

Good Tidings of Great Joy to All People

Luke 2:8-20

By **[Rev. Joshua M. Rieger](#)**

As we come today to the Word of the Lord, we're going to be looking at Luke 2 verses 8 to 20. This is a continuation of the passage that Billy Joseph preached on Wednesday evening. And so as we begin this passage you'll see that it begins by saying, "And in the same region." Well, Christ has just been born in the previous passage. Christ has just come on the scene. He is lying in a manger wrapped in swaddling cloths and that in Bethlehem in the city of David, and so as we come to this passage, "the same region" is the area of Bethlehem. And we will be reading there, but before we come to God's Word, let us go to Him in prayer and ask Him to attend the reading and the preaching of His Word.

Heavenly Father, as we come to Your Word today, we acknowledge that we come with hearts heavy with guilt, hearts heavy with anxiety and fear, hearts that are full of excitement about holidays and family and gifts and time off, but not many of us come to it Lord with hearts that are weighed down by the weight of glory of Your presence in Your Word. Almighty God who caused holy men of old as they were carried along by Your Spirit to write the Scriptures for our learning, we ask that You grant that we might hear Your Word, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them so that we might embrace and hold fast to the blessed hope of the everlasting that You have given us in our Savior, Jesus Christ. We pray all of these things in His name and for Your glory, in Jesus' name, amen.

Now if you would take your copies of God's Word with me and read in Luke 2 beginning with verse 8:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and 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 among those with whom He is pleased!"

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

All flesh is grass and all its loveliness is like the flower of the field. The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of our God stands forever.

As we come to this passage, we've spent the last couple weeks looking into Matthew's account of the birth and Mark's reference to the incarnation. And we've seen a couple of things. We've seen that there is a gift. Christ is a gift that we all need. We've seen that Christ is also a gift that we should all want. And last week we looked at the fact that Christ is the gift that we can only and must receive through repentance. In Luke 2:1-7, we saw on Wednesday night the details that God gave and the ones that He left out with reference to the birth of Christ in Luke 2 were showing us what was truly important. Today we're going to see the reason for the gift that was given and we're also going to look at the response it should drive us to. Last week we saw that one response it should drive us to is repentance, but we're going to see that another response that should go along with this is found in this passage as we see the angels' response and as we see the shepherds' response.

I want you to see three things as we move forward in this passage. The first thing I want you to see is the message that the angels proclaimed. And as we see this message it should drive us to Christ. And the second thing that I want us to see is the recipient of that proclamation. And as we see the recipients of that proclamation, it should make us aware of our neediness. The third thing that I want us to see is the response to the truth of this message. So let's look first at the message that the angels proclaimed.

THE MESSAGE THE ANGELS PROCLAIMED

First of all, it tells us that the message the angel came to proclaim was good news. The angel was a fearsome messenger. The message he proclaimed, though, was good. Imagine a scene that you may have seen several times before on TV or movies where you have a person who is cowering in fear. Somehow they're oppressed. Maybe they're in a prison in a foreign land or maybe they're persecuted by a dictator or some sort of oppressive regime, and suddenly they're in a room and they're cowering in fear and suddenly a Marine or a Navy Seal

breaks through the door with a machine gun in hand with his helmet on and dressed up in camouflage. And the initial response is one of fear. Now the initial response to a machine gun is always, I think, one of fear. If you're not familiar with one, then seeing one even when it's not in someone's hands is a little fearful. You might be wondering whether it's going to go off or something like that. But seeing this person who's fierce, standing there with a gun in hand, it's an initial response of fear. But then the sailor or the Marine says, "I'm here for you. I'm here to save you. I'm here to protect you." And immediately that fear is transformed to joy.

