

**Luke 2:8-20**

(New International Version 1984, ©1984)

***The Shepherds and the Angels***

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ<sup>[a]</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

<sup>16</sup> So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

**Footnotes:**

- a. [Luke 2:11](#) Or *Messiah*. "The Christ" (Greek) and "the Messiah" (Hebrew) both mean "the Anointed One"; also in verse 26.
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**Introduction.**

This December marks the 45<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the airing of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. It's the Christmas classic animated film which features the characters from the *Peanuts* comic strip. When the show first aired 45 years ago in 1965, there was a great deal of controversy among the network executives regarding it. It seems there was one particular scene which many of the people at CBS, the network, and Coca Cola, the major sponsor, found offensive and thought should be eliminated. They said it had to go. However, Charles Schultz, the cartoonist, responded, "The scene stays in, or the show doesn't air. It's just that simple."

What was the scene? What was so controversial in the short movie? I'll show you the clip. It is the scene when Linus van Pelt recites the story of the birth of Jesus from Luke 2 in the King James



Version. Schulz wanted the film to have the religious meaning that was so central to his own experience of Christmas, so he insisted that the scene not be cut and they left it in. Take a look.

Tonight I want us reflect on this amazing passage of Scripture Linus quoted which caused such a ruckus back in 1965. It is one of the canticles of Christmas. Long before Taylor Swift, Maria Carey or Lady Gaga ever recorded a Christmas album, the angels sang a song of praise which has echoed down through the centuries.

### **I. The Visit of the Angel.**

*“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified! But the angel said to them, ‘Fear not! I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people’” (2:8-10).*

Why is it that whenever an angel showed up in the Bible, the first thing they say is, “Fear not!”? It happened when the angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist. It happened when Gabriel appeared to Mary. It happened again when an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, and it happened when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the field. Throughout the story of the birth of Jesus, right and left we see angels saying, “Fear not!” Now, why in the world would these angels say this unless fear was the first reaction of people whenever they encountered an angel of the Lord?

There was once a little boy who was chosen to play the angel in the church Christmas pageant one year, and he worked very hard to memorize his lines. But when it came time for his big announcement during the play, he was so frightened that instead of saying, “Fear not!” he said, “I’m scared to death!”

That’s the way many of us feel tonight. We find ourselves fearful this Christmas. The economy is weak, and we’re still digging out from the Great Recession. There is a war in Afghanistan, and Osama bin Laden is still at large. Our country is polarized by politics, and the gulf coast is still recovering from the oil spill. The future is uncertain, and it is unknown. There’s a lot to cause us fear and concern.

What fears are you battling tonight? Perhaps it is a fear of failure, or a fear of abandonment, or that your marriage isn’t going to make it. Maybe you’re afraid of getting laid off at work, or that you can’t find a job when you graduate. Perhaps your son or daughter is heading down the wrong path, and you worry about their future. You may be fearful tonight you’re your cancer might return. Maybe you’re just fearful that if you really give over your life to Christ, He might take you in a whole different direction and you’re afraid to trust Him. Or maybe you’re just afraid of the credit card bill next month! I know I am!

The angel said to the shepherds, “Fear not!” It’s a word the Lord says to each of us this evening. Our God is an all-powerful God who is full of love. He wants the best for you and me, and while we don’t know what the future holds, we do know the One who holds that future. So hear the angel when he says, “Fear not!”

### **II. The Message of the Angel.**



*"But the angel said to them, '...I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord! And this will be a sign unto you; you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (2:10-12).*

What was the message the angel's canticle of Christmas? What encouragements do you see in the words the angel spoke? Note the first thing the angel said is, "**I bring you good news of a great joy.**" Joy is one of the words we most often hear used at Christmastime. We lit a candle last Sunday during Advent for Joy, and I've seen the word "joy" on many of the Christmas cards Lorie and I received this year. However, I think we often confuse joy with happiness. It's easy to do. Outwardly, joy and happiness resemble one another, but they are actually quite different. Happiness comes from the root word "hap", which means "chance." It suggests that good things might happen to us, but it's really a matter of chance and dependent upon outward circumstances. On the other hand, joy is the English translation of a word which at its root means "surprise." C.S. Lewis picked up on this when he titled his autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, and Lewis said he pursued joy for many years until he finally found it in Jesus Christ.

Has joy left you this Christmas? Are you looking to the gifts under the tree to give you joy? Are you hoping your family will bring you joy? Are you counting on your job to offer you joy? Then you're setting yourself up for disappointment, friend. Only Jesus can bring the real joy you seek.

The **second** part of the angel's message was - **the promise has been kept.** *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord" (2:11).* The years of longing, the centuries of waiting were finally over. The Messiah had come! At just the right time, God fulfilled His promise to send a Savior. For hundreds of years the people of Israel had looked for a Messiah, one who would rescue and deliver them. In the OT from the book of Genesis all the way through Malachi, there were over 300 prophecies concerning the coming of the Messiah, and Jesus fulfilled every single one of them. Born of a woman (Gen. 3), born of a virgin (Is. 9), from the seed of Abraham (Gen. 22), of the tribe of Judah (Gen. 49), of the line of Jesse (Is. 11), of the house of David (Jer. 23), born in Bethlehem (Mic. 5), presented with gifts (Ps. 72) - all these and more were prophesied in the OT. The apostle Paul writes, *"But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son..." (Gal. 4:4).* The Lord kept His promise, and He was true to His word.

The **final** part of the angel's message was - **here is a sign**, you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Perhaps there would be many babies in Bethlehem during the census. How would they know which baby was the one? The angel gave an additional sign that this special child would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. It would be a newborn, but it would be resting in a most unusual place - a stable in a feeding trough for animals.

