

## To All People...

*\*\*Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

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In his best-selling book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, Philip Yancey contrasts the humble circumstances that surrounded Jesus' royal visit to planet earth with the ways of today's world:

*\*\*In London, looking toward the auditorium's royal box where the queen and her family sat, I caught glimpses of the...way rulers stride through the world: with bodyguards, and a trumpet fanfare and a flourish of bright clothes and flashing jewelry.*

*Queen Elizabeth II had recently visited the United States, and reporters delighted in spelling out the logistics involved: her four thousand pounds of luggage included two outfits for every occasion, a mourning outfit in case someone died, forty pints of plasma, and white kid-leather toilet seat covers. She brought along her own hairdresser, two valets, and a host of other attendants. A brief visit of royalty to a foreign country can easily cost over twenty million dollars.*

*In meek contrast, God's visit to earth took place in an animal shelter with no attendants present and nowhere to lay the newborn king but a feed trough. Indeed, the event that divided history, and even our calendars, into two parts may have had more animal than human witnesses. A mule could have stepped on him.*

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995)

*\*\*During the Season of Advent, Pastor HeyYoung and I have been loosely following a book by another UM Pastor, Adam Hamilton, called The Journey. So, we have been looking at the unfolding of the Christmas story in terms of its movement - God's revelation to Mary (and the changes that caused in her life), Joseph's dejected walk home from the town of Ein Kareem (where he first heard the news that Mary was pregnant); yesterday we talked about the journey of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem - a grueling nine or ten day trip taken when Mary was nine months pregnant, into a strange place, where she ends up giving birth in a stable. We talked about journeys that we don't want to take.*

The picture that has been emerging throughout this season is that this whole story is not the calm, serene, Currier and Ives Christmas card scene that we so like to hold on to. It was actually, gritty, down to earth, disappointing (to those directly involved in it). It resulted in heartache, and pain... and confusion, and at times even terror, as well as great joy.

And it involved the most unlikely cast of people - a 15 year old girl from a 'nothing' town called Nazareth hears the amazing words: "*Blessed are you among women*". A quiet, humble carpenter (who may have been an old man) finds himself the 'step-father' of the Messiah... and has to do some serious soul searching before he accepts what is happening, and continues his journey.

And here, tonight, we are hearing once again the "Good news of great joy" delivered by Angels to, at best, *unlikely* recipients. I've been saying throughout this series that we've heard the stories so frequently that we seldom stop to consider how odd some of it actually is. We've turned it into a 'fairy tale' type story, that is just accepted, and not examined. To our loss....

Take the shepherds, for example...

**\*\***We think of shepherds and Christmas - here in 2012 - and, probably, immediately what comes to mind is an idyllic, pastoral scene. In fact, the word 'pastoral' comes from a root word that means - shepherd! It's a very positive, serene image for many of us. (Although I do remember the rather troubling conversation that our youth leader overheard last year as he was in a store looking at costumes for some sort of Christmas thing...and a young mother was there with her daughter, where they came across some shepherd costumes. The little girl asked her mother, "What does a shepherd have to do with Christmas?" And the mother answered something like, "That's some religious thing. We don't believe in that.")

You might be surprised to know that that rather disdainful attitude towards shepherds is actually close to the attitude of the people in Jesus' day. Shepherds were on the low end of the pecking order of society in that day. They generally didn't own any land - so they were forced to graze their sheep on other people's property, something that was tolerated, but not exactly welcomed by the landowners. (How do *you* feel when someone's dog finds its way to your lawn?)

Others were simply 'hired hands' - the sheep they were watching over did not belong to them. They owned practically nothing, lived in tents, and wandered the fringes of society. They were uneducated, poor, and carried the air of those who would simply rather be left alone; those who enjoyed solitude, and weren't crazy about interacting with people. (They were truly 'off the grid'!)

Isn't it curious that these people were the ones to whom God chose *first* to reveal the "Good News of Great Joy"? Social outcasts? Hermits? And it wasn't simply a perfunctory message - it was delivered with great fanfare.

