

Last week we saw how God, by means of providence, used Caesar Augustus to fulfill God's prophecy about the Messiah being born in Bethlehem.

And we left off after v.7, with the just born baby Jesus lying in a feed trough.

And now the scene shifts to what was going on that very moment just outside that little town – in a field.

And this is a passage I was really looking forward to studying, because it's **good news of great joy**.

So this morning I get the same privilege the angel of the Lord got – I get to announce to you this morning **good news of great joy**. So that means if you don't go out of here happy this morning, I've blown it.

The Announcement of the News

When I decided to ask Tracy to marry me, I put a lot of thought into how I would ask her. I spent weeks thinking about it trying to figure out the perfect place, the perfect setting, and just the right words to say.

That's kind of the way it was when God decided to make the announcement to the world about the birth of His Son into the world.

He made sure to pick just the right people to announce it to, in just the right setting, at just the right time, in just the right circumstances.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Lit. **watching the watches of the night** (they were taking turns – each would take one of the watches of the night).

They took turns watching out for thieves and predators.

December 25

You may have heard that sheep were kept outdoors like this in most places from April to November, but in some places they were kept outside year round. So we really have no idea what time of year this was.

By the third century, some Christians were celebrating Jesus' birth on Dec.25th, others on Jan.6th, and others were arguing that we shouldn't celebrate His birth at all.

In the Roman Empire, prior to Constantine, they worshipped the sun, and celebrated *Sol Invictus* ("the Unconquerable Sun") on what they thought to be the winter solstice (Dec.25).

The winter solstice is the shortest day of the year. The sun kept getting lower and lower in the sky, the weather got colder, and the sun looked to be dying out. Then, after the winter solstice, it started making a comeback.

It got higher in the sky, the days got longer and warmer, and the Unconquerable Sun triumphed yet again.

This was a major pagan celebration complete with orgies and all the trappings of pagan worship, and it was considered to be the birthday of the sun.

Some people say the Christians started celebrating Jesus birth on this day in order to mix together that pagan holiday with Christianity (which was probably close to what Constantine had in mind).

Others say it was just coincidence that both were celebrated the same day.

Others say the Christians did it to *replace* a pagan holiday with a Christian one.

Regardless of what their intentions were, that third one is what ended up happening.

Nobody celebrates *Sol Invictus* anymore, nor are orgies a part of most people's Christmas routine (generally speaking).

We can only guess what the people's intentions were. My guess is there were some who were syncretistic (wanting to mix the religions together), and others who sincerely wanted to get rid of the pagan holiday.

But what their intentions were doesn't really matter to us now.

It's superstitious to worry about the origins of a holiday. You can't taint a day by doing bad things on that day.

Lots of bad people have done lots of bad things on every day of the year. My desire is to redeem every day and every opportunity.

What the pagans believe about December 25 has no power over me. The pagans are wrong about every day.

But for me to celebrate a Christian event in a Christian way is always a good thing to do. And it is consistent with God's desires for us to have annual reminders of important things.

So we don't know on what day Jesus was born, but if we want to celebrate it, Dec.25 is as good a day as any.

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them,

Who is this angel?

Luke has mentioned him once already. Flip back to 1:11.

When Zechariah was first informed about the fact that his barren wife was going to conceive the forerunner to the Messiah, it was this angel who appeared to him.

Luke 1:11-12

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear.

In v.19 we find out exactly who it is:

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news.

So the angel of the Lord in ch.1 is Gabriel.

Anyone who reads the Bible much will notice that most of the time when an angel is referred to, he is just called "an angel."

But there are 65 times when the angel is called "the (or an) angel of the Lord" (Hebrew: angel of the Yahweh, Greek angel of the Lord)

What is the significance of the angel of the Lord? How is he different from any other angel?

TT Ex.3

Luke was very deliberate in the wording he chose to describe this angel. The whole phrase comes right out of the LXX of Ex.3:2.

