

Advent 2017:

Unwrapping The Gift Of Christmas

*The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.
(Isaiah 9:2 ESV)*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.
(Micah 5:2 ESV)*

*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.
(Luke 2:10 ESV)*

*“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”
(Luke 2:14 ESV)*

Joy: Good News Of Great Joy
December 17th, 2017
Luke 2:8-20
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning. I want to invite you to open your Bibles to Luke 2:8-20; that’s on page 857 in your pew Bibles. This is the third Sunday in Advent and this is the reading that goes along with the lighting of the third Advent candle. We are supposed to read this text and to reflect upon the theme of JOY. Christmas is supposed to make you happy – I don’t know if you know that. If you aren’t happy this Christmas then you probably aren’t doing it right. So hopefully today will be helpful.

Now, in point of fact the reading for today is just Luke 2:8-12, but I think you get a better sense of the passage by reading all the way to verse 20 but in keeping with our decision to do a traditional advent this year we will focus in on verses 8-12 and we will try to understand why the birth of Jesus is such incredibly good news. Hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 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!”

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. (Luke 2:8–20 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now obviously this is one of the PRIME Christmas passages. You know me well enough to know that I like preaching on some of the more obscure Christmas passages. I like pulling out Revelation 12 every once in a while or Genesis 3:15 – right? Those are under utilized Christmas passages – but this is one is the one we read every year. This is the one that puts us in the Christmas spirit, but its supposed to do more than warm our spirits it is intending to direct our worship. There is more going on here than a heart warming little event. People in this story are thinking they are not just reacting. The shepherds are reflecting on what they have seen and heard and Mary is treasuring and pondering these things in her heart.

That’s what you are supposed to do.

I remember a couple of years ago our daughter Peyton was in the Christmas Eve play that we did here. She was Mary and she was very proud to have been given the lead role. It wasn’t a speaking part – the children just had to move around in costume while a leader read the story – but Peyton took her role very seriously none the less and she explained her role to anyone who had missed her virtuoso performance. She said:

“I was pondering Jesus in my heart – that’s what Mary did you know – she pondered Jesus in her heart. At one point I forgot and was looking for my auntie to wave at her, but then right away I went back to pondering Jesus in my heart.”

Somebody obviously told her that that’s what Mary was doing – and I’m glad they did because

that is kind of the point of the story. This isn't just a sentimental event – on its own it isn't even that interesting of an event. Poor people had babies all the time – that isn't the sum total of what's going on here. This means something and the meaning is found in the words that were spoken by the angels. The shepherds knew that too – that's why I wanted you to read all the way to verse 20. Look at verse 20:

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, **as it had been told them.** (Luke 2:20 ESV)

They didn't go home excited because they had seen a poor kid born in a barn – they went home excited because of what had been told them. It was what the angels SAID that made all the difference in the world.

So what did they say? Now we are ready to zoom in on today's passage. Let's look very carefully at verses 10-12:

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." (Luke 2:10–12 ESV)

The angel literally says in verse 10: "I proclaim the Gospel to you". He uses the word *euangelizomai* which when you see it written looks an awful lot like the word "evangelize". So he says, "Listen up! I've got GOOD NEWS FOR YOU, I've got the GOSPEL for you so gather round now; and then he says something very interesting. He says:

¹¹ **For unto you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:11 ESV)

For unto you. Those three English words come from one Greek word. A very small Greek word, the Greek word *humin* (pronounced *whom-inn*) which literally means "for your advantage". It is what scholars refer to as the dative of advantage. The angel literally says: "For YOUR ADVANTAGE is born this day in the City of David a Saviour who is Christ the Lord."

Jesus is FOR YOUR ADVANTAGE! Are you hearing that? Christmas is GOD HELPING YOU! Christmas is about God SAVING YOU. The baby born in Bethlehem is the gift that changes the world.

His coming is much to our advantage.

That is what the shepherds were thinking about that – that is what Mary was pondering in her heart and that is what we are supposed to be thinking about today. We are supposed to be asking the question:

Why Is The Coming Of Jesus Such Incredibly Good News?

