

"A Vision of Great Joy for All"

Luke 2:10-12

Christmas Eve

Messiah, Boerne

December 24, 2022

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

Read text: Luke 2:10-12

Dear Friends in Christ:

Our text tonight is the Gospel reading from Luke 2, the familiar Christmas story, in which we hear an angel speak to shepherds about great joy. On the night when Jesus was born, Luke tells us that 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. The angels didn't want the shepherds looking up into heaven, however; they wanted them to look down here on earth, to see the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ.

This Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, was their promised Messiah, and his work of salvation would soon fill all the earth. And so, one angel first appears to the shepherds and says,

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people" (v 10). God is going to fill the inhabited world with joy, a joy that comes from sins forgiven, from death defeated, and from life everlasting. And this joy is for *all* people. It comes even for you, this day, in this baby, Jesus. In his life, death, and resurrection, God saves you from your sins and gives you great joy.

Since we may have heard this story often, we can miss out on the strangeness of what's happening. We hear that the angels appeared to shepherds out in the field and think, "Oh yea, the shepherds." But my question to you is, why would the angel make this announcement to shepherds? Doesn't it seem strange to you that it would be shepherds who would be told the good news first?

Now, in Palestine at the time of Jesus, you have two kinds of shepherds: peasant shepherds and nomadic shepherds. Peasant shepherds lived in villages. In the morning, they would take the flocks out from the

shelter in the villages to the surrounding pasture, and then they would return to the village with their sheep at night. This is the type of shepherd that Jesus speaks about when he says he is like a shepherd who looks for the lost sheep and, when he finds it, puts it on his shoulders and brings it home with him and calls his friends to rejoice with him that he has found his lost sheep (Lk 15). On the other hand, you also had nomadic shepherds who did not have a 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 considered to be tricksters, liars, con artists, who could say whatever they wanted and then move on. These are the shepherds who would be out in their fields at night.

Why is that important? Well, Luke has just told us that Caesar Augustus was conducting a census of the whole inhabited world. The Roman emperor was numbering and taxing all people, so Joseph and Mary went from

Nazareth to Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. All the people were being numbered, but the nomadic shepherds would not be numbered. They were not numbered among the Roman people, and they were not being numbered among the Jewish people. Yet the angel appears to them and announces to them that a Savior is born for all people.

Think about what that means for us today. At Christmas, we can tend to forget that this joy is for all people. Powerful forces in our society seem to want us to forget that. The government, the mass media, and the educational system are teaching us to think about Christmas as just one of many winter holidays celebrated only by Christians, as if the joy of Christmas was only for Christians. For everyone else, there's the joy of the holiday season—holiday lights, holiday trees, holiday cards—as well as other religious and non-religious celebrations. Our society would like us to think that Christmas has joy that is limited to Christians, yet as we hear in our text, the

joy of Christmas is intended by God "for all people" (v 10).

Sometimes the Church can even begin to limit the Christmas joy. In 2005 when Christmas fell on Sunday, several mega-churches across the country decided not to have services that morning. The Senior Pastor of one such megachurch said, "The best way to honor the birth of Jesus is for families to have a more personal experience on that day." Notice how Christmas was being limited by the church to families. Those who were single, divorced, or widowed, or those for whom religion and family did not mix well, were seemingly not included in the celebration of Christmas. These churches made the mistake of equating the kingdom of God with the stereotypical American nuclear family.

Sometimes we can also limit the joy of Christmas ourselves, with or without the help of the Church. Our hopes of a wonderful Christmas can actually take the joy of Christmas away. We can imagine what we want for our loved ones, our parents, our brothers and sisters,

our children, our dearest friends, even ourselves. And yet all our desires and all our dreams can't erase the presence of sin in the world, in our families, and in our lives. Sin has a way of tearing us apart, of beginning arguments that never end, except in the icy silence that makes dinner awkward, of ending relationships that we wish would continue, as we sit and wonder what it would be like this Christmas if disease and death never came. And so, we come to church on Christmas and gather with all these people, yet deep down we wonder if it's really meant for us.

That's why it's such great joy to hear the voice of the angel again this evening. When God sent his angels to proclaim the Good News about the Savior's birth, to whom did God send them? The Roman world was gathering its people to be counted, and there were some who were missing. But they were not lost to God. To God, every single human being matters. To God, *you* matter. That's why He sent his Son to take upon himself human flesh, to bear all human suffering, to die under all

divine judgment, and to rise to bring new life to all. There's no sin he can't handle, no suffering he hasn't fought and overcome. To every person, in every situation, Jesus brings a word of forgiveness. The joy of sin forgiven by Jesus is for all people, and tonight it's for you.

Dear friends, that's why it's such a privilege to proclaim the Good News about Jesus to you tonight. You may have come with your family, or you may have come alone. There may have been a death in your family, a divorce, a lay-off at work, a separation, and 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 the angel say, "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" (vv 10-11). Regardless of what else may be happening in your life, one thing is certain: God has seen you, had mercy on you, and, in

Christ, you are a child of the heavenly Father. In
Jesus Messiah, you are part of the family of God, and
that's reason for great joy! Amen.