\*\* *"An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the Glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified."*

"The Glory of The Lord shone around them"... can you picture it? But that wasn't all - after the announcement was given (we'll come back to that in a moment) it was as if heaven itself couldn't hold back any longer:

\*\* *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."*

\*\*Now its not just a single angel - who may have simply appeared as a man (although the "Glory of The Lord" is a theological term that refers back to the 'Shekhinah Glory' the 'light of God, that shone on the mercy seat in the Holy Place in the ancient tabernacle'. This was the 'evidence' for the wondering Israelites that God was with

them.) But now, that Light is shining out here in the wilderness, scaring some shepherds half to death... and it's not just *one angel now*, its 'a great company of the heavenly host'.

Suddenly! The 'heavenly host' means "the armies of heaven." Appeared... suddenly! To announce the greatest thing God had done... since creation. And all this... to... shepherds?

What a cast of characters... Mary, Joseph, these shepherds. But then there's another group of people who receive news of this event that changed the universe. And while in one sense, these are the sort of people that the *world* would expect to be given notice of something important. They are wealthy. They are powerful - at least, they move in high circles; they were granted an audience with King Herod easily enough.

**\*\*But still, their appearance in this saga is a surprise, in that these *magi*, as Matthew names them, are not Jewish. They are not Israelites, and have no connection with the Jews that we know of. The word magi comes from the same root word that we get our word "magician", and they were probably a cross between astrologers and astronomers.**

They were people who studied the heavens to look for signs of important events. Their religion (if they were from Persia - modern Iran - as most scholars believe) was probably Zoroastrian, which is a kind of monotheistic philosophical faith. But think about this: they travelled about a thousand miles to get to Bethlehem, a journey that must have taken between three and six months.

Tradition has them arriving on January 6, which we now celebrate as Epiphany, but, after they left, Herod called for the destruction of all baby boys in Bethlehem under two years old, so their arrival may have been much later than that. But either way, these men searched the heavens, and saw - what? - Jupiter in retrograde and the alignment of certain stars and constellations? (There's lots of theories about that) - but whatever it

was that they saw, they were convinced by it that God was doing something very specific: that a King was born.

So God revealed the *same* message to these 'foreign Gentiles' that he did to the Shepherds. God gave it to them in a way they could understand, in their own terms... they *knew*. And so they packed up and made that long trip to see for themselves, coming prepared with expensive gifts... fit for a King.

\*\* Let's ponder once again the message given to those shepherds:

*Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy **which will be to all people**. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

The message that these heavenly messengers brought was intended for all people everywhere. It was intended for the young, and the old. For the rich and the poor. It was intended to be given to people of all nations and faiths. For all time. Because it was a message that we all need, not just to hear, but to receive.

The message was - and is - that a Savior has been born to us. To all of us. A Savior.

As I was thinking about those words again, about that promise, this past week, it occurred to me the the Promise also has imbedded within it a 'diagnosis' of sorts, about us, from God. Now, since God created us all, and knows us, it seems to me that this would be important information.

The fact that God's "Good news of Great Joy" is that we have been given a Savior, certainly implies that we need *saving*. And therein lies a very important part of this News. Some might say 'the *catch*' as if God is trying to deceive us, or trick us into something that we don't want or need. The old 'bait and switch' ploy.

I love words (which, I guess, is a good thing, given my occupation). But, again, it occurred to me this week that the importance, or the effectiveness of this Good News

hinges on a simple preposition. The promise is that God has Good News of Great Joy which is given to all people.

What becomes very clear, however, both through Scripture and 2,000 years of human experience is that there is a vast difference between 'to' and 'in'.

It is obvious that this Good News of a Savior might have been given *to* all people, but it is clearly not *in* all people. Over a third of the world claim belief in Christ, and call themselves Christians, but by the standards of Jesus himself - who didn't simply call on people to 'acknowledge' him, but rather, to 'follow' him, there are many people in this world - most - for whom the Good News has never been internalized. It was *to* them, or 'for' them - as a gift of Love, it is offered to all people, as we've said tonight. . . but never having been embraced by an act of will, or received, it remains 'to' and not 'in'.

The Gospels (the first four books of the New Testament) tell the story of Jesus, what he did, what he taught, what happened to him as a result. The message that he clearly taught during his ministry on earth was to 'turn, and follow him'. The word Jesus used was 'repent'.