Why did the shepherds think it was such a big deal? Why did Mary? And why is it still? That's what I want to help you think about this morning.

The first answer I think is this: I think the coming of Jesus is really good news because the world is such an incredible mess.

1. Because the world is a mess

At the time of the first coming of Jesus the world was a terrible mess from the perspective of the covenant community. Jesus was born, we figure around 4-6 BC – which is confusing I grant you – but our dating system was based on an estimate made many years later. At the time of Jesus' birth the covenant community was in an awful mess. The northern tribes had been defeated and dispersed by Assyria in the 8th century BC. Many individuals Jews from those tribes migrated south and joined the southern Kingdom but then in 6th century BC the southern kingdom was defeated by Babylon and they were taken into exile. And then miraculously in 539 BC the Persians defeated the Babylonians and the Jews were set free and they began to return to the land in waves.

For a while everything looked pretty good.

But then in the 4th century BC the Greeks defeated the Persians and the Greeks were nowhere near as benevolent towards their subject peoples as the Persians had been. In the 3rd century BC the inheritors of the Greek world fought each other for control – often on top of the Jewish people. The land of Israel lay between competing powers and they swept back and forth across

the land and trampled the common people into the dust. It was like being run over by a herd of elephants on a monthly basis.

Now right around this time the Romans started to get involved in this part of the world and they put a stop to the southward expansion of one of these Greek Kings – a man named Antiochus IV Epiphanes. Rome literally drew a line in the sand and told Antiochus Epiphanes that he had to withdraw from Egypt or Rome would enter the war on the side of the Ptolemies. Antiochus withdrew back towards Syria through Palestine and as he did he massacred huge numbers of Jewish people because they had attempted to rebel against him while he was down in Egypt. Frustrated in his attempts at world conquest, Antiochus began to work out his rage against the people of God. He outlawed reading or even possessing copies of the Old Testament and he brought the worship of the temple to a halt and he even sacrificed a pig on the alter in the temple and he set up a holy object - likely a meteor - as a monument to Zeus - an act of sacrilege described in the Bible as “the abomination of desolation”.

This eventually led to an uprising, known in history as the Maccabean Revolt. A Jewish priest murdered the Greek official who had been sent to force him to participate in a pagan ritual and he and his sons became the leaders of a Jewish guerrilla force. That led to a brutal and blood 7 year war that eventually led to the ouster of the Greeks and a 100 year period of Jewish independence.

But it was not to last. Two members of the Maccabean family went to war with each other over control of the movement. The war was so bitter that they BOTH actually called upon the Romans to come in and intervene. Hear that! The Jewish people during their one moment of independence INVITED THE ROMANS to come in and keep the peace. Well guess what happened? The Romans wouldn't leave and now whatever hope there was for independence was gone with the wind.

They couldn't rule themselves and so they surrendered themselves to the Romans!

Are you catching that frustration? This is where we are in the history of the covenant community! Israel felt like a rag doll tossed and abused and discarded by one global power after another. The only question at the time was: “Who is going to beat us up this month?” Will it be the Romans to the west of us? The Parthians to the east of us? The Egyptians to the south of us? Or will we take

a turn and beat up ourselves? Who is going to crush our hopes today?

That was the question.

The world had never been worse for the covenant people and that was why the birth of a Saviour was such incredibly good news. We could use some saving right about now, the shepherds thought, because we have been on our own in a really bad world for a really long time and we've had enough!

Things were about as bad as they could be and to top it all off all the so-called leaders of the covenant community were only making things worse. That's the second reason that the coming of Jesus was received as really good news.

2. Because human leaders are only making it worse

At the time of Jesus' first coming there were several groups competing for leadership inside the covenant community. Most of them make cameo appearances in the New Testament. First of all you've got the Sadducees. The Sadducees were a group of highborn Jewish aristocrats who were way too cosy with the Romans. They made terrible accommodations in order to maintain control of the temple. They were seen as religious liberals – they only accepted the first 5 books of the Bible as authoritative. They were political operators and they were widely despised.

