

Luke 2:1-14 “The Good News of Great Joy”

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This week most of the news has been consumed with coverage of the impeachment proceedings. On Thursday, *Christianity Today*, an evangelical magazine started in the 1950's by the late Billy Graham, rocked the headlines by publishing a controversial editorial calling for the removal of President Trump. No matter on what side of the political aisle one sits, I think that we can all agree that the impeachment is *bad* news. Whether one thinks it is *bad* news of a president who truly used his power “to coerce a foreign leader to harass and discredit one of the president’s political opponents.” Or whether one thinks it is *bad* news because it is the most recent attempt of a progressive campaign to overturn the 2016 presidential election. Whatever the case, we all can agree that new of the impeachment is *bad* news. In our text today, we have more world news. Not bad news of impeachment of the president of the United States, but good news of great joy. When we consider the news, we learn that *you should believe in Christ so that you might not perish but have eternal life.*

Context

The time is that of the Roman Empire, first century, during the reign of Caesar Augustus. In the boondocks of the Empire, in the vicinity of a small town in Judea, Bethlehem, the most significant event in the history of the world takes place—the birth of the ChristChild. Shepherds are keeping their flocks by night. Like any other night, totally boring, monotonous; a silent night. The shepherd on watch is fighting off sleep. Talking to himself about hunting in order to stay awake. Within a split second, all are awoken, suddenly traumatized by an awe-evoking sight. The angel of the Lord appears, hovering over them. This majestic creature is a messenger from the Creator of the cosmos. Just dispatched from the throne of God, he is like a luminescent light still glowing with the blinding radiance that emanates from the splendor of God’s glorious being. While they are breathlessly waiting for their hearts to start beating again, the angel makes an urgent announcement. Verse 10, “*Fear not, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.*” The Christmas commercial is about good news of great joy. Which raises two questions: Why is the news *good*? Why is it so *greatly joyful*?

The answer lies in the context. Luke’s original audience. To whom does Luke write? *...to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus* (Lk. 1:3). “Most excellent” is the title of a Roman governor (Acts 24:2; 26:25). As we would say the Honorable Judge Smith. Most Excellent Theophilus is probably a Roman governor, at least a high-ranking official in the Empire. He has come to know Luke and other Christians in the early church who have witnessed to him about Christ. But he has heard other reports about Jesus. Contradictory reports. For example, others report that Jesus’ birth was the product of sexual immorality. He was a sorcerer in league with Satan and performed His miracles by devilish power. He was a dangerous revolutionary, an insurrectionist who was a threat to Roman governor Pontius Pilate. The Jews eventually had him crucified because of blasphemy. So Theophilus has contradictory reports about Jesus. Two radically different interpretations of the life of this Galilean.

Luke writes to him. Why? Verse 4, *that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught.* Theophilus is *uncertain* about what the Christians have taught him regarding Jesus. He doubts, lacks assurance, because their facts conflict with those of their

enemies. Someone has false facts about Jesus. Whose interpretation of the life of Jesus should Theophilus believe? The Christian interpretation or their enemies'? He doesn't have a New Testament to read. The reason for which the Holy Spirit inspires Luke to write. Two different interpretations of the facts which causes for Theophilus uncertainty, doubt about what he was taught. So what we know of Theophilus is that either he is a new believer who has come to faith in Christ in which case he now finds himself facing *Anfechtung, faith-crisis*. His new faith now assailed by uncertainty, attacked by doubt. Or it may be the case that Theophilus is not a believer, but a seeker exploring the Christian faith who now harbors some doubt, uncertainty. Whatever the case, that Theophilus lacks certainty regarding what he was taught about Jesus indicates that he is questioning competing worldviews. Exploring comparative worldviews.