And this is what we see here in this passage today because angels are God's soldiers in His heavenly host. They're also His messengers, but we see them here as His soldiers in His heavenly host. And so we know just from looking at the Scriptures that angels are something that always instilled fear in those who they come to. The immediate response we see continually in the Scriptures is fear when people come into contact with angels. And so these shepherds are out in the fields near Bethlehem and all of a sudden this soldier, this fearsome being, appears to them in the sky and not only does the fearsome being appear in the sky — and that's something that they should be justly afraid of — but also the glory of the Lord shines about them. And now this is something that also instilled fear. When we look at the Old Testament, we see pictures of the glory of the Lord, we see that when the people came into contact with it on Mount Sinai it instilled fear. In fact, they did not want to hear any more from God. They wanted Moses to be the one who went up. When the glory of the Lord came down in the first temple, once a year when the chief priest was in there, it was something that was a fearful thing. It wasn't something that everybody came into contact with. When the people returned from exile and they built a second temple, the glory of the Lord was something that never returned to the temple. It's been something that has been missing for generations. It's something that is fearful.

And yet these men standing on a hills watching their sheep — I don't know what the weather is like; I don't know whether it's clear or cloudy, but it's the middle of the night and they're just watching sheep. It's dark. Everything is kind of lazy. They're probably hanging out, maybe talking around the campfire, maybe relaxing, and all of a sudden an angel shows up and the glory of the Lord is shining all around them and they're very afraid. And this angel gives them a message. What is this good news that the angel proclaims? He says to you, "Unto you is born this day in the city of David, who is Christ the Lord." Well to a people who are waiting for Christ, they're waiting for the Messiah, people who are aware of the fact that the glory of the Lord has not returned to the temple — we are still a people who are under subjection — they are waiting for a Messiah; this is good news. They are a people who are subject to a despotic rule and they're waiting for a Savior. This is a message of joy. It's something they're waiting for.

And the angel doesn't just give them this message, this joyful message, that

immediately turns the fear of his presence into joy; he also gives them a sign. And the sign has two parts. The first part is that there is a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths. Well this is not something that is exceptional. Babies are wrapped in swaddling cloths when they're new. In fact, we all are very familiar with these little cloths that are blue and pink and white and as soon as we see them we know it's a picture of a baby in a hospital because that's what it elicits in our mind. This is something that we're all very familiar with. This is something that the shepherds would have been familiar with.

The second part of the sign is what is actually surprising. The second part of the sign is that this baby is not just wrapped in swaddling cloths, but He's lying in a manger. He's lying in a feeding trough. This baby, which is from the first despised and rejected, as Isaiah said, this baby who sleeps in a feed trough, is the Savior, who is Christ the Lord, that the angels just told them about. Not only does he give them this good news that the Savior is coming, but the next thing out of his mouth is, "This Savior that you've been expecting, this great joy, is just a few miles from here lying in a feed trough. When you find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes that's not good enough. When you find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths lying in a feeding trough, then you've found the Savior." And so they are looking for this sign, this sign that the rejected one — He's going to save you. The despised one, He's your King. The humiliated one lying in a feeding trough is your Lord and your Master.

THE RECIPIENTS OF THE PROCLAMATION

So we've seen this message - who receives this message? We know it's the shepherds but let's look at a little bit more about the shepherds. The shepherds are the ones who most immediately receive it, although the angel does say this is a message "for all men." But the immediate recipients of the proclamation are shepherds and there's three reasons that it's important that shepherds are the immediate recipients.

First of all, shepherds were social outcasts. If you've sat here and listened to sermons very long from this pulpit, you've heard Dr. Thomas especially speak about the fact that shepherds were social outcasts. They were people who were not to be trusted. They were not allowed to testify in trials because they were untrustworthy. Just by nature of their work with sheep, they were ceremonially unclean. So these are recipients who are social outcasts. We see that this is a scene that recurs in Luke. This is something that Luke often highlights. We've been in Luke for a couple of years now and we've seen this over and over again and we just saw last Sunday night when Brister was preaching to us from Luke 16 about this picture of the beggar outside of the rich man's house. And when they both died, the beggar was the one who ended up in heaven and the rich man was the one who ended up in hell, in the torments of hell, and we see even there Luke is highlighting the unexpected — that Christ came to affect those who

were social outcasts. We see it in this idea that the shepherds were social outcasts something that shows us a people aware of their need.

