

THE ANGELS AND THE SHEPHERDS

LUKE 2:8-20

Have you noticed how many Christmas carols we sing every year emphasize angels and their role in the birth of Jesus? Of course, some have the word “angels” right in the title: *Angels from the Realms of Glory... Angels We Have Heard on High... Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*. But other carols mention angels a lot: *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear (that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth)... The First Noel (the angel did say)... While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks (by night, all seated on the ground, an angel of the Lord came down)...* Is that appropriate? Is that biblical? Absolutely! We’ve been observing that angels were everywhere before, during, and after the birth of Jesus. Angels proclaimed, encouraged, rebuked, protected, and worshiped. It’s from the mouths of angels we learn all that’s significant for us to know about Jesus’ birth. So, this Advent season we’ve been inspired and informed by the impact of angels and their message that very first Christmas. It was life-changing for an over the hill priest named Zechariah, a baffled young virgin named Mary, a confused fiancé named Joseph, and common shepherds out in the fields surrounding the town of Bethlehem – which is today’s story. Let’s read it now. We’re told right there the angels’ message to the shepherds was “good news of great joy.” That’s a wonderful phrase, isn’t it? Kind of rolls off the tongue nicely – “good news of great joy.” What made it so? Why is the angels’ message still “good news of great joy” on Christmas Eve Day 2017? Let me share at least four reasons briefly today.

IT PROCLAIMS A GREAT SAVIOR.

Here’s part of what the angel said to the shepherds, “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!” (Lk. 2:10-11 NLT) He gives Jesus three very important titles all of which accentuate His greatness. First, He is Savior. Angels gave both Joseph and Mary specific instructions to name their baby “Jesus.” His name in Hebrew is Yeshua and it literally means “Yahweh saves.” Yahweh was the Old Testament name for God. The Old Testament character, Joshua, who brought the Jewish people into Canaan – the Promised Land – had the same name. But Jesus was a greater Savior than either Moses or Joshua. Yes, they were used by God to save God’s people in the Old Testament, the Jews, physically from bondage in Egypt. But through Jesus, God saves God’s people all over the world – past, present, and future – from eternal bondage to sin and death. Jesus accomplished that salvation at the cross and the empty tomb some thirty-three years later. He died in our place taking the punishment for our sins upon Himself and then rose again from the dead. He’s Savior.

Second, Jesus is Messiah or Christ. It literally means “the anointed one.” The Messiah was thought to combine three great roles for the Jewish people. The Messiah was a person God would send to be prophet, priest, and king. At the time of Jesus, the people expected someone who would defeat and expel the hated Romans and establish Israel as a world power. That’s one reason Jesus avoided the title of Messiah during His ministry. His understanding of what it meant to be the Messiah or Christ was very different than most people in His day and time. Jesus made it clear He came to set up

a spiritual kingdom and provide spiritual liberty from sin and death for everyone who became His follower. Third, Jesus is Lord. That title really points to the deity of Jesus. He is Immanuel – “God with us.” Truly, as the Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, put it - Jesus is Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. The angels’ message was indeed “good news of great joy” to those shepherds because it proclaimed a great Savior. It still does. Here’s another reason.

IT REVEALS GOD’S GLORY.

The Bible says, “Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in highest heaven.’” (Lk. 2:12-13 NLT) The angels were saying that the full “Godness” of God Himself, so to speak, was being displayed in this event. God is beautiful beyond description. Everything that is truly delightful and desirable is summed up in God. And all of that got somehow poured into and through Jesus. Here’s what the Bible says about Jesus elsewhere, “Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.... For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body.” (Col. 1:15, 2:9 NLT) It also says, “The Son radiates God’s own glory and expresses the very character of God.” (Heb. 1:3 NLT)

The angels were saying that by sending Jesus into the world, God permitted you and me to observe His glory in its highest form or greatest manifestation. Jesus is the most significant demonstration of God’s glory. That act – sending the Son of God into this world in the person of Jesus – revealed for all time and eternity what God is made of. What’s the single most impressive thing about God? Jesus. Sending Jesus into this world broken and busted up by sin reveals that love is at the core of God’s heart. Sending Jesus reveals God is fundamentally gracious and merciful above all. Sending Jesus reveals God is – today and forever – for you not against you. This was and is the most glorious thing about God’s glory. There’s no more magnificent and marvelous aspect of Almighty God than when He sent His Son, Jesus, into this world.

Have you ever played Pictionary? You draw pictures to illustrate a word or a concept and everyone else playing the game tries to guess what you’re illustrating. One Christmas season, a family created different phrases for a Christmas version of Pictionary. Nine year old Sarah picked the phrase “Glory to God in the highest.” That would be pretty tough, right? How would you draw or represent graphically “Glory to God in the highest”? Sarah decided to focus on just the word “God.” She drew a human form with a face, arms, and legs. And then she added large hands with nail prints in the palms. She drew Jesus to convey the idea of God. She was very accurate biblically. The angels’ message was indeed “good news of great joy” to those shepherds because it revealed God’s glory. It still does. Here’s yet another reason.

IT PROMISES GOD’S GRACE AND PEACE.

Part of the angels’ announcement said, “‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.’” (Lk. 2:14 NIV) That compact phrase tells us two awesome things you are made for. Because Jesus came into the world,

you can be a grace receiver. That word “favor” can also mean “grace.” Grace is a gift given to people who in no way deserve it or its benefits. God’s favor rests upon you today not because you’re a good person, because you’re not good enough. Neither am I. God’s grace rests upon you not because you’re so moral and upright, because you’re not. Neither am I. There’s an old Dennis the Menace cartoon that depicts Dennis and his little buddy, Joey, leaving the Wilsons’ house next door with some cookies in hand. Dennis turns to Joey and says, “Mrs. Wilson gave you a cookie because she’s nice, not because you’re nice!” Dennis the Menace was a great theologian. God’s favor – God’s grace – is just like that. It’s never something you earn, or deserve, or that you’re entitled to receive. All you can ever do with grace is just receive it like a Christmas gift – gratefully. Then you show your gratitude to God by how you choose to live every day of your life from then on.