Materialistic Atheism

Perhaps reconsidering the mainstream cultural worldview of his day for highly educated folk. As a Roman official, Theophilus enjoys a classical education. Trained in philosophy, ethics, rhetoric. Certainly in rural areas, uneducated folk still believe in classical mythology. But not most educated government officials of high rank. They don't subscribe to Greek mythology, but Greek philosophy. Perhaps Theophilus' doubt causes him to reconsider the prevailing philosophy among intellectuals of his day which in contrast make the gospel *good news of great joy*.

What is that? Materialistic philosophy. Which teaches all that exist in the universe is matter. All of reality boils down to chemicals and particles. There is nothing spiritual. No god, no angels, no soul, no afterlife. At death, the spirit of a person is annihilated; evaporates like a mist in the sunshine and ceases to exist. This philosophy began with the Milesian thinkers before Socrates, Plato, Aristotle. Incidentally, this ancient Greek philosophy has been microwaved and reserved today as science. The predominant worldview today of Western civilization. Mainstream in Europe; a totally secular, post-Christian continent. This worldview grows increasingly fashionable in the U.S. Popularized most recently by the so called "New Atheism." Richard Dawkins, *Outgrowing God*. Faith is for children. The point is: Atheism, or materialism, allows for *no* good news. None.

In a godless, self-existent universe there is no *good* news. News is not *good* or *bad*. News just *is*. In a godless universe, there are no categories of good or evil. So were Theophilus to hear other news of an earthquake which kills thousands of people, it cannot be reported as *bad* news. For in a godless world, the earthquake is just a natural event. Not bad or good. It is just a natural event in a natural universe, brought about by purely natural causes and is to be viewed as part of the natural order of things. That is all that can be said about the earthquake which causes thousands to perish; it just *is*. It *is* what it *is*. Not good or bad. The universe doesn't care about good or bad. It simply *is* and people are left to deal with it. That is the message of any news. Deal with it until you die and face the yawning abyss of nothingness. In contrast, the news of the birth of the ChristChild is good news. For it is a message *great joy*. Joyful news. But in a godless universe, there is no joy. Only joylessness. For, by definition, a godless, self-existent universe is totally accidental. Unplanned, undesigned, unintended. No purpose in its existence. No joy in the universe. Existence is ultimately joyless.

Had the universe never existed, it would not have mattered. Ultimately, it would have made no difference. The universe is doomed to die anyway. Scientists say the universe is expanding. Everything is growing farther and farther apart. As it does, it becomes increasingly colder, energy is used up. Eventually all the stars will burn out, all the matter will collapse into

dead stars and black holes. There will be no light, no heat, no life. Only the corpses of dead stars and galaxies, ever expanding into the infinite graveyard of cold dark space. That the universe ever existed will not make any difference. Ultimately, it would not have mattered that the human race ever existed. Mankind is a doomed race in a dying universe. Because the human race will eventually cease to exist, ultimately it wouldn't matter that it did exist. The human race isn't any more significant than a colony of ants on which one pours gasoline and sets on fire. Both meet the same end of nothingness. The same is true of each individual person. Ultimately, nothing in one's life matters. All of it is meaningless; whether rich or poor; famous, unknown. Everything with which you are now consumed is ultimately meaningless; work, boyfriend, school.

Yet Theophilus might object and claim that his life matters now. His life is important now because he is a Roman official, he can do good for others. He can fight for justice, help the poor. But that only shows he matters for the moment. Kansas song, "All we are is dust in the wind. Just hang on, only for the moment then the moment is gone." Ultimately the moment doesn't matter. Whatever he did in the moment is ultimately meaningless. Like philosopher Michael Ruse recently stated. He is a distinguished professor, 79 years old. He just published new book, *A Meaning to Life*. In it, he states about his life-long career, "In the end, you know truly that it doesn't mean a thing" (*World*, 26; 12/28/19). Still someone might object, "But maybe his life affected the course of history." That too is meaningless. In a godless world, there is no meaning to history. Human existence is completely accidental, unplanned. Result of spontaneous combustion, gravity, random mutation. There is no reason for history. The human race is an accident of chance, thrust in to a purposeless universe for no reason. That is all we are, freaks of nature, shoved into an unplanned universe devoid of meaning to live a purposeless life. After that, death. Then nothingness. Epicureans, "Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die." Find whatever kind of meaning one can for the moment, then the moment is gone. There is nothing after that. Annihilation, then nothingness. In a godless universe, there is no meaning in life. No rhyme or reason for anything. No ultimate joy! Joyless, joyless, everything is joylessness.

