

## “Good Tidings of Great Joy”

December 17, 2023

Luke 2:8-20 (KJV)

### I. Introduction

So here we are again—the story of the shepherds and the angels!! It’s easy to just tune out when we come to this part of the story of the birth of Jesus. As well as reading the same verses as we did last year and the year before that and the year before that, we hear and even sing the same songs about angels and shepherds, e.g., “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “Angels We Have Heard on High.” We see shepherds portrayed in Christmas programs every year—those that were here last Sunday night saw shepherds in *our* program. They’re part of every crèche scene and every live Nativity scene. But this morning instead of thinking **about** shepherds, let’s think about **being** one of the shepherds there on the hills of Judea on that momentous night.

*As an experienced shepherd, you’ve learned to read the signs and since it is winter and since there aren’t any clouds, you know it’s going to be a cold, cold night. Being an older, experienced shepherd, you check to make sure that the younger shepherds have brought in enough wood to keep a warm fire going throughout the night—there have to be some perks for being a senior shepherd. And since it is winter, you also know that the wolves and feral dogs, as well as other predators, will be hungry, so you check to make sure your rod and staff and sling are ready—ready to scare off, or even kill, if necessary, any predator that wants to make a meal of your sheep.*

*Because of the cool weather, the sheep have been rather rambunctious, but you and the other shepherds have finally gotten them all bedded down for the night. It’s getting close to time for you and the other shepherds to bed down too, so you’re letting the cooking fires die down a little. Those on the 1<sup>st</sup> watch for the night are getting ready to go out and protect the sheep from wild animals and from thieves. Things are as calm and collected as possible. This is starting to look like one of the few peaceful nights shepherds long for.*

*Then, suddenly, without warning, the sky seems to catch fire and in the middle of the bright light, there's an angel. Things are no longer "peachy keen;" in fact, they are downright frightening. As a shepherd, you aren't afraid of anything—bears, lions, wolves, even robbers—but you're terrified of the unknown—this light and the angel! And then the angel says, "Do not be afraid." **Right!** That's easier said than done! But the angel goes on to say that "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord." Then, before you or the other shepherds can even think about what you've just seen and heard, things get worse; suddenly there isn't just one angel, there is a huge choir—a plethora of angels all praising God. And then...then they're gone!*

*After the angels leave, you and the other shepherds talk about what you have just seen and heard. You decide that you're not all crazy or hallucinating from eating some bad food, so you hurry to Bethlehem where you find the Baby just as the angel had said. After you've had time to see the Baby and Mary and Joseph, you and the other shepherds return to your flocks. On the way back, you tell everyone you meet about what happened to you and what you've just seen. Finally, you get back to your flocks where you and the rest of the shepherds continue to glorify and praise God because of the good tidings of great joy that you have heard and seen.*

Looking back, that must have been quite the night. So, what are the good tidings of great joy that the angel was talking about and what should be done about it? We can answer some basic questions about these good tidings or news by looking at Galatians 4--turn to Galatians 4:4-5.

## **II. The Angel's Good Tidings**

**A. When** First, we see the "when"—**"When the time had fully come."** Just like everything God does, the timing of the birth of Jesus Christ was perfect or right in many ways.

**1. The timing was right religiously.** Ever since they had returned from the Babylonian captivity and rebuilt the temple, some 400 years before the birth of Christ, most Jews had continued to worship Jehovah. To aid in their worship, in the years following captivity, the various writings and prophecies had been

collected into what is called the Old Testament. By 200 B.C. the Hebrew Scriptures had been translated from Hebrew into Greek. So, at the time of Jesus' birth, many people could read the Bible. Many of them had read and knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah and some, like Simeon and Anna, were looking for His coming or Advent.

*2. The timing was right culturally.* Greek was the common language throughout the known world; almost everyone could speak it to some degree. At this particular time, “when the time had fully come,” language would not be a barrier to going into “all the world” and telling others about Jesus the Christ.

*3. The timing was right politically.* The peace of Rome, the Pax Roma, was maintained throughout the Roman Empire—there were armies and garrisons spread throughout the empire to do just that. As the Empire grew, the Roman government had built a system of roads to link one end of the empire to the other. Both of these things—the peace and the roads—would allow missionaries, including the Apostle Paul and Barnabas and even the Twelve Apostles, to move freely and with relative safety throughout the Empire.

**B. Who** Next, we see the “who”—“God sent His Son.” Jesus willingly submitted Himself to the Father and came and lived on earth in His human body; turn to Philippians 2:5-8. But, at the same time, Jesus was and is God. Turn to John 1:1-4, 14. Hebrews 1:3 puts it this way, “The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” All this is to say that Jesus was and is God and has all the attributes of God: He's eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, just to name a few. But, in order to experience humanity and to pay the penalty of sin, Jesus had to become human. Jesus had to lay aside His attributes of the Godhood. Jesus was God Incarnate, i.e., He was God in human form. In His humanity, Jesus took on the role and function of Son—He was obedient to the Father and His will; in the Garden of Gethsemane in Matthew 26:39 He prayed, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.”