But another reason it's important that the angel came to a shepherd — the angel who came to shepherds was proclaiming a Savior, a Messiah, a Christ who was the descendant of great David, who was himself at the time of his calling, a shepherd. It was a harkening back, a reminder of who this Christ was, who this Messiah was, and what lineage He came from. And so as they heard this message, first of all they were shown that it was a people who were needy, a people who were aware of their need to whom Christ came, but secondly we see that it's a people who are going to remember His lineage when they hear where He's coming.

And the third reason this is important is that the Bible, both New and Old Testament, tells us consistently about the symbol of the shepherd in relation to God and to His flock, to His congregation, to His sheep. This is something that we've seen already. The Bible, they don't have the New Testament at the point that this proclamation comes, but they're very familiar with the Old Testament where God is a Shepherd for His sheep, for His flock. We think of Psalm 23 and the message that we have there. This would have been something that was familiar to them. The idea that we have in the New Testament that elders are to shepherd the flock, the church of Christ — there's a reason as the elders and deacons kind of divide up the congregation of First Pres. in order to shepherd them, in order to care for them and their spiritual needs. They've called these groupings flocks and folds. This comes from the very idea in the Scriptures that, you know, God has provided under-shepherds. Christ is our Shepherd, but God has provided under-shepherds to care for His sheep. And we also see that God is called a Shepherd of His people Israel in the Old Testament. And Christ in the New Testament is called the Good Shepherd.

But there are other recipients. The angel does say this is a message “to all men.” We see that the recipients are Israel, who are also outcasts, although Israel didn't think of themselves as outcasts. They were proud; they were unaware of the fact that they were outcasts. They were a special people who'd received the promises of Abraham, of Moses, of David. They thought that they had a lot to be proud of, but they were a people who, every time God had called them, had failed in the calling to which He'd called them. They were a people who'd sinned over and over and over again to the extent that they'd suffered under the curse of God's wrath for their sins. They were so sinful that God punished them by allowing them to be overrun by the most evil nation on earth at the time. If that's not outcasts, I don't know what is, but yet they thought of themselves very proudly. They did not see themselves as outcasts, but they were still outcasts who needed a Savior. And now, on top of the fact that they've dealt with this exile, now that they're back in the land they're a small people who don't rule themselves. They are living under the rule of another who limits the way they are able to worship and serve and all of these other things, limits their own decision

making. There are people that might remind us of, you know, the modern day Curds or gypsies or people like that who don't have a home, who are in multiple lands and no one seems to really want them.

And it's also to the Gentiles, to the rest of the world, who didn't receive the promises in the first place. They're referred to as "Gentile dogs." Christ refers to them in His teaching as swine, and yet Christ came even for them. They were true outcasts. The Savior, who is Christ the Lord, came to those who were in need. He came, most specifically, to those who are aware of their need. The message of the Gospel was taken to the Gentiles after the Jews rejected it - time and time again, we see this in Paul's ministry. Read through Acts and see how Paul consistently goes to a town and begins to teach in the synagogue and when he's kicked out he takes the message to the Gentiles. These were a people who were needy. These were outcasts who also needed the message of a Savior, and there was a Savior who came to meet their needs.

Missionaries I've heard speak of the fact that often the people who are most receptive to the Gospel are those who are needier because they're aware of some need in them. This isn't across the board; God obviously works in amazing places, but I've talked to several missionaries who gave us an example of this people who were more aware of their need being faster recipients of the Gospel. Christ came to meet a need. He came to meet the deepest need in man which we learned two weeks ago in Matthew 1. He didn't come to improve life for some people who were already doing okay, to give them a better life. He came to bring those to life who were already dead, those people who had no hope in and of themselves. And these are the people that Christ was born as a Savior to.

We need to take this opportunity as we look at this passage to focus on our own neediness because we are a people who are inordinately materially blessed, but we are still spiritually needy. And so we may look around us and think, "We're doing alright. I don't need too many things. The gifts that I look forward to at Christmas are all blessings and encouragements and things extra that are not needs. I'm not looking for food or shelter on Christmas." But that does not change the fact that I am no less needy than the most despicable outcast in Israel in the Gentile world the day that Christ came.