Ex.3:1-2

Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led the flock to the far side of

the desert and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. 2 There an angel of the LORD appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.

Lk.1:11 ὥφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου

Ex.3:2 ὥφθη δὲ αὐτῷ ἄγγελος κυρίου

Luke quotes Ex.3 with identical wording. At the very least, Luke is wanting to call to the reader's attention the famous incident with the burning bush.

Perhaps it's also an indication that it's the very same angel.

Since very often it's "*the* angel of the Lord," it seems as though this is one particular individual.

Many of you have probably been taught that the Angel of the LORD is God Himself – specifically, the pre-incarnate Christ - Jesus.

The reason people believe that is because that angel speaks the words of God in the first person.

Ex.3:3-6

So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange sight--why the bush does not burn up." 4 When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, "Moses! Moses!"

And Moses said, "Here I am."

5 "Do not come any closer," God said. "Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground." 6 Then he said, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face, because he was afraid to look at God.

So v.2 says it's the angel of the Lord, but then it is God who speaks.

The very first time the Angel of the Lord appears in the Bible is when he appears to Hagar.

Gn.16:9-10

Then the angel of the LORD told her, "Go back to your mistress and submit to her." 10 The angel added, "I will so increase your descendants that they will be too numerous to count."

Passages like that have driven some people to conclude that the Angel of the Lord is not an angel at all – it's God.

That seems to be the majority opinion, but there is one, major problem with that theory: he is called an angel.

So my theory is that he *is* an angel.

And Luke, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, had the same theory:

Acts 7:30-32

"After forty years had passed, an angel appeared to Moses in the flames of a burning bush in the desert near Mount Sinai. 31 When he saw this, he was amazed at the sight. As he went over to look more closely, he heard the Lord's voice: 32'I am the God of your fathers

So it was an angel. But the angel so represented God that he actually spoke with the voice of God.

That wasn't a foreign concept in ancient times at all. It was very common for someone to send a representative (especially a king) in his place to speak for him.

And when that emissary spoke, and said "I will do this" or "I have done that," it was understood that it was the king talking, not the messenger.

So since the word "angel" means "messenger," and since the messenger of the Lord is sometimes called "the messenger of the Lord" and sometimes just called "a messenger," there is no difficulty at all in understanding him to be a messenger (an angel)

who represents God and speaks for God.

That makes perfect sense. What doesn't make any sense is why he would be called an angel if it were God Himself.

Not only that, but how could the angel of the Lord be the incarnate Christ if he appears to the shepherds after Jesus was incarnated and had been born?

And if it's Christ, why is he called Gabriel in Luke 1?

So this angel of the Lord is a real angel – very likely Gabriel.

To see an angel is a terrifying experience. Angels are awesome beings.

There were a few times in the OT an angel would appear as a man for one reason or another, but when they appear as angels, people respond the same way they do when God appears to someone – paralyzing fear.

We don't know what angels look like, but we do know that when you see an angel, your first thoughts are not about his beauty, but about how dangerous he appears to be.

Whatever you associate with a being who is formidable, and frightening, and dangerous – that's the kind of thing that marks their appearance.

So when you are confronted with someone like that, chances are you're doomed – and you can tell that just by looking at him.

And it's not unreasonable to assume that the *Angel of the Lord* would be even more awesome than other angels.

The Glory of the Lord

Not only that, but this wasn't just an angel. Something else happened that didn't happen when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah and then Mary.

9 and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. (lit the feared with a great fear)

Far more terrifying than the appearance of the angel is the appearance of the glory of God.

And as always, God's presence is accompanied by brilliant, bright light.

This was a night like every other night. The sleepy shepherds trying to pass the time...counting sheep (or whatever shepherds do to pass the time)...

And suddenly, as if one of the stars exploded or something the sky is flooded with an ocean of light. And out of that steps forth a glorious angel.