Joy

But then an angel bring good news of *great joy*. So suddenly we might find ourselves like C. S. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, to quote the title of his famous autobiography; that relates his own conversion from atheism in which he was "surprised by Joy." Lewis explains that there is joy out there in the joyless universe, Absolute Joy, Ultimate Joy. For Lewis, like Another world. About his long spiritual journey, he writes, "Up till now each visitation of Joy left the common world momentarily a desert" (181). Joy existed in another realm. A new dimension of reality, from which one is visited. Visited by Joy. "Each visitation of Joy left the common world momentarily a desert." The visitation is the experience of the awareness of God. Exactly what the angels bring news of. *Good news of great joy*. Joy that breaks into our world from the other side. Joy that enters this realm. How? Verse 11, *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*. Joy emerges into the joyless universe as a person, a Savior born into the human race. That a Savior is given to the world implies that the human race desperately needs salvation; evident in the reason that Luke writes to Theophilus. He lacks certainty because of competing belief systems; alternative philosophies and theories about the world and our existence in it.

The comparative world religions indicate that the human race needs salvation. For they don't show that the human race is in search of the one true God but rather reveal that it is on the run from Him, hiding from God. World religions are not the result of people searching for spiritual truth, as if they don't possess it. They do. People are created in the image of God, the law of God is written on their hearts. Which haunts them with the truth of God, disturbing them, so that in response they hate the truth. *So they exchange the truth of God for a lie, they suppress the truth in unrighteousness* (Rom. 1). Every time the idea of God comes to mind, they suppress it, and suppress it, press it back down below the threshold of waking consciousness, over and over to the extent that they finally become addicted to untruth, given over to untruth. This is what explains the rise of idolatry from the ancient world to the modern; Baal, Ashteroth, Marduk, Chemosh, Zeus, Thor, Hinduism, Buddhism, directed panspermia. All which serve to show that the defiant human race is in rebellion against the God Who Is There.

That is the natural condition of man. Hostile to God, at enmity with God. Alienated from God. Repelled at the thought of God. Unwilling to enjoy God. *"There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God* (Rom. 3:10). In man's natural condition, there is not one person who has ever sought God on his or her own initiative. Not one. Left to one's own will, no one has ever wanted to seek God. The natural condition of the human race is so depraved that no one has ever desired God, or yearned for God from one's own heart. By one's own spiritual strength. No one wanting the pleasure of God's presence. No one desiring God. If you think that you can remember a time when you sought God, that may be true, but only because God first sought you and drew you to Himself. But apart from the grace of God, it is impossible for anyone to seek Him because of man's natural condition in a state of spiritual death. The genetic trait inherited from the father of the human race after he rebelled against God in the garden and experienced spiritual death himself. Since then ever one of his descendants worldwide has been born spiritually dead. Exactly why Jesus tells Nicodemus, *unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of heaven* (Jn. 3:3). One must be born spiritually because in our physical birth we are born into a state of spiritual death. DOA. Totally unable for spiritual good. Unable to delight in God, unable to take pleasure in His presence. That is the natural condition of the human race. Yet into this God-hating world darkened by unbelief, God the Father sends forth a Savior. Because of His infinite love and compassion and mercy, in order for the human race to know Joy, God sends forth a Redeemer. Who definitely saves by sending the Holy Spirit to those whom He chooses in order to regenerate their hearts, to give rebirth to them as new creatures. Who are then enabled by a renewed will to willingly seek God and call out to Him in faith.