I have seen the kind of manger used in Palestine at the time of Christ. It was usually made of stone, and a rectangular hole was hewn out of it. What an odd place to lay a newborn baby, and yet it speaks of the lowliness of Jesus' birth and tells of the humility of the coming of the Son of God.

After the heavenly messenger had completed its announcement, the angel was joined by the host of heaven, and together they sang, *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests."* What a dramatic scene that must have been. First one angel, and then, all of a sudden, an entire army of angels appear. It was quite a spectacle to behold, and the angelic praise lit up the sky of Palestine that night.

### **III. The Response of the Shepherds.**



The passage tells us the **shepherds responded to this song of praise in faith** to the message of the angels, and they seized the opportunity to witness the amazing events of that night. They could have written off the experience as an illusion or attributed it to some bad wine. They could have complained about fatigue and reasoned that they needed their sleep. But they did none of these things. Rather, they responded in faith and went at once to Bethlehem. Their faith led them to drop what they were doing and share in an experience which would change their lives forever. How might God be calling you to drop the excuses and drop what you're doing to respond in faith to Jesus this Christmas?

**The shepherds also responded with witness**, and they told everyone they met about the amazing things that had happened to them that night. When you've got good news to share you can't keep it to yourself.

**Finally, the shepherds responded with praise.** The text tells us, "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told*" (2:20). Praise is the only appropriate response when we are apprehended by God's love and see Him do amazing things in our lives. Is praise a mark of your celebration of Christmas this year? Or are you like Scrooge, grumping around saying, "Bah, humbug." Take time tomorrow to praise God for His good gifts, and glory in the miracle of the Incarnation as if you were experiencing it for the first time.

## Conclusion.

Philip Yancey says "Christians share an odd belief in parallel universes. One universe consists of glass and steel and wool cloths and leather briefcases and the smell of freshly ground coffee. The other consists of angels and sinister spiritual forces and somewhere out there places called Heaven and Hell. We palpably inhabit the material world; it takes faith to consider oneself a citizen of the other, invisible world.

"Occasionally the two worlds merge. In Bethlehem, the two worlds came together and realigned. What Jesus went on to accomplish on planet Earth made it possible for God someday to dissolve all the disharmonies of both worlds. No wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song, disturbing not only a few shepherds but the entire universe!"<sup>1</sup>

The word "angel" means "messenger." Angels are messengers of God, and they were sent by the Lord to proclaim the Good News of Jesus' birth. Lorie and I have a Christmas pillow that sits in the breakfast nook of our home during this time of the year. It reads "Christmas is a time when angels walk among us." Sometimes God sends His angels to declare His love in spectacular ways like in this passage, but other times He looks for people like you and me to be His messengers, His angels who will sing our own songs of praise. And when we join the angels as messengers of His love, heaven and earth converge together.

I close with this. A physician who works at Hospice of Metro Denver wrote the following back in 2005. "I just had one of the most amazing experiences of my life. I was driving home from a meeting this evening about 5, stuck in traffic on Colorado Blvd., and the car started to choke and splutter and die. I barely managed to coast, cursing I might add, into a gas station, only glad that I would not be blocking traffic and would have a somewhat warm spot to wait for the tow truck. The engine wouldn't even turnover.

"Before I could make the call, I saw a woman walking out of the 'quickie mart', and it looked like she slipped on some ice and fell into a gas pump so I got out to see if she was okay. When I got there, it looked more like she had been overcome by sobs than that she had fallen. She was a young



woman who looked really haggard with dark circles under her eyes. She dropped something as I helped her up, and I picked it up to give it to her. It was a nickel.

“At that moment, everything came into focus for me: the crying woman, the old Suburban crammed full of stuff with 3 kids in the back (1 in a car seat), and the gas pump reading \$4.95. I asked her if she was okay and if she needed help, and she just kept saying ‘I don't want my kids to see me crying,’ so we stood on the other side of the pump from her car. She said she was driving to California and that things were very hard for her right now. So I asked, ‘And you were praying?’ That made her back away from me a little, but I assured her I was not a crazy person and said, ‘God heard you, and He sent me.’

“I took out my credit card and swiped it through the reader on the pump so she could fill up her car completely, and while it was fueling I walked next door to the McDonald's and bought 2 big bags of food, some gift certificates for more, and a big cup of coffee. She gave the food to the kids in the car, who attacked it like wolves, and we stood by the pump eating French fries and talking a little. She told me her name, and that she lived in Kansas City. Her boyfriend left 2 months ago and she had not been able to make ends meet.

“She knew she wouldn't have money to pay rent Jan 1, and finally in desperation had called her parents, with whom she had not spoken in 5 years. They lived in California and said she could come live with them and try to get on her feet there. So she packed up everything she owned in the car. She told the kids they were going to California for Christmas, but not that they were going to live there. I gave her my gloves, a little hug and said a quick prayer with her for safety on the road. As I was walking over to my car, she said, ‘So, are you like an angel or something?’

“That made me cry. I answered, ‘At this time of year angels are really busy, so sometimes God uses regular people.’ It was so incredible to be a part of someone else's miracle. And, of course, when I got in my car it started right away and got me home with no problem. I'll put it in the shop tomorrow to check, but I suspect the mechanic won't find anything wrong. Sometimes the angels fly close enough to you that you can hear the flutter of their wings.”<sup>ii</sup>

Angels were messengers of God's love that first Christmas, and you and I can sing our own songs of praise in how we live our lives and in the words we share with others this Christmas, too. Yes, indeed, Christmas is a time when angels walk among us. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Philip Yancey, *Finding God in Unexpected Places*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>ii</sup> Source unknown. Sent to me by a friend. Edited slightly for grammar and style.