And eclipsing the angel in brilliance is the awesome glory of God.

Instead of the sheep being faint, dark gray silhouettes in the distance, suddenly they are seen as clear as day.

In fact, who knows what brilliant, transcendent, heavenly colors of light reflected off their wool.

The shepherds who were sleeping wake up in the brightness and think, "Oh no – I missed my watch and slept till noon!"

But it only took a second for them to realize this light wasn't coming from the sun. It was still night, and this light was none other than the glory of God.

At the very least it was obvious that it was something that couldn't be explained and was different from anything they had ever seen before.

And so they **fear with a great fear**.

Take a peek down at v.13 and look what happens next.

It was already seemingly as dramatic as scene as it could be. Gabriel was there. The glory of God was lighting up the whole area – all around. The shepherds were terrified...

But now the whole scene explodes with even more spectacular drama:

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God

The word **host** means **army**. (This is the only army that ever came for the purpose of announcing peace)

The Lord mercifully let's the shepherd's adjust to the shock of seeing one angel before sending the whole army.

Maybe this is the that 12 legions of angels Jesus said He could have called at His arrest. Or maybe it was the entire angelic army – stretching from horizon to horizon.

This verse is incredibly dramatic in the Greek. Lit. **And suddenly (unexpectedly, abruptly) egeneto (it happened):**

Suddenly it happened: with the angel a multitude of the army of heaven praising God

There is no verb (other than **it happened**) – it's just an exclamation.

When God makes a big announcement, He does it right. Here He sends the angel of the Lord himself, and backs him up with the entire army of angels, and the very glory of God.

(My proposal to Tracy didn't turn out anywhere near that good.)

So those are the circumstances of the good news of great joy.

But that's not the only important thing. God is also concerned about the recipients of the News.

The Recipients of the News

The angel makes it clear that this news is for **all people**. But it's not announced to all people.

That would have been one option. God could have made a worldwide announcement.

"I now interrupt your life for some important breaking news..."

But He chose not to do that.

He didn't announce it to the political leaders. He didn't announce it to the religious leaders.

He didn't even announce it to righteous Simeon, who had been waiting and waiting for this child.

He could have announced it to all the most godly people in Israel.

But He didn't. He just announced it to some Magi hundreds of miles away, and to a group of shepherds right outside of town.

We have looked in detail in the past at why He announced it to the Magi. So we understand that. (Tape 16)

But why the shepherds?

Why shepherds?

One possibility is that God wanted the angels to appear to someone who was awake at that hour, so the people wouldn't think it was a dream.

But more in line with the message of the book of Luke is that the good news of great joy came to the shepherds because they were lowly.

Every society has jobs that are extremely boring and unpleasant, and in many cases those jobs end up in the hands of people who are way down toward the bottom of the social strata.

Leon Morris puts it very delicately: "As a class shepherds had a bad reputation. The nature of their calling kept them from observing the ceremonial law which meant so much to religious people. More regrettable was their unfortunate habit of confusing 'mine' with 'thine' as they moved about the country. They were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in the law courts." (93)

These particular shepherds may very well have been godly men (based on how they respond). But the point here is that they were from a despised lowly class.

God wanted the birth of Christ to be connected with common people, poor people and lowly people. That's just as important as Him being born in Bethlehem.

So Herod, Caesar, Quirinius, the chief priests...none of them are anywhere around.

Instead the angel appears out in the fields.

From the time of Moses up to now, the *axis mundi* – the point of contact between heaven and earth has always been the Holy Place in the Temple.

When the glory of God appeared, it was there through the priests.

It was that way even right up through that last chapter – when Gabriel appeared to Zechariah the priest in the Temple.

Now that holy, sacred point of contact between heaven and earth is a field, at night, and it doesn't come through any priest.

It bypasses all religious authorities and comes directly to the most common of commoners.

There is no question that is intended as a signal of a whole new order in the way God deals with His people.

