

A Day of Joyful Celebration Luke 2:8-14

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There is something fitting and appropriate about Christmas being on a Sunday. Of course, churches used to worship on Christmas Day regardless of the day of the week it fell on. Over the years, that faded because people were busy and, frankly, even Pastors were eager to travel to their own families. However, there is no question that the joy of Christmas is deeper when we stop to worship together and remember why we are celebrating.

This morning I take you one more time to the hillside and the Shepherds. This time I want to focus on the words of the angels in Luke 2:8-14.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger."

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased"

Specifically let's reflect on the words, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people."

Good News

The angel said the announcement of the birth of Christ was "good news." The angel meant more than the good news of a dad or doctor coming out of the delivery room to announce, "It's a boy!" That is always great news. This news is great for much deeper reasons.

First, the birth of Jesus is good news because **it shows God has not forgotten us**. The birth of Jesus was the fulfillment of a promise God made countless times since the time of creation. We have all had times when we wondered if anyone cared about our lives. It may have been in a time of crisis or perhaps in a time of loneliness. One of the loneliest times of the year is Christmas. While everyone else is off celebrating with their families, you may be all alone.

It's possible this is the first Christmas without a spouse, sibling, or parent. Maybe this is the first Christmas the kids won't make it back home. Maybe you can't make it home for Christmas or you are for some reason estranged from your family. Maybe this is your first Christmas as a

divorced person. In all these situations, it is easy to feel you are forgotten. No one seems to notice or care.

But this is what makes Christmas special. The whole point of His coming was to let us know that He does care. God cares about you whether you feel like He does or not. He cares about you whether you believe it or not. The gospel is the good news that God does not give up on us; He has not abandoned us; He does not look past us. He sees us.

The birth of Jesus was also good news because **it means a remedy for our sinful alienation from God is available.** The life of an Old Testament Jew must have involved seemingly one sacrifice after another. They were always in need of making atonement for their sin. I wonder how long men had to stand in line at the temple to offer a sacrifice for sin. How long was it after they left the line that they felt they needed to get back into line to “atone” for new sin?

Don't you feel this way at times? You start the day by taking time to confess all your known sins. But, before the day is over, you have to repent from the bucket full of sin you committed the remainder of the day. And if you are like me, some of those sins are the very things I confessed and desired to turn from earlier in the day.

The good news of the gospel is this: we no longer have to live our lives plagued with guilt. Jesus came to give His life as a payment for sin once and for all. On the cross Jesus cried, “It is Finished!” The price for our sin was paid. Guilt no longer need haunt us. We no longer need to fear that an unconfessed sin was going to consign us to Hell.

In 1 Peter 3.18 we read, “Christ suffered for our sins once for all time. He never sinned, but he died for sinners to bring you safely home to God.” I like this better in NIV: “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit.”

The righteous (Jesus) for the unrighteous (us). He died as a payment for our sin. Imagine if someone came into your bank and paid off your mortgage! It would be a relief and a great blessing. That debt is NOTHING compared to the sin debt we owe before the Lord.

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, our sin (yes every bit of it) is forgiven. Guilt is removed. Forgiveness is granted. We are embraced by love. This is what the coming of Christ meant. This is the Good News of the Gospel in every day of our lives.

Third, **the message of Christmas is the good news that futility of life is banished; meaning and purpose is infused into our lives.** The message of the secular world can be summarized with the phrase: “you live, you die, that's it.” There is no eternal dimension to our lives, no lasting purpose. So, the goal in living is to enjoy whatever you can for as long as possible before you die. Is it any wonder people feel life is meaningless . . . because in this view, nothing has any lasting meaning. There is no incentive for morality. No reason to serve others. There isn't any reason to care about anyone's life but your own (leading to the rampant violence and the deep

disregard for the life of others that we are seeing today). So, we use people, we live wild, and we die alone as if jumping off a cliff into a deep nothingness.

Here is the thing, if you misdiagnose the problem, you will arrive at the wrong solution. This is what our society does and is doing. The problem in our life is our alienation from God! What we need is not more stuff, we need the new life and orientation that Christ gives. We don't need to redefine morality, we need to live by the standards God has set. Jesus said, "I have come so you might have life and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10). Through Christ our frantic and constant activity and our crazy mood swings give way to contentment and joy.

