us to think Christmas has a joy that is limited to Christians. Yet, as Luke points out, God intends the joy of Christmas to be for all people.

Even the church can begin to limit Christmas joy. In 2005, when Christmas Day fell on a

Sunday, several mega-churches across the country didn't have services that morning. Willow Creek in Chicago, Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Fellowship Church in Dallas. These mega-churches decided not to worship on Christmas.

Reporters had a field day because it looked like those churches cancelled Christmas. The senior pastor of Willow Creek explained it this way, "We don't see it as not having church on Christmas. We see it as decentralizing the church on Christmas, hundreds of thousands of experiences going on around Christmas trees. The best way to honor the birth of Jesus is for families to have a more personal experience on that day."

Notice what happened here. These churches were limiting Christmas to families. Only people who were in families were able to celebrate Christmas. Those who were single, divorced, widowed, or for whom religion and family did not mix together well, those people were excluded Christmas.

Those churches made the mistake of equating the kingdom of God with the American nuclear family, and their hopes of families having "a more personal experience that day" only made matters worse. Some people wouldn't be celebrating Christmas with their families that year and the church, in its hopes of a personal Christmas, took Christmas away.

It's possible to do the same thing to ourselves. Our hopes of a wonderful Christmas can take the joy of Christmas away. Christmas has a way of bringing back memories. Memories of what it was like as a child. Christmas has a way of creating hope. Hope of a better future. We can imagine what we want for our loved ones, our parents, our brothers and sisters, our children, our dearest friends, even ourselves.

Yet all of our desires and all of our dreams can't erase the presence of sin. Sin in the world. Sin in our families. Sin in our lives. Sin has a way of tearing us apart. Sin starts arguments that never end, except in an icy silence that makes dinner awkward. Sin ends relationships we hoped would continue, and we wonder what it would be like this Christmas if the cancer never came. So, we come to church on Christmas, we gather with all the people, and yet deep down we wonder if we really fit in.

That's why it's such a blessing to listen to Luke's account of the Christmas story; to hear this voice of an angel, a voice from the edge. When God sent his angels to proclaim the good news of the Savior, who did God send them to?

The Roman world was gathering its people. They were all being counted. But there were some who were missing. Some who didn't matter. Some who would be lost. But they weren't lost to God. They weren't forgotten or overlooked. To God, every single human being matters. To God, you matter.

For this reason, he sent his Son to take on human flesh, to bear all human suffering, die under divine judgment, and rise to bring new life to all who believe. There is no sin he

cannot handle. There is no suffering he has not fought and overcome. To every person, in every situation, Jesus brings a word of forgiveness and hope. The joy God brings is for all people. And this morning it is for you. Jesus makes you part of the family of God. You might have come with your family or you might have come alone. There may have been a death in your family, a divorce, a lay off, a separation that made it hard for you to come to church this year. But God brought you to this place because you are part of his family and he wanted you to hear the voice of this angel: *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 Savior, which is Christ the Lord* (Lk 2:10-11 KJV).

Regardless of what else is happening in your life, one thing is certain. God has seen you. He has had mercy on you. In Jesus, you are a child of the heavenly Father. In Jesus, you are part the family of God. Merry Christmas.