So the angel appears, the glory of God appears, and later the whole army of angels appear, and the shepherds are terrified. At this point the Angel of the Lord speaks.

The Angel's Words

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

The word for **great** in v.10 is the same as v.9. The angel tells them to exchange their **great fear** for **great joy**.

This news is for *all* people. It's not just for the Jews – all of humanity.

Spiritual Family

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you;

Luke often uses the word **today** to refer to the day of salvation. Here he means it both that way and literally.

And since the Jews calculated a day as beginning at sundown, and this takes place during the night, that means this child had literally just been born – within minutes or, at most hours.

We can't say for sure the day or month or year of Jesus' birth, but we know it was at night.

Notice those two little words at the end: **to you**. Isn't it interesting that the angel says that to these men?

This is another one of those unexpected uses of a preposition. We talk about being born *into* a certain situation, or being born *on* a certain day...

...but what does it mean to be born *to* someone? Specifically, what does it mean that Jesus was born to this group of shepherds?

If He were born to anyone, you would think it would be to Mary and Joseph – not some random group of shepherds.

We saw that on the one hand it's significant that this announcement did not come to kings or priests or Pharisees or Scribes...

But it's also worth noting that it didn't even come to Joseph and Mary – not in this form. Mary and Joseph didn't get to see the glory of God and the army of angels praising God over their new baby.

This birth is not like most births. It's not a family event. It's a world event. Mary and Joseph are just 2 in a crowd of billions who have an interest in this birth.

Usually the birth of a baby is an event that has significance among family members and close friends only.

When you are in the hospital room right after delivering a baby, you don't expect a whole bunch of strangers to come streaming in to see the baby.

But in this case, once the Lord gets Mary and Joseph to the right birthplace to fulfill prophecy, Mary and Joseph become almost incidental to the story.

If I tell you the story of the first week of little Charles' life, it's going to be a story mostly about Jack and Suzi, and their friends and family.

If I tell you about Christian's first week, I'll talk mostly about Tommy and Helen and their family.

But the story about Jesus early days is all about shepherds from the field and angels from heaven and magi from the east and Herod the Great and Zechariah and Elizabeth, and some guy named Simeon who was hanging around the Temple, and an old woman named Anna, who through in her two cents...

But after His birth, nothing significant is said or done by Mary and Joseph except that they took Jesus to the temple and then down to Egypt.

And that's because Jesus' spiritual family was much more important to Him than His physical family.

Jesus always had a far greater interest and much greater commitment to His spiritual family than He did to His natural family.

We need to take a lesson from that. In the Evangelical world, we have strongly emphasized the importance of family, and rightly so.

- Fathers should not neglect their children and wives.
- Mothers should be in the home and raise their own children.
- Kids shouldn't be involved in so many different activities that there is no time spent together as a family.

I believe in the importance of all those things. Sometimes we tell our kids to just skip their homework, because we don't want

academics to overtake our family time.

However, in emphasizing all that so much, I think we may have gotten to the point where in many cases it's an over-emphasis. We can get to the point of making our family an idol.

There are some people who are committed to nothing but their family.

And they are more committed to their natural family than to their spiritual family.

Most pastors I know would say that's a good thing. Your natural family should be #1, and the church should be #2.

But that's nowhere close to the way Jesus acted toward His family.

Mt.12:46-50

While Jesus was still talking to the crowd, his mother and brothers stood outside, wanting to speak to him. 47 Someone told him, "Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." 48 He replied to him, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" 49 Pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. 50 For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother."

They say blood is thicker than water, but the Spirit is thicker than blood. In God's eyes you are more closely related to us – other Christians, than you are to your blood relatives.

That's a fascinating concept. That means I have more of a responsibility toward Nikki or Faith as my sisters in Christ than I do as their earthly father.

And that has massive ramifications regarding our responsibility to one another in the church.

So the setting for the giving of this news was awesome, to say the least.