Christmas is good news because it says life DOES matter. We are living now to live again. There is a purpose for/in our lives. There is a God whom we serve, and a Savior who wishes to make us His own. The Lord has gone to great lengths to give us a reason for living. He sent His Son to show us that this life is not all there is.

Great Joy

The angels brought good news that would bring great joy. What is the joy of Christmas? If you asked a child (and many adults) they would have no trouble with this one . . . the joy of Christmas is the presents they get from Santa and others! This is not the joy the angels were talking about.

Joy is a word used throughout the Bible. When the Bible uses the word joy the word is closely related to gladness and happiness, however, joy is more a state of being than an emotion; it is a result of choice. Don't miss this . . . joy is a state of being that is the result of a choice. And what is the choice that results in joy as a state of being? **It is the choice to surrender to the Lordship of Christ.**

In John 16:20-24 Jesus told the disciples,

²⁰ I tell you the truth, you will weep and mourn over what is going to happen to me, but the world will rejoice. You will grieve, but your grief will suddenly turn to wonderful joy.

²¹ It will be like a woman suffering the pains of labor. When her child is born, her anguish gives way to joy because she has brought a new baby into the world. ²² So you have sorrow now, but I will see you again; then you will rejoice, and no one can rob you of that joy. ²³ At that time you won't need to ask me for anything. I tell you the truth, you will ask the Father directly, and he will grant your request because you use my name.

²⁴ You haven't done this before. Ask, using my name, and you will receive, and you will have abundant joy.

Don't miss the contrast, the joy of this world and the joy of the believer is different. The joy of the world is found in amusements, indulgences, and in victories in games (such as sports). Jesus said the world was going to rejoice that He was dead! However, the believer's joy is different. It is anchored to Christ. The analogy to labor and delivery is a good one. No one has ever said, "I wish I could have more children because I loved being in labor!" The joy is in the result of the labor. Holding that child in your arms is where you find joy.

In much the same way, the Christian's joy is in the result of this life . . . the reality of a right relationship with God and the promise of life beyond the grave. The joy promised is not something we will get after we arrive in Heaven. It is something we can know and experience RIGHT NOW! This joy comes from walking with Christ. Genuine faith is practical. It results in a change in the way that we live our lives. Jesus calls us to “follow Him.”

The book of James argues that faith without obedience is not real faith. There are too many people who have an intellectual knowledge of Christ and that is where it stops. James says, “You have as much faith as the demons . . . maybe less because they have enough sense to tremble in His presence.” The point is: real faith results in following the life and directions for life that we find in the Bible. Obedience is the evidence of genuine faith!

You can tell someone that you love them and are committed to them. However, if you treat them poorly, cheat on them, and do nothing to cherish them . . . your declaration of love will sound very hollow. Your relationship will be superficial. But . . . if you show your love by your devotion, your attention, the way you give preference to the needs of this person . . . your relationship will be extraordinary and filled with joy. And that is where we find the joy in following Christ.

We also have joy because God’s Promises are shown to be reliable and extraordinary. I touched on this last week. Jesus is the fulfillment of God’s promise. Christmas shows us that the Lord can be counted on to make good on His promises. Jesus promises us great things

- We will have peace that is deeper than the world can give
- We will have forgiveness and life beyond the grave . . . no condemnation
- We have anytime access to God
- We have the Holy Spirit living inside of us, and praying for us
- We are being made into a new creation through the fruit of the Spirit
- We are united with other believers in a bond the world cannot understand
- We can respond to trials with love rather than hostility
- His Word will guide our path
- He is preparing a place for us
- He will never leave us or forsake us
- All things in our lives will be weaved into good (making us more like Him)
- God will give us strength for the trials of life
- He promises that when we leave this life and enter into the eternal life He has prepared for us, we will be more alive than at any other time.

These promises are GIVEN to US. These things are better than any gift under a tree. The greatest gift at Christmas is what God gave us that first Christmas. The shiny gifts will rust, break, or wear out. The promises of God, however, become a source of support and encouragement throughout life. Any time we are facing a tough time, we can call on these promises and find peace and joy in them.

