

This morning our sermon text comes from Luke 2:1-20. It is a familiar text, but one worth hearing, especially on this day.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 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.

8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. 10 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. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*14 “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased!”*

15 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.”

16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in heaven loves you.

Prayer...

What we give thanks for today in the birth of Jesus Christ was a *real* birth. Make no mistake about that.

It was a real human birth, a real human baby boy birthed by a real mother with pain and suffering and blood difficulty.

Indeed if you had been there that night, it would have looked like any other completely normal birth (if there is such a thing), totally indistinguishable from the dozens of other babies born that night in Bethlehem, or the hundreds of other babies born that day in Judea.

If you had been present with Mary and Joseph that night, nothing would have seemed out of place at all — just another young man and woman starting a family together, if in less than ideal circumstances.

But if you had been in the plains outside Bethlehem that night, out where the shepherds were—now that would have been a different story.

Because there, in the darkness, in the stillness, in the silence broken only by the sounds of animals moving occasionally in their sleep, there was suddenly a revelation of the glory cloud of Yahweh—the same

glory cloud that filled the tabernacle and the temple now appeared in the midst of the darkness.

The text tells us: “[8] And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.”

The shepherds saw the the glory of the Lord and the angel standing before them like a warrior of heaven, and they were wise to be afraid.

But then the angel in light and glory spoke to them, and it is this message, this announcement, this angelic sermon, that I want to focus on this morning.

This is what the angel said: “*Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. [11] For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] And this will be a sign*

for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

*[14] “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is
pleased!”*

Don’t be afraid says the angel. For I bring you *good news*.

I bring you *euangelion*. I bring you *gospel*.

This greek word, *euangelion*, is the same as is used in the Old Testament reading this morning from Isaiah, which describes the beautiful feet of the one who brings the message of good news to the exiled people, and is the same word that is today often translated into our modern english as *gospel*.

Sometimes “the gospel” is defined as this: It is the announcement of the reality that you are a worse sinner than you ever dared imagine, and at the same time you’re more loved than you ever dared hope.

And yes, to some extent that’s true. At least it’s true that the gospel, the good news of the scriptures *includes* those truths.

But as we see in this text this morning, there is a gospel message that the angels bring that is even more basic than those truths, for the Angelic sermon we see here is simply this—the gospel is the good news that *God is here. God has come.*

For in the city of David, a savior is born, who is Christ the Lord.

You see, the gospel, properly defined, does not begin with us, with our sinfulness, or even with our belovedness.

The gospel, according to the scriptures, *begins with God.*

The gospel begins with God's action, with his faithfulness, with his glorious existence — and it is manifest in nothing so clearly as the sending of his son to be born in human flesh.

But this announcement that the Angel brings to these shepherds, and also to us, it is not meant only to be good news — it is good news of great *joy*.

Good news of great *joy*.

It seems to me that the joy that the Angel commends here at the birth of Jesus, at the festival of Christmas is slightly different than the victorious triumph of Easter.

When we think about our salvation as being deliverance from sin and death, Jesus' resurrection and the celebration of Easter means that the victory is ours, the battle is won.

But Christmas...Christmas, the feast of the incarnation, has more to do with the joy that comes when those who are enslaved to sin realize that there will actually be a battle in the first place.

To put it in blunt terms, if Easter is the celebration of the *certainty* of our salvation, then Christmas is the celebration of the *possibility* of our salvation at all.

Easter is triumph and a victory march in the sunshine. But Christmas...Christmas is the note passed under the door of the prison cell that reads: *Rescue is coming soon.*

And because it is so unexpected, so out of the blue, the joy that Christmas brings with it is a kind of giddiness, a kind of carelessness and merriness and recklessness.

Now, in our culture today, with all its faults and flaws — it is interesting, we still have at least an echo of this reality in the way we keep Christmas.

Now, of course, we could critique our culture's celebration of Christmas, we could talk about consumerism and materialism and all the other isms that are in play.

But I have no interest in doing that today.

Because I think there remains, in our culture, an extravagance connected with Christmas that I think is profoundly appropriate and right.

Christmas is the time when people in our culture will travel thousands of miles to be with family and friends.

Christmas is the time when people in our culture will spend more money than they perhaps should to bring delight to someone they love.

Christmas is the time when people in our culture will eat and drink more, at least from a responsible health perspective, than anyone really ought to.

And I want to say: That's ok. That's right. That's good.

Because if you don't go at least a little crazy in some way at Christmas it is very possible that you have missed the point of the whole thing in the first place —which is overwhelming joy.

It's fascinating, actually, how the emotion of unconstrained joy pervades the whole Christmas story from beginning to end.

John the Baptist leaps in the womb with joy when Mary comes to visit his mother Elizabeth, bearing Jesus in her womb, just barely conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Mary opens her mouth in the magnificat and tells of how she rejoices in God her savior, for he that is mighty has done great things for her, and for all mankind.

Elizabeth's neighbors and relatives rejoice when John is born to her in her old age.

The angels tell the Shepherds when they announce Jesus' birth that they have good tidings of great joy for all humanity.

And Matthew tells us that when the Magi saw the star resting over the place where the child Jesus was, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.

And this joy causes people to do extravagant things.

Remember that, as far as we can tell from our text, it seems that the shepherds who heard the angels' message, in the next breath, thought nothing of leaving their sheep unattended in the wilderness to search for a glimpse of a promised infant king.

And the Magi, once they had seen star, and ascertained its meaning, left their homelands to travel hundreds of miles to see this new king.

That's more than a little wild and reckless.

But the whole thing, the whole story is unexpected and more than a little extravagant.

And that's the way it should be — because the birth of God's son is not only good news.

It is good news of *great joy*.

The Christmas message is good news of great joy because it is the announcement that long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.

It is no ordinary message. And that is why the prophets tell us it feet of him who comes over the mountains are beautiful, for he brings good news of happiness on his lips.

It is why the voice of the watchmen lift up their voices and sing for joy, for eye to eye they see the return of their God to Zion.

The good news of Christmas is an incautious and extravagant hope.

It is the glad announcement that our God, who loves us all out of proportion, brings his salvation not from a distance, not from far away, but as a *man like us*.

So this morning, here is my Christmas charge to you: Go, eat your pie with joy and drink your wine, or your beer, or your eggnog, with a merry heart, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And I commend *joy* to you, for in this new world created by the birth of Jesus Christ, man has no good thing but to eat and drink and be joyful—for God has become man, not for a moment, but for eternity, and human flesh resides even now in heaven.

And if a man lives now in heaven, then who can truly say what other strange and wonderful things may happen next?

It is good news of great joy indeed.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.