The recipients of this news were carefully chosen and that speaks volumes about the meaning of this birth.

But most important of all is the response to this news.

The Response to the News: Joy!

10 the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy

God loves granting spiritual privilege to the lowly, and specifically He loves coming to them and announcing news of great joy.

So the birth of a Savior is **news of great joy**.

News of joy is news that ought to elicit a happy, celebrative emotional response.

Reasons For Joy Since Jesus' Birth

Titles

What is it about Jesus' birth, specifically, that should generate such a joyful response?

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

The angel doesn't bother with the name Jesus. Instead he focuses on the exalted titles: **Savior, Christ and Lord**.

I really think there is something to be said for that.

There is a kind of an over-familiarity with Jesus in our day, and sometimes it comes out in our language when we refer to Jesus all the time without any of the exalted titles.

Over 75% of the references to Jesus in the epistles have either “Lord” or “Christ” or both along with “Jesus.”

Sometimes I think we show more respect to human beings in the way we talk (Mr. Doctor, etc.) than we do when we talk about the Lord Jesus Christ.

More significant than the fact that the angel used only titles is the titles he used.

For one thing, this is language that is borrowed from the titles used to honor Caesar Augustus. He was known not only as lord, but as the savior of the Roman world.

So it’s like the angels are telling these shepherds that a Caesar Augustus-like ruler has just been born in the little town they were camped next to.

He’s a Caesar Augustus caliber ruler, but he will be ruler not of Rome but of Israel!

So in the Roman world, these were exalted terms. But in the Jewish context, they rise to a much higher level still.

Savior

In 1:47 the word Savior has been used to refer to God.

God’s status as Savior points to His omnipotence. And it’s what sets the true God apart from the false gods.

Isa.45:21

Who foretold this long ago, who declared it from the distant past? Was it not I, the LORD? And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me.

In order to be a Savior, in the ultimate sense, you have to be all-powerful, because you have to be able to rescue your people from absolutely anything. (The term can apply to men, but in that case it requires that they be given the ability to save by God, who still would have to be omnipotent) That means you have to be more powerful than any other power in existence.

When the Jews referred to God as “my Savior” they were acknowledging both His infinite power and His kindness and mercy. (He is not only able to rescue us from anything, but willing).

In this life we face a lot of things that cause anxiety as we look to the future. There are things much bigger than us that could happen that scare us.

That fear will tend to sap your joy, and the only escape from that fear is knowing God as Savior.

“I know God as Savior, and painful things still happen.”

Even though we believe God to be all-powerful, the future can still be scary, because we know that even though God has the power to protect us from anything, He may very well decide to allow calamity to strike us.

But that anxiety is a very different kind of anxiety than we would have if we did not understand God to be our Savior.

It’s like the difference between being in a car with the brakes out rocketing down a steep mountain pass, and being in a roller coaster at an amusement park.

Both experiences are frightening in a way, but the first is overwhelming, and the second is not.

And the reason is you know at the amusement park some extreme things may happen, but nothing *ultimately* harm you.

Being a Christian and knowing God as Savior is like going through life in an amusement park. You don’t know what’s coming

next, and it could be pretty wild, but whatever happens you know you can't fly off the track of God's plan for your life.

So joy in life comes from cultivating an ever-growing understanding of what it means that He is Savior.

Christ

Secondly we have cause to rejoice now because of Jesus' birth because He is the Christ (Messiah). The very fact that He is the anointed one is cause for joy.

TT Isa.9

This is another one of the indisputable direct prophecies about the Messiah in the OT.

It's a promise of restoration that will come when the great Ruler who will sit on David's throne will come:

Isa 9:1-7

You are all familiar with vv.6ff

6 For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Father of eternity, Prince of Peace. 7 Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

Look up at the beginning of the ch. and you will see this is to be a time of great joy.

**1 There will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan--
2 The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. 3 You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.**

And that time is here spiritually, and it's coming in the physical world (at the Second Coming of Christ).