'Repent' has a many facets to its meaning, (and I know a lot of people have been beat up by well meaning and insensitive Christian evangelists, who have used this word like a hammer, calling out judgement on people). But the 'bottom line', we might say, involves a recognition that we are in need - of a Savior. It's recognizing that we can't create meaning in life on our own, and that everything we try do to accomplish that, ultimately fizzles out. Life has an interesting... some might say, a *cruel* way of constantly dousing us with reality. We try to find meaning in material things... and they end up turning to dust in our fingers.

\*\*I remember thinking a few years ago, as the stock market was doing well, and my retirement fund looking pretty good that "I'm going to do better in retirement than I am working." You start making these plans... then - 9/11 happens, two wars, the housing/lending crisis (that we're still reeling from). The stock market tanks. Europe's economy

falls apart, too. Unemployment soars. Life becomes less certain - at least financially. Now, I'm thinking I'll be lucky to retire at 70. Boom! Life happens!

\*\* We put our hope in family, in friends, try to find ultimate meaning there... and we find too often that those relationships get strained, and stressed very easily. And holidays especially - this 'most wonderful time of the year' - tends to bring out the worse in people. Or, even when our relationship ties are nearly perfect, we end up losing people we love, and their vacancy leaves deep gashes in our souls... that never seem to completely heal.

\*\*Jobs end up being routines, or we lose them... or, we feel unappreciated... we try to build security in an artificial, gated, world - away from the 'madness'. And yet we are still touched by the insanity of a Stony Brook, or realizing that the highest murder rate in history is in a next door town, or a SuperStorm brings unimaginable destruction of memories, and lives, in a place that we always thought was safe.

See, the thing is, (and God has known this all along) that we will never find real hope, lasting purpose, ultimate meaning, or true peace in *anything* this world can offer us. There are parts of this world that point to these things - the parts that are based on love - but it's only the *real thing* that will satisfy. We are made to find life fulfillment in union with God. And nothing else will do it for us.

\*\*We've been designed to live in relationship with God. Acknowledging that is what 'repentance' is... living that out in our day-to-day lives is what it means to answer the call to 'follow' Jesus. To have a Savior.

Now, it's kind of a job requirement for me to be the one to remind 'the world' that the essence of Christmas is not where society is constantly shouting to us that it is. But, really, I have nothing against Christmas gifts, and parties. Dianna and I really like driving around and looking at the Christmas decorations and lights that people put up. I like Christmas cookies (obviously) and egg nog, and .... I'll stop there! We enjoy giving

gifts - and, sure, we like getting gifts, too! But, my friends, listen, this is the truth: *you will never find what you are looking for in life under your Christmas Tree.*

You are not going to find the thing that you are searching for in life in a holiday celebration, no matter how hard we try to make it perfect. You're not going to find Life in a bank account, or a promotion, or any human relationship. But you will find that all these human things take on deeper meaning, joy and significance in the light of Christ.

In Christ our relationships have a solid foundation to build on, forgiveness becomes the norm, and there is real joy for us in the blessing of others. Our assets have an outlet - we can give with joy, and bless others and find that the blessing comes right back at us. We still grieve when those we love are taken from us, but we find that there is a 'hope that stands the test of time' as we rest on the Solid Rock of the Promises of God in Christ.

As a follower of Christ, we find that we not only have a strong moral code to guide us in a world that more and more tries to cut corners for its own gain, but we have the eternal promise of God's forgiveness when we mess up, and a clean slate on which to start again. This is what our Savior does, this is what we all were promised 2,000 years ago. In the Good News that first came to a bunch of society's rejects, outcasts, and peripheral people.

...Oh, and to you and me, as well. Listen again to the responses of those in the Christmas story for whom the "Good News **to**" became "Good News **in**"...

\*\* Mary:

"My soul magnifies the Lord,  
And my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

\*\* Shepherds:

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, just as it was told them.

\*\* Magi:

When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

\*\* Enjoy your Christmas, brothers and sisters... but don't look for hope under your Tree. It can be found, just not there. Open your heart to the presence of the Holy One, and you will find that this Good News is not simply *to* you... it is *in* you.