For All the People

Finally, the angel tells us that **the good news of great joy is for all people**. In other words, NO ONE is excluded. You may have grown up feeling excluded or rejected by others, but you are not excluded by the Messiah. It doesn't matter what gender, race, or socio-economic status you have. God's love has nothing to do with your past, your reputation, or your talent (or lack thereof). The message of the good news of Christmas is offered to you by God's grace, not because of your accomplishments!

There was a cartoon in the Chicago Tribune many years ago on the front page of the paper (before such a thing was seen as politically offensive). There was a Christmas Tree with a solitary gift still under the tree and the tag had "John 3:16" on it. The caption said, "The unopened gift."

Jesus came to redeem the world. He came to save anyone and everyone but . . . He does not coerce anyone. The gift is offered, but each one of us, individually, must choose to receive the gift.

This became clear to me one night at our youth group meeting. Our youth pastor used Revelation 3:20 where Jesus says to the church in Laodicea, "Behold I stand at the door and knock, if any man hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in, and sup with Him, and He with me." My youth Pastor said, "Imagine Jesus saying this to you. He wants entry into your life and you have to make the decision of how you will respond." He pointed out that we don't become followers of Christ because of our parents, our citizenship, or because of the church we attend, or the Bible we read. We each must decide whether we will open the door of our hearts and let Him come in and save and lead our lives.

Even at 13 years old I figured I was already a Christian. I went to church all the time with my parents and tried to be a decent guy. In fact, I think most of my friends thought I was a Christian (or Christ-follower), but it never dawned on me that this is a relationship with God that I have to receive, or by default, refuse.

That night was my awakening. My spiritual eyes were opened, and I did believe. I put my trust in Jesus not as THE Savior but as MY Savior. I told the Lord that I could hear him knocking and was opening the door to invite Him to live and move and lead in me. It was the best decision I ever made.

The question that I want you to grapple with is that same question: Have you opened the door and invited Him to come in and lead your life? Have you turned to Him as the only who can save you and make you into a new person and set your life on a new course? Of all the gifts given to you at Christmas or any other time . . . have you opened this gift; the most important gift of all?

It is not about saying magic words or doing the right combination of things . . . it is about a settled decision to trust Christ alone for your salvation and direction in this life. Don't leave this gift unopened.

Conclusions

What happened in Bethlehem is not a back story to Christmas . . . it is THE story of Christmas. Christmas is not just a party that takes place every year, it is a deeply personal and transformative celebration of what God has done for us. He came IN PERSON to rescue those He created. He came for you.

If all you celebrate is Santa Claus and the secular characters of Christmas, you have missed the point! But, then again, I suppose if that was all you were concerned about you would not be in the sanctuary or watching online this morning.

If you will allow me, I have some suggestions for celebrating this day appropriately in light of the true message of Christmas.

- 1) Make sure you have opened the door and have invited the Lord to be the honored guest at your Christmas table.
- 2) Share your testimony of when you opened the door of your heart to Christ with as many people as you can.
- 3) Sing for joy. Sing the Christmas carols, hum the tunes, rejoice in the Lord! Let people know you have the joy of Christ in your heart. Hope they ask, "What's up with you?" So you can tell them.
- 4) Use every gift you receive as a reminder to think about and give thanks for the very best gift: the new life that comes through Christ.
- 5) Live all of life joyfully. People are generally nicer at Christmas. I encourage you to carry the "Christmas Spirit" with you throughout life and throughout the year. The truths of Christmas do not change with the new year! Neither should our joy.
- 6) When you are going through hard times, don't make the mistake of misdiagnosing the problem; understand the need for a more tenacious faith. The answer to every situation is always found in Him rather than in the trinkets and excesses of the world.
- 7) Savor the moments. Every one of them is a gift from God. Every moment! The worst moments and the best moments are all redeemed by the Lord. Every moment is more meaningful and purposeful because of Him.
- 8) As you celebrate Christmas today, and maybe in days to come, look for ways to draw attention to the Christ of Christmas. A simple comment such as, "Hasn't God been good to us!" or even to children, "Aren't you glad it is Jesus' birthday?"
- 9) Finally, when the day is all over, and you fall into bed, look up to Heaven and say a little prayer: "O Lord, with all the things that happened today, I want you to know that I don't forget what the day is all about. This is the anniversary of the day that you brought good news to bear on my soul, the good news that has become the joy of my life and the confident assurance for my eternity. I want to thank you from the depth of my being."