THE RESPONSE TO THE TRUTH OF THE MESSAGE

The third thing we see in this passage though is the response to the truth of this message or proclamation that came to the shepherds. There's a response that we see. First of all, we see how the angels respond. One angel gives the message, one angel comes and proclaims these truths to the shepherds, but one angel is not enough to respond in the correct way to the message that's being given. And so rather than this one angel then praising God, what we see is immediately a heavenly host appears. This is something that's exceptional in the

Scriptures. This doesn't happen very often. The times that we face a heavenly host are not usually in this type of setting. We see Elisha who has his eyes opened and his servants eyes opened and he sees the heavenly host protecting them, but it's not something that's available for everyone to see. This is a unique experience. Usually you see one or maybe two or three angels come to people, and they're already afraid. Imagine if you've already responded in fear to one angel coming and now an entire multitude of the heavenly host appears! But the heavenly host, the multitude, is responding in joy, responding in praise, as they sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

They didn't see this, the angels, as an opportunity to "ooo" and "ahh" over a baby that was cute. This was a chance to give glory, laud, and honor to the great God of heaven. This was an opportunity to worship and praise the great God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ, who was lying in a feeding trough. It was His righteousness that was sinned against. It was His just and righteous wrath in the face of iniquity, our iniquities, that made the shepherds and Israel and the Gentiles needy. He's the one we have sinned against and yet we cannot save ourselves, and He sent the Savior. He sent His own Son, the second person of the Godhead, and so He deserves praise. And the angels worship Him. This is their response. The angels, in a way, have tickets kind of on the fifty yard line, or maybe more like the commentators in a football game who see everything going on but aren't taking part in it themselves in some sense.

Or maybe a better picture is, I remember when I was in the navy, this would have been in 2003 probably, and we were in the Gulf of Aden, which is, when you come to the bottom of the Red Sea there's a little strait there named Bab el Mandeb Strait and you're in the Gulf of Aden. And Yemen is to the north of you, the city Aden is right there, and to the south of you is Somalia and one of the things that our navy does is intercept small boats called dhows as they're traveling back and forth between Yemen and Somalia. Usually we're looking for boats that have guns or money or drugs that are being used to help out terrorism. And as you're in this, you know the boarding team leads the ship in a small boat and our ship had, as a helicopter, a helicopter called an SH-60 Bravo. And the helicopter would take off, and we'd always do this at night because those people in the dhows, we wanted them to have as little advantage as possible. I was the navigator so I never got to leave the ship as the boarding party; I had to stay on the ship. But you would watch and you would see the screens as they had night vision on and you'd see the helicopter giving you kind of a picture of everything that was going on. And these small boats would be coming alongside this dhow that we sent out and these sailors would rush aboard and the men on the dhow had no idea what was coming. And you'd be back on the ship watching the whole thing, amazed at what technology and training and skill allow you to do.

And that's what the angels are experiencing. You know, 1 Peter 1 tells us the angels looked into the truths of the Gospel, or they longed to look into the truths

of the Gospel. They were in awe of the salvation that God was bringing and so they're standing back and they're watching the salvation, they're seeing what the Lord is doing to a people who have sinned and yet who are just completely unaware of the depths of their sin. They're sitting there in the presence of God knowing the depths of the human sin and yet they watch and they see God send His own Son, they see God respond with a mercy and a love that is just flabbergasting. And their only response is worship.

And the shepherds respond in the same way. The shepherds found Mary and Joseph and the baby, lying in a manger, and they tell everybody immediately, "This is exactly what the angels told us was going to happen." This isn't a surprise to them. They didn't stand around after the angels left and say, "Was this a vision? Do you think there's really a baby in a manger?" They immediately, it looked like in the passage, got up and went exactly where the angels told them to go, looking for this sign they'd been told about. And so they left immediately. And they get there and they see the signs they'd been told about and they start telling people and they realize that it's just as the angels told them that it was going to be. And so as they return, and the passage tells us that they are glorifying and praising God; it was as marvelous as the heavenly host had told them it would be. And so they respond in the same way that the heavenly host responded — by glorifying and praising God.