**C. How** Galatians next tells us “how” He came—“born of a woman, born under law.” Like all other Jewish men, Jesus was born of a woman under the rule of the Mosaic Law. He was fully man—he got hungry and tired, He had to keep the Laws of the Old Testament; yet at the same time He was fully God. He

had to be fully man in order to represent humanity and to take the penalty of sin on Himself in our place.

**Turn to Hebrews 2:14-15.** But He, also, had to be fully God so that His sacrifice would be of infinite value so that through His death, He could redeem all mankind. As one commentator put it, *“He had to be God to have the power of Savior and He had to be man to have the position of Substitute.”*

**D. Why** Finally, we see “why” He came—*“to redeem those under law.”* **Romans 6:23** put it this way, *“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Jesus came to give mankind the opportunity to be freed from the penalty—the wages—of sin. He came to redeem mankind. Jesus paid the price of your sin. Since He lived a sinless life, through His perfect sacrifice, He was able to redeem those who trust in Him by dying in their place. Peter wrote in **1 Peter 3:18**, *“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”*

“Redeem” is a Greek word; it means to “buy back.” In the time of Christ, a man could purchase or redeem a slave in any Roman city. He could then either keep him as a slave for himself or free him. Jesus came to redeem us—to buy us back from the wages of sin—and then set us free. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, He did more than just free us, He made us sons and daughters of God with all the privileges that come with that adoption.

This then is the good tidings or news that the angel brought to the shepherds: *at just the right time, God sent His Son into the world in human form, to redeem man from the curse of sin and to make him a joint heir with Jesus Christ.*

### **III. The Shepherd’s Response**

After they heard the angel’s Good Tidings, we see the shepherds’ response. First, they hurried to Bethlehem to find the Baby. They didn’t procrastinate—who could sleep after what they had seen anyway? They didn’t blame something they had eaten for what they saw; they didn’t worry about what others might think—they dropped everything and hurried to Bethlehem.

There, after some searching, they found the Baby just as the angel had said. The Bible doesn’t tell us what the shepherds did when they found the baby *“wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger,”* but

I suspect that they were full of wonder and joy as they perhaps held Him in their arms and worshipped this Gift from God—the Messiah—their Savior.

But they didn't keep the birth of the Savior a secret, they went out and told others what they had seen. In the beginning, the angels were God's messengers; then the shepherds became God's messengers. "They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child." And, finally, they returned to their flocks, but they were changed men. They were never going to be the same—they had seen angels, they had seen a miracle, they had seen God in human form—as Luke wrote in verse 20, they "returned, glorifying and praising God." They were full of joy; they were rejoicing, just as the angel had said they would.

#### IV. Your Response

That was then, what about now: what about you—what is your response to this good news? Every person in this room has heard about the birth of Jesus Christ—we all have celebrated Christmas in the past; some of us many, many times. But the birth of Jesus was only the beginning—you know the rest of the story: you know how Jesus grew up and after some 30 years He was crucified by those He came to save; you know how 3 days later He rose from the dead and during the next 40 days was seen by over 500 people – turn to 1 Corinthians 15:1-8. As we've read in Romans and Galatians and Philippians, He did all of this to redeem the world from the wages of sin. As the Apostle John wrote in 1 John 5:12, "He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." So, what have you done with God's Christmas gift to you—what have you done with Jesus?

If you have made Jesus your Lord and Savior, then you, like the shepherds, can be full of joy; you can glorify and praise God—even in the midst of all the turmoil around us. You have been redeemed. Your sins have been forgiven. When it comes time to leave this earth, whether through death or through Christ's return, you are guaranteed of a place in heaven as a son or daughter of the Almighty Creator God—in Acts 2:21 Peter said, "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

You can be joyful right now; you don't have to wait until you get to heaven. In Philippians 4:4, Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always." James 1:2 says, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face

trials of many kinds.” Neither Paul nor James expect us to be laughing and celebrating when things get tough or seem to be impossible. Only a person not in his or her right mind would celebrate in those kinds of situations. But you can have joy and peace in your heart as you go through difficult times—as you deal with health issues, concern about the increasing violence and wars in the world, even anxieties about the future. But you aren’t going through any of this alone, Jesus said in [Matthew 28:20](#), “I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” As a Christian you can rest on God’s promises, verses like [Romans 8:28](#) which says, “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

Joy in difficult circumstances doesn’t come naturally, like hope and peace, joy is possible only as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. That’s what we see in the verses Lois and Nancy read from [Galatians 5:22-23](#): “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

So, what kind of joy do you have? Is it a feeling that you get when everything is going well? There is nothing wrong with that kind of joy—Christians need to be able to rejoice and celebrate when good things happen. But what about when seemingly bad things happen, when you are being crushed or beaten down, do you still have joy, an inner peace, because you know that, no matter what, God is in control? This kind of joy can only come from the Holy Spirit and trust in God. This is the kind of joy that only a Christian can have. [Hebrews 12:2](#) says, “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

This Advent season as we consider all we have as children of God, ask God to fill you with His Spirit and to fill you with His hope and His peace and His joy. And, then like the shepherds, let’s tell others about the birth of the Savior of the world and what it means to you and to them. This celebration and proclamation shouldn’t just happen on Christmas, we need to be ready to tell others every day, we need to celebrate every day—we have hope—confidence in eternity, we are loved by God, we can be filled with joy.