The next group is the one we're most familiar with – the Pharisees. They were reformers who were trying to provide an alternative centre of gravity given the corruptions of the temple under the Sadducees. They basically said that because the temple is so corrupt we need to make the Bible and the synagogue the centre of religious life. They were all about the law – the Sadducees were all about the temple and the sacrifices. The Pharisees wanted to “obey” their way into kingdom – the Sadducees wanted to sacrifice their way into kingdom.

The third group was the Essenes. They thought the whole thing was a mess so they moved out into the desert and built monasteries. They were pretty sure that the end of all things was at hand so they were stocking up on canned goods and predicting the date of the Rapture – in contemporary terms.

The fourth group was the Zealots. They were assassins and terrorists. Judas Iscariot had belonged to this movement before joining in with the disciples – that’s what “Iscariot” means. It means assassin. One of the groups within the Zealot movement was called “the Sicarii” – hence Judas Iscariot. They were known for killing people with a dagger. They attacked Romans but also compromising Jews. They were particularly antagonistic towards the Sadducees. They would come up behind a worshipping Sadducee during a festival and they would stab him in the ribs and then melt back into the crowd. They were terrorists and they did far more harm than good. Every time the Sicarii struck the Romans retaliated 10 fold. People came to hate the Sicarii almost as much as they hated the Romans.

Those were your leadership options at the time when Jesus was born. You’ve got the compromisers, the legalists, the crazy canned good people and the terrorists. What are you going to pick from that basket of deplorables? There was not a single good option in the bunch!

And that’s why the coming of Jesus was such incredibly good news. Listen to what the angel says:

“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. (Luke 2:10–11 ESV)

Are you hearing that? The King has come! The Son of David – the long awaited Messiah. The leader we have been waiting for.

Can you enter into that joy today friends? Can you feel some of the frustration of the shepherds? Do you ever feel like all our leaders are just some other flavour of crazy? Do you ever feel like there are no good options in the bunch? Didn’t we just see this play out this past week in Alabama? How would you like to have been a voter last week in Alabama? Behind door number 1 you’ve got a guy who has been accused of molesting children. Behind door number 2 you’ve got a guy who favours abortion right up until the moment a child comes out of the womb. Is there a door number 3? Could someone nominate a chimpanzee or a bar-b-q brush or something? What in the world have we come to when those are the options we have to choose from?

Of course its not much better here. Is there a political party left in this country that you can vote for with a clean conscience? Has it ever been any worse than it is now when it comes to human leaders?

Then you should know a little something about why the coming of Jesus is really good news. This is why we pray THY KINGDOM COME – THY WILL BE DONE ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN – doesn't that prayer feel a little more natural than once it did? That prayer just OOZES out of me now and had they known it, it would have OOZED out of those shepherds in Bethlehem and that's why the coming of Jesus was received as REALLY, REALLY good news.

Thirdly I think the coming of Jesus is really good news:

3. Because there is something fundamentally wrong with human beings

That's the conclusion you come to at the end of the Old Testament story. Early in the Old Testament story there is a bit of optimism. You get David and you get Solomon and you think, we might be pretty close right now to the Kingdom of God on earth. We've got the land, we've got the law, we've got people coming from all over the world to learn about the ways of God – things are pretty good – and then things go really bad. It turns out that even the best of us – even the bravest like David and the wisest like Solomon – even the best people that we can produce eventually fall into sin and lead us into ruin.

So by the end of the Old Testament there is no optimism apart from the promise of God. By the end of the Old Testament the prophets are convinced that there is something fundamentally wrong with human beings. Jeremiah says it this way, he says:

“The heart *is* deceitful above all *things*, And desperately wicked; Who can know it? (Jeremiah 17:9 NKJV)

The human heart is unreliable, Jeremiah says, and it will never lead us in the direction of life and peace. By the way, that is exactly what the Bible says before the great flood of Divine Judgment in the days of Noah.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. (Genesis 6:5 ESV)

That was the state of humanity right before God wiped them off the face of the earth with a flood and that was the state of humanity again at the end of the Old Testament. Why do we keep ending up here the prophets ask? And the answer is that there is something fundamentally wrong – there is something fundamentally broken in the human heart.