So how do we respond to this truth 2000 years later? Well, we learned last week in Mark 1 we respond with repentance, which is a picture of recognizing this neediness. We look to Christ as our only hope in the midst of our sin, in the midst of our neediness, in the midst of our inability to save ourselves. But there's another picture, another response that we see in this passage. And that response is that we praise God. We sing hymns of praise to Christ for what He has done, hymns of praise to Christ for His humiliation, but what we see here is that the angels and the shepherds praised the Father in heaven who sent His Son as the Savior for the world and we respond in the same way, just as we did this morning when we sang, "Gloria in excelsis deo," which means, "Glory to God in the highest," just as the angels sang. He has brought peace among those with whom He is pleased. He has done this through Christ the Lord.

We hear this message year in and year out. Maybe you love, as I do, the movie, *A Christmas Carol*, or the book, even. Maybe you enjoy that story but the thing is, we hear, as we get to the end, that the problem that Scrooge has is that he's not carrying the Christmas spirit with him through the whole year. This is what he needs to learn from all this experience. Now Brister told us last Sunday night of the fact from the Scriptures that if they didn't believe Moses and the prophets, how were they going to believe someone who came back from the dead? Well, Scrooge's problem, apparently, isn't that he isn't glorifying God, his problem is just that he's not carrying the spirit of Christmas with him. And somebody comes back from the dead and all of a sudden he does fix himself, but that's not what we see in the Scriptures, is it? Our problem is not that we're not carrying the spirit

of Christmas with us through the year. Our problem is that we are not so astounded by this truth that we're falling on our knees every moment, praising and worshiping God the Father for sending His Son as our Savior. We're called to constantly praise God. If we sit here today trusting in Christ, if we sit here with lives that have been transformed by the Spirit of God then we have peace with God, and only because He sent His Son to live and die in our place because the power of the resurrection has been realized in our lives as we place faith in Christ. And this is something that God the Father has done in our lives, that He has brought us to, and so this should be something that elicits a response of praise.

So as we look at this story that I'm quite certain you'll probably hear again in the coming week at some point, we need to realize that this story, this truth from the Scriptures is something that should make us aware of our neediness, it should make us aware of our sin, just remembering who the angel came to. Second, it should drive us to Christ, recognizing that He is the Savior and He is the only hope. And last, it should cause us to fall down on our knees and praise God. Next Sunday morning we'll be praising God because we're here at church but we should also be praising God primarily because He sent His Son and He sent His Son to die. And every person enters the world knowing that someday they'll die, but Christ entered the world knowing that He was going to die a death of punishment, capital punishment, for others' sins. And that's something for which God deserves glory.

Let us close in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we are so very grateful for the mercy and the love that You have shown us. And God, we know that our hearts are deceitfully wicked, desperately wicked, deceitful above all else, Lord, and we know that we do not even grasp the depths of our own sin against You. We don't grasp the depths of our need of Christ. But Lord, we ask that You would help us to grasp for Christ, knowing that He is our only hope, that He would be the greatest treasure that we seek. He would be the treasure that we are willing to sell all else for, and that Lord, in response to that, we would glorify and praise You with our lives on Sundays, as we have a day set aside to worship You, but also every day as we live out a spiritual act of worship. We pray that this passage and this season would have the effect on our lives that You call it to have as the angels praised, as the shepherds praised, Lord, that we also would praise. In Jesus' name, amen.

Now if you would respond with me by opening your hymnals to hymn number 218 and we will sing about the angels who worshiped God.

Now receive the Lord's benediction. May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Spirit be with you all. Amen.

©2013 First Presbyterian Church.

This transcribed message has been lightly edited and formatted for the Web site. No attempt has been made, however, to alter the basic extemporaneous delivery style, or to produce a grammatically accurate, publication-ready manuscript conforming to an established style template.

Should there be questions regarding grammar or theological content, the reader should presume any website error to be with the webmaster/transcriber/editor rather than with the original speaker. For full copyright, reproduction and permission information, please visit the First Presbyterian Church Copyright, Reproduction & Permission statement.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to RPM

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [RPM](#), please select this [link](#).