But the whole fulfillment of that promise and all the other promises was set in motion that night in the stable in that little feed trough.

So for us, we look both directions for our joy. We are in between Jesus' first coming and Second Coming, and both are cause for celebration.

Isa.55

"Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. 2 Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare. 3 Give ear and come to me; hear me, that your soul may live.

That part we already have. That came with Jesus' first coming, and we look back to that and celebrate with great joy.

But, like God's people in OT times, we look forward in anticipation to when the whole creation is redeemed and restored to joy.

At that time **12 You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.**

You might be thinking, "Even in OT times they knew God as Savior. So what is it exactly that we have to rejoice about since Jesus' birth? Even in OT times things were pretty good, spiritually for God's people."

They had the OT Scriptures that told them about God. They had a God who loved them and who had made covenants with

them, and who had vowed to protect and care for them.

Anyone could, like Abraham, believe what God had said and it would be credited to him as righteousness (no one had to earn his salvation).

God listened to the prayers of His people and answered them.

God spoke to His people directly through the prophets.

A believer in the OT times who repented of his sin would be forgiven, and when he died would go to paradise.

And yet, the angel says this news should have brought the shepherds joy – which means their situation after the arrival of Christ is better than before His arrival.

So what is there to be so joyful about now on this side of the birth of Christ? What is the significance of the Messiah have been born?

- For one thing, we have seen through the eyes of reliable eyewitnesses, Almighty God in human flesh.

Mt.13:16-17

But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. 17 For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.

We don't have to guess what God would be like if He were a man.

The greatest reality there is is to know God, and we have far more capacity to know Him now than people did before Jesus came and revealed exactly what God is like.

- We rejoice because we have the incredible privilege of being a part of the Church – the body of Christ – the most amazing institution to ever exist in this world.

It's a place of amazing love and fellowship. A place where dozens or even hundreds or thousands of people come for the purpose of serving and loving you.

It's the vehicle through which God is accomplishing His ultimate purpose of the ages.

- Now that Christ has come, we are a kingdom of priests.

No longer do we have to approach God only through some religious authority. We each know Him.

- We have the Holy Spirit indwelling us.

This gives us an advantage in the areas in which the Holy Spirit works in His people – things like

- spiritual power
- significance and meaning in the Kingdom
- sanctification (the process of becoming more like God in our character)
- greater understanding of God
- greater ability to accept spiritual truths, etc.

- Now we are living in the Mt.13 form of the Kingdom of God. Instead of it being some vague, cryptic hope that we only read about in prophecy, we are actually in it!

The final, ultimate fulfillment of the promises in the OT is heaven (the New Jerusalem – the place we will enjoy forever).

But those promises are being fulfilled in three stages. The inauguration of the Kingdom (from Jesus' birth to His Second Coming), the Millennial Kingdom, and the Eternal state.

We are well in to that first stage. We are living in the first stage of heaven! The Kingdom is here!

the Lord

Even though we are only at the beginning of ch.2, Luke has already used the term “Lord” in this book 20 times to refer to God just in ch.1!

v.6 Scripture is called **the Lord's commandments**

We read of **the temple of the Lord** (9), the **angel of the Lord** (11)...

John **will be great in the sight of the Lord**. (v.15) and **will bring back to the Lord their God** many people (v.16,17).

God is called the Lord their God (16), **The Lord God Most High** (32), and **the Lord, the God of Israel** (68)

In 2:26 Jesus is called the Christ of the Lord (meaning the Christ who belongs to the Lord God).

So when Luke talks about the Lord, he's talking about God. He's done that 20 times in ch.1 just so you don't miss it.

So given all that it's quite an announcement when the angel says in v.11 that this child is not only the Christ, He is the *Lord!*

We have cause to rejoice, because this child is none other than God Himself who has come into this world!

The staggering miracle of the incarnation – Almighty God becoming human flesh.

Celebrate!