Savior

Who is He? Verse 11, *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*. Notice the description of the Savior. First, He is **Christ**. Often people think that *Christ* is Jesus' last name. But not, it's a title. Christ derives from the Greek word that is used to translate the Hebrew word for "Messiah." Which means "Anointed One." The *Anointed One* is Jesus' official title. Just as in our culture, we have official titles for certain public offices; President, senator. So too in ancient Israel the *Anointed One* is the title for a public office. What office? That of the Ultimate Warrior king of prophecy. *2 The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the LORD and against his Anointed One...8 Ask of me, and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession. 9 You will rule*

them with an iron scepter; you will dash them to pieces like pottery" (Ps. 2). The Anointed One is the Son of God Warrior-King who will conquer the nations and rule the world.

Second, *He is Christ the Lord*. In the Greek text, the word for *Lord* is *kurios*. The term used in the Septuagint for God. The Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, in which *kurios* is the name used for God. So the Christ is *kurios*, divine, worthy of worship. Not merely a man, but a divine-man, a man in whom deity dwells, now born into the human race. Exactly was predicted long ago by the prophet Isaiah, *the virgin shall conceive and bring forth a son, Immanuel*, "God with us." Within the womb of the virgin Mary, the eternal Logos unites to human cells, human organs, the human soul of a developing unborn infant. Deity is joined to humanity and what is brought from her womb was not just another cute cuddly baby, but God become flesh. God incarnate. If the shepherds simply want a photo-op with a child of royalty they could go to Herod's palace. But they seek this child. Why? Because the baby in the manger is God in the flesh. That is the announcement to the shepherds. God is in the manger! Christ the Lord. The Child grows and becomes known in history as none other than Jesus of Nazareth. The infinite God-Man. Given that we might know Joy. Because of His life of perfect obedience to the law, He earns righteousness that He freely gives to those who believe in Him. And by His substitutionary death on the cross, He vicariously pays the penalty for sin that we owed but could never pay. Satisfying divine justice, quenching infinite wrath, appeasing God's anger and thereby reconciling God to humanity. So that we might know joy in the pleasure of God's presence as we experience the adventure of eternal life on the New Earth.

Guilt

If that not reward enough, that we might know joy now! At the moment. In this life. Again, back to the context. Luke writes to Theophilus that he may *know the certainty of the things he has been taught*. Why does he lack certainty? Because of competing truth claims. Alternative belief systems. Comparative world religions. Why do they arise? Human guilt. The guilty conscience with which we are born. World religions arise from an attempt to ease the burden of a guilty conscience. To get rid of the thought of God, to erase the idea of God from waking consciousness, so that man doesn't feel guilty. Guilt is the reason for which Christ is born, not only to free from the bondage of sin but the *guilt* of sin. "Jesus does not want, as the only guiltless one, to ignore a humanity that is being destroyed by its guilt...Out of selfless love for human beings, Jesus leaves his state as the one without sin and enters into the guilt of human beings. He takes it upon himself" (Bonhoeffer, 34).

This is what makes Christianity so radically different from all other man-made religions, philosophies and theories: The forgiveness of sin which provides relief for the guilty conscience. One might invent human theories to provide an interpretation of reality in which there is no God, but in real reality the guilt of sin is never removed. There is no relief for the guilty conscience but through Christ. *let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience...* (Heb 10:22 NIV). The atonement for sin that Christ makes on the cross removes the guilt of sin, cleansing the guilty conscience. The salvation that Jesus offers, removes any angst of past sin. That is why Jesus is born. So that we might joy and enjoy joy. But guilt robs of joy. Guilt destroys joy. Yet Christ is born so that we need not smother under a guilty conscience and bear the suffocating burden of guilt. That we might breathe the free air of forgiveness, which comes by faith. By belief in the ChristChild who

is born to bear the guilt of sin for us. That we might be surprised by Joy and know joy in the everlasting presence of God.

That is the Christmas message. Not the bad news of impeachment. Not the *is*-news of a godless, self-existent universe. But the *good news of great joy*. Good news of great joy. Amen.