That's what the Jews have learned by the end of the Old Testament – or at least, that's what the prophets have learned. They've learned that they need more than FREEDOM from their ENEMIES – they need salvation in and of themselves!

Do you see that?

Even if God destroyed the Assyrians – which he did – the people would still wander away into idolatry and apostasy – which they did! We talked about that last week. Even if the people were rescued from exile in Babylon, they would still wander away from God in their hearts. If you free us from the Greeks we will make war on ourselves and call in the Romans. We can't be free. We can't enjoy peace because there is something fundamentally wrong with us.

Something needs to change inside.

The prophet Ezekiel knew that. In the climactic promise of the Old Testament in Ezekiel 36 God – FINALLY SAID – what the prophets had been longing to hear. God said:

I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. (Ezekiel 36:26 ESV)

God said that when he came to save them the next time he wouldn't just PRESS BACK the enemy, he would CLEANSE and PURIFY the human heart. He wouldn't just FREE THEM, he would FIX THEM. Thanks be to God! That's why the coming of Jesus is such an incredibly big deal!

It's a big deal because we are lost and our compass is broken and we can't find our way home.

4. Because we don't know how to get home

That's what the prophets had figured out by the end of the Old Testament. They were lost and they could not get home. They had been trying to find their way home since Genesis 3. Do you remember how Genesis 3 ends? Genesis 3 tells the story of Adam and Eve's fall into sin. It tells the story of how they rebelled against God and tried to become as gods deciding right and wrong for themselves. As a result they got kicked out of the Garden – do you remember that? Verse 24 says:

He drove out the man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life. (Genesis 3:24 ESV)

God kicked them out and shut the door and then he placed a giant angel with a flaming sword to block the way. Listen, I think that really happened but I also think it's a pretty obvious symbol. That's a symbolic way of saying – you can't go home!

There's a big angel with a sword in the way! That's Bible talk for "its never gonna happen". You can't work your way back to the Garden.

The Garden is gone and you will never find it again. Not in your own power.

Try as we might. Try as they did. Its not going to happen.

But here's the thing – we always think we're making progress. Because the heart is deceitful above all things – so we always think that we are making choices that will bring us closer to home. But they never do.

Let me ask you a question, you 40 year olds and 50 year olds and 60 year olds and 70 year olds – those of you have you have lived long enough to answer this question – let me ask you. Are we making any progress?

Are we there yet moms and dads or are we more lost than ever?

You know the answer.

If you read history, you know the answer. If you watch the news, you know the answer. If you've got kids, you know the answer. We are chasing our tails out there. We are walking in circles and it feels like we will never get home.

It felt like that in Luke 2. It felt EXACTLY like that in Luke 2 and that is why the coming of Jesus is such INCREDIBLY GOOD NEWS.

Because he knows the way. He is the way! He said that in John 14:

"I am the way, and the truth, and the life. (John 14:6 ESV)

You see that? Jesus knows the way! Jesus IS the way so if you are in him then you are going home. If your sins are covered by his blood, if your heart is filled with his Spirit, then you are going home.

And you aren't going home empty handed. Not only did Jesus pay our debt, he completed our probation! He did what we were supposed to do and never did! He obeyed God perfectly – he kept all the commandments to earn a share in things he already owned. He did that so he could share those things with you and me. That's why the Bible says:

For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why it is through him that we utter our Amen to God for his glory. (2 Corinthians 1:20 ESV)

We say thank you to God through Jesus because we inherit everything from God in Jesus.

Right? That's the Gospel! And that's why the coming of Jesus is such incredibly good news.

This is light in the darkness. This is hope for the hopeless and this is JOY TO THE WORLD. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.