“What if I understand all that but I still don't feel any joy? I have read it so many times, there is still an intellectual appreciation, and occasional feelings of joy, but it's hard to have the same emotional response every time I read the account.”

So what should you do?

I was studying the concept of joy in the OT, asking myself specifically, “What kind of joy should accompany the arrival of deliverance or a Savior for God's people?”

So I started looking up all the occurrences of this word for joy in the Greek OT, and I especially kept my eye out for instances of joy that were connected to deliverance or a savior being sent to deliver God's people.

Right away I noticed it appears a lot in Esther.

TT Est.9

The book of Esther is the historical account of a time when the Jews came perilously close to extinction.

Their enemies had the upper hand, they had the political power, and were right on the verge of wiping them out altogether.

But God stepped in and by means of providence delivered Israel.

In ch.9 we read about their joyful response to that deliverance.

Est.9:17-32

This happened on the thirteenth day of the month of Adar, and on the fourteenth they rested and made it a day of feasting and joy.

That's how to be joyful 101 – have a feast.

18 The Jews in Susa, however, had assembled on the thirteenth and fourteenth, and then on the fifteenth they rested and

made it a day of feasting and joy.

(One thing you learn right away when you study the word “joy” is that it goes with the word “feasting”).

19 That is why rural Jews-those living in villages-observe the fourteenth of the month of Adar as a day of joy and feasting, a day for giving presents to each other.

Isn't that interesting? In response to God delivering them and saving His people, they had an annual celebration in which they had a feast and gave each other gifts.

22 as the time when the Jews got relief from their enemies, and as the month when their sorrow was turned into joy and their mourning into a day of celebration. He wrote them to observe the days as days of feasting and joy and giving presents of food to one another and gifts to the poor.

So what is the appropriate response of joy to the arrival of deliverance for God's people? Celebration, feasting, giving of gifts (especially gifts of food), and giving to the poor.

I know what some of you are thinking: “What kind of cheezy sermon is this? Is Darrell trying to turn the birth narrative into a defense for giving gifts and pigging out at Christmas time?”

Honestly, that was the farthest thing from my mind when I began this study. I'm just telling you what came up in my study of the concept of joy.

And there's no question that the response of joy in people's hearts is vital part of what God intends for the birth of Jesus.

And God has given us the wonderful reality of *celebration* as a means of helping along our emotions so that we have proper joy.

When you are with family, and you give gifts, and receive gifts, and have feasts, and give to the poor, and everybody joins in a big celebration – that assists our weak emotions in becoming properly joyful.

Nobody feels an emotional exuberance every time they reread some good news from the past. That's why God instituted celebrations and feasts – to generate those feelings of joy anew.

When Herod the Great realized he was about to die, he ordered that a list of the most distinguished Jewish citizens of Jerusalem be made, that they be arrested and sentenced to death on trumped up charges.

His reason for doing that was that he knew no one would mourn his death, and he was determined that there be weeping on the day of his death, so ordered the death of other men who would be mourned.

The purpose of the feasts is just the opposite, of course, but there is a similarity in the principle. If just recalling the event isn't enough to fill you with joy, God would have us make it a celebration, and have feasts and give gifts to each other and to the poor, so that it will be a time of celebration.

Back in ch.1 we see there is to be a joyful reaction to the birth even of Jesus' forerunner, John. In the announcement of his birth the angel said...

Luke 1:14

He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth,

Skip down to v.28.

Luke 1:28

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

The word translated **Greetings** is the same word translated **joy** in ch.2, except in the form of a command. The very first word out of the angel's mouth in announcing Jesus' birth to Mary is a *command* to be joyful.

At first she was troubled, but that gave way to great joy, and in v.58...

Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.

So you can see the Lord is making a point to let us know that the arrival of Christ into the world is to be marked with joy.

And it's fitting, and appropriate that this be a season of joy.

The world, in their clueless ignorance, doesn't even understand why.

