

Good evening, and a very Merry Christmas to all of you. I begin tonight by inviting you to take a big, deep breath, and then do it again. It has been quite a year and I feel like we all need a breather. I connect monthly with some pastors in the area and at our December gathering, the conversation centered on the weariness we feel in our churches. It has been a tough year where the forces of darkness seemed to take ground, that every bit of news was bad, and fear ruled the day, and it didn't seem like anyone could get along. And as if the news couldn't get any worse, my house got tp'd on Saturday night. It went so nicely with our Christmas decorations. The forces of darkness sure are diligent...it was in the low 40's. This felt like a heavy year, didn't it?

I hope you have come tonight ready to hear some good news! Because God has an answer for all of that. You know, I love that Christmas is celebrated at the end of the year. Even though Jesus was likely born in the spring or summer, the end of the year is a time where we naturally look back to evaluate and look ahead to hope and dream. And if you find yourself looking back and then struggling to look ahead with enthusiasm or optimism, I'm so glad you are here. Each Christmas we get a chance to remember, celebrate, and be inspired by the story of the birth of Jesus. That regardless of what has come before, Christmas is a season to renew our hope, ignite our joy, and bring us to a place of peace.

If you are a guest with us this evening, we have spent the last several weeks looking at the different characters of the Christmas story to be encouraged by the way they lived expecting Jesus. Tonight, we look at one more group whom we can all relate to. If you have heard this story 100 times, may I encourage you to hear it afresh. And if it's new or unfamiliar to you, it is a message I pray you take to heart and own for yourself.

[SLIDE: Luke 2:8-14] ⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

God sends his angels and a celestial laser-light show to announce the birth of our Savior to a group of shepherds. While they arrive at a time distant from our own in a culture different than our own, their message addresses challenges just like our own. The message of Christ is timeless because the brokenness he came to heal is tireless.

A message of light in the midst of darkness

This announcement shows us not only who Jesus came to save, but who Jesus came to be and what he came to do. There are two beautiful truths of the angel coming to announce Jesus' birth to shepherds. We might expect the Messiah of Israel to first be announced to religious or political leaders, but God chose first the shepherds, outcasts of society, ceremonially unclean, the lowly. That audience is meant to be an encouragement to us that Jesus came for everyone. Additionally, the one who would be called the Lamb of God and would call himself the Good

Shepherd was announced first to shepherds as a picture of his ministry. I love both of those pictures, and if you've heard this passage preached, you've likely heard that before. But there is something I do not want you to miss. I don't think the time of day is an accident. These shepherds were watching over their flocks at night when the angel came. They were working in the darkness to take care of their sheep. They were exposing themselves to the dangers of night to protect their flock. And that's exactly what Jesus did by being born. He stepped into the darkness of a broken world to take care of his flock. He exposed himself to the dangers of night, to wicked hearts of men who would reject him and crucify him, but he did that so that we could be made eternally safe.

Jesus came to bring light into a dark world. That is demonstrated here by the glory of God that shined brightly and was in great contrast to the night sky. If you know your OT, you know that God had removed his glory from the temple centuries prior, and he had been silent for 400 years. But now, in this scene, the glory of God had returned in the glow around the angel and in a baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

You may have heard of the unusual bet between two professional gamblers a few months back. One bet the other that he couldn't stay in pitch black room by himself for a month. Now, if you're 25 and someone challenges you, you have to say yes. They settled on the bet and he came out after 20 days. I read an interview where he talked about hallucinating and almost losing his mind. Now, why would I tell you that story. I tell you that because, while the bet might seem absurd, the bet they made accidentally reveals a beautiful spiritual reality: **We are meant to live in the light.** In the Gospel of John, Jesus is called the light, his life is the light of men, and his followers are called sons and daughters of light. One day God will return to wipe out all the darkness, but while we wait, know that darkness has already been defeated through a cross and empty tomb, and God has placed those of us who are his followers as beacons of light to push back against the darkness until he returns.