Because Jesus came into the world, you can also be a peace possessor. Before we go any further, let me try to clear up an old misunderstanding. The old King James Version of the Bible translates this verse in the following way, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Lk. 2:14 KJV) It sounds like the angels are promising some future time of universal peace and brotherhood. That may be why every Christmas season you hear these sentimental, misty-eyed, and lump in the throat sort of connections between Christmas and world peace. The birth of Jesus has come to be associated with governments, armies, and people just not fighting each other anymore. If that was what the angels were saying the first Christmas night, it’s turned out to be a miserable failure, hasn’t it? The world we live in is anything but peaceful.

Without boring you with all the differences in the Greek words and grammar, let me suggest that more modern versions of the Bible provide a more accurate translation of what the angels promised. The NIV puts it like this, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” (Lk. 2:14 NIV) The NLT renders it like this, “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.” That’s a very different promise. The angels never promised that Jesus’ birth would somehow result in worldwide peace. Instead, peace was being offered only to the people who become objects of God’s favor – His saving grace. Peace is offered to people who have pleased God by turning away from their sin and rebellion and then embracing Jesus as Savior and Lord of their lives. Are you a grace receiver and a peace possessor? Has that happened to you? It doesn’t happen automatically to anyone. It’s something you choose personally and consciously. The angels’ message was indeed “good news of great joy” to those shepherds because it promised God’s grace and peace. It still does. Here’s a final reason.

IT’S AVAILABLE TO EVEN ME.

That wonderful truth is illustrated best by the recipients of this angelic message. It’s a mistake to think of first century shepherds as noble, admirable, ruggedly glamorous people. If you had lived in Jesus’ day, it’s more likely that you would have looked down your nose at shepherds. Everybody else did. They were part of the despised, lower class. They were most often economically poor people who led a nomadic existence

spending little if any time at home. Shepherds lived hard, brief lives. They had boring jobs caring for stubborn, dumb sheep 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. They lived hard lives out in the open exposed to the hot sun, cold nights, bone-chilling winds, and soaking rain. Life was a pretty joyless experience for shepherds in Jesus' day.

Knowing that brings deeper meaning to what the angel said that first Christmas night. It was to these low class shepherds, he said, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people." (Lk. 2:10 NLT) It was a message for "all people." What was the angel saying? He wasn't implying God is a universalist when it comes to saving people for eternity. He doesn't save or intend to save every sinner without exception. God only saves sinners who repent, trust in, and follow Jesus. Instead, "all people" means God shows no partiality in saving sinners. We live in a world where people are separated as male or female, rich or poor, black or white, educated or uneducated, powerful or powerless, and citizen or immigrant. None of those distinctions matter in the least to God. None of them exclude you from God's salvation. In fact, the only qualification you need is to be included among "all people" is that you're a sinner in great need of salvation, you're a victim of sin's bondage and brokenness yourself, and you've received with joy the news that Jesus has come to fix you. In other words, you want and need transformation and you know that only happens through Jesus.

Don't overlook how those shepherds were transformed. By the end of that night, joy exuded from every pore of their being. "The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!" (Lk. 2:20 MSG) They'd stepped out of their limited, boring, and hard lives long enough to see this world through angels' eyes and angels' praises. They now saw Jesus the way angels saw Him. If we could see our lives and our circumstances in life from the perspective of those celebrating, worshipping angels, nothing here would be quite the same. We could celebrate the presence of Jesus in all our circumstances – even in life's flattest, hardest, and saddest moments – because we know God's grace and peace rests upon us.

During World War 2, a young mother by the name of Anne along with her two small sons went to live with her parents. Her Air Force husband was serving in Europe. It was Christmas time. Anne and her parents did everything possible to make it a memorable, special Christmas for those two boys. The tree was put up and decorated. Gifts were purchased and hidden away to be brought out on the big day. The thrill, excitement, and beauty of the season pushed aside the anxiety and pain of war at least for a while. But only for a short time. Just a week before Christmas Day, word came that the two boys' daddy would not be there that Christmas or any Christmas to come. He'd been killed in action.

Anne went to her room and closed the door. Her mother and father talked quietly and wondered what on earth to do. Finally, they decided to take down all the decorations and throw out the Christmas tree. Deep sorrow had replaced their joy. After a while, Anne came out of her room, saw the empty space where the tree had been, and asked, "Why, Mother? What have you done with the Christmas tree?" Her mother said, "Your

dad and I got rid of it. It just seemed so out of place with you being so broken-hearted.” But Anne said, “Oh, no, Mom. Bring it back in. Christmas was made for such a time as this!” Indeed it was. Indeed it is. It was – and it still is - good news of great joy.

If the deepest meaning of Christmas is some kind of shallow, nameless happiness, you can take it or leave it. But if Christmas proclaims a great Savior, reveals God’s glory, promises His grace and peace, and it’s available to someone like you and me - broken and busted up in different ways by living in this sinful, broken, and busted up world - then we can celebrate it again this year. This is good news of great joy! The deeper the hurts in your life and mine, the deeper the reason to rejoice this Christmas. Shall we celebrate Christmas this year? Yes, we must celebrate Christmas, because Jesus was born for such a time as this.