But it still appropriate that on the day set aside to celebrate the arrival of the Lord Jesus Christ into this world, there would be

- laughter,
- and fun,
- and rejoicing,
- and singing,
- and gift-giving,
- and feasting
- and gifts to the poor
- and celebration,
- and JOY!

That's not to say anyone is required to celebrate Christmas. The Bible never tells us to celebrate it (other than telling that somehow or another it is to be **news of great joy**).

In the NT era God has given us great freedom in the external expression of the spiritual realities in our hearts.

But it is very appropriate that the time of Jesus' birth be honored every year in a time of joy and rejoicing and celebration.

There have been many times in Israel's history when there wasn't any external cause for rejoicing.

In fact, in Zechariah's time instead of celebrations and feasts, they mostly had fasts – to remind themselves of terrible things that had happened.

In the 4th month of every year they had a fast to lament the breaching of the walls of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar.

In the 5th month of every year they had a fast to mourn the burning of the temple.

In the 7th month of every year they had a fast to lament the assassination of one of their great leaders.

In the 10th month of every year they had a fast to lament the beginning of the siege of Jerusalem.

And in Zech.8 God said, "Someday I'm going to bring you deliverance. And when I do, it's going to be a time of joy – and not just a moment of joy, but annual celebrations of joy.

Zech.8:19-23

This is what the LORD Almighty says: "The fasts of the fourth, fifth, seventh and tenth months will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah.

Life was tough for God's people in OT times, both physically and spiritually.

And they looked forward to the fulfillment of God's promise that a time was coming that would be characterized by joy, not sorrow.

And so now the angel of the Lord appears and announces, "That time is here!"

12 This will be the sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a feed trough."

Here the word **sign** is not used in the sense of a miracle – just an indicator. The angel sends them to go find the child, but doesn't give them directions – instead he just gives a hint. They have to seek him out.

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

And suddenly (unexpectedly, abruptly) *egeneto* (it happened):

Suddenly it happened: with the angel a multitude of the army of heaven praising God

...saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest,

No mention of singing. This praise was something they were saying – presumably all in unison.

The statement **Glory to God** is a cry for God to be glorified. He's already as glorious as He can be, and yet more things could still happen to increase His glory in the sight of His creatures.

And one of those things is for His creatures to praise Him in this way.

the highest is a synonym for heaven. The point behind the Bible telling us that God lives in heaven is not so much for us to picture some place somewhere (although it is a place), but rather for us to think about the dwelling place of God being the highest conceivable abode –

- the most exalted, most glorious, most important place there is. That's God's home.

And the angels are letting us know that in that place – the highest heaven is impressed with what God has done in Bethlehem this evening.

Prior to this time this group of angels had seen the glory of God the Son, and they knew something of God's plan of redemption for man.

And at some point they become aware of exactly what is happening here. God the Son becoming a man. This is the not only the greatest thing that has ever happened on earth, but it's the most monumental shakeup that has ever taken place in heaven.

They want all creation to respond with joy to this incredible event, and so they come to earth in a such a way as to be able to be seen...

And it's no wonder that they burst out shouting "**Glory to God in the Highest.**"

and on earth peace

Not just absence of strife, but general well-being.

to men on whom his favor rests."

The traditional phrase is "Peace on earth and good will to men." But the oldest MSS say **peace on earth to men on whom his favor rests.**

That phrase means the peace is specifically for those people God has favored.

Would you like to have seen that? Do you wish you were there to see those angels?

Well, those angels wish they were here.

It's a more privileged thing to be in the church than to be one of the angels of heaven.

God the Son didn't become an angel. He became a man.

In v.15 the angels do not just disappear. They return to heaven.

So as they are ascending back up to heaven, that's a good place for us to wrap up our thoughts this morning.

Benediction: Ps 100: Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth. 2Worship the LORD with gladness; come before him with joyful songs. 3Know that the