A message of good news in a sea of bad

Not surprisingly, we're told the shepherds were filled with great fear. When you come face-to-face with the divine or any of his angelic messengers, it's a reasonable first reaction. **But when we encounter God on the basis of his grace, we have nothing to fear.** The angel commands them "Do not fear". It is a command we've seen throughout this series and different Christmas passages and it is a command given to all of us who would follow God. The command goes beyond an absence of fear. It is a call to live in hope.

That hope is based on the substance of the news given by the angel. This is not bad, fear-inducing news. This is good, joy-inducing news. The angel uses three words to describe who the child is, and it's the only place in the New Testament where they are all used together. This child is a **savior**, a deliverer, who was born to defeat and free us from the power and the penalty of sin and satisfy God's justice. This child is the **Christ**, the Messiah, the gracious king who reigns, but who calls himself a servant, and who loves deeply those who are citizens of his kingdom. And he is the **Lord** God himself; the magnificent truth that the God who promised to send a Messiah sends himself to take on flesh, enter creation, and finish the work of salvation. And it's this work that leads to the last part of the angel's message.

A message of peace in a time of division

There was a national survey taken recently and for most of questions asked, the surveyor found very little agreement. However, there was one question that got the most agreement of all: Do you think we are divided?

There certainly is a great amount of hostility in the world today, but it is a symptom of the divide sin placed between God and man. But in their song of praise, the angels sing of a peaceful, harmonious relationship that can exist between God and man. This is a peace that goes beyond an absence of conflict, this is the shalom of God that will be made possible through the reconciling work of Jesus. It is a peace based on the favor of God, not by anything we do, and it is offered through this baby born in Bethlehem. It is only through peace with God that we'll be able to find peace with each other.

If you are here tonight and not a regular church goer or a follower of Jesus, I want you to know the good news proclaimed by the angel, the baby born to be the Savior, and the peace with God that is possible is offered to you. It's a gift. There's nothing to do to earn it. But a gift is only good news if it's accepted. That's your part. Jesus came so that you could be with God forever.

And so, given this incredibly good news, how will these shepherds now respond *expecting* Jesus?

[SLIDE: Luke 2:15-20] ¹⁵ 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." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Now, let me say that I think Luke is giving us a summary version of the conversation between these shepherds, because they seem very measured. If he was quoting them verbatim, I'm sure the first word would be "Dude!" If you were given a message of this magnitude in a way this majestic, how would you respond? For the shepherds, **this news was too good to ignore and too good to keep to themselves.**

We are told they went with haste. They hurried! They went to Bethlehem to look for this baby and when they found him, everything the angel told them was true. **When we go looking for God, he will be found by us.** Some of you are here this evening trying to take on the darkness, fear, and division on your own, and my guess is that it may not be going well for you. The good news is that **you don't have to.** If you run to Jesus, go with haste, you will discover that what God says about him is true. And once you've made that discovery, do what the shepherds did.

When what they were told came to pass, when God's Word was confirmed, they were so moved with joy and praise that they couldn't help but tell others. They became the first evangelists.

They declared the good news of the Gospel. They didn't have a lot of words because they didn't need a lot of words. They just said everything the angel said to them and they praised and glorified God like the angels. The people listened and heard with wonder. If you are a follower of Jesus, you are the keeper of the greatest message ever given. That unto us is born a Savior. From God to angels, angels to shepherds, and from generation to generation. Now it's your turn. There is a scene that will play out tomorrow morning in a lot of our homes. Our kids are going to wake up, and then they are going to wake you up, though I'm sure they'll let you sleep until 9:30 or 10:00. You see, they are going to wake up *expecting*. They are going to wake up with the anticipation and promise of a gift, and their response is an example to us. They will go with haste to the stockings or Christmas tree, and when they receive the fulfillment of this promise, they will turn to those around them and say, "Look what I got!" That's exactly what the shepherds did. The message of the angel is certainly one about light and hope and joy and peace, but really, it's a message about the greatest gift that was ever given. It's the gift of God himself, given to all who would accept it. And so this Christmas, go with haste, accept your gift of Jesus, and then go tell everybody "Look what I got!"

We close tonight with the lighting of our Advent candle. It's a beautiful picture of how we receive the light of the good news of the birth of our Savior. Receive it with haste and pass it on to others.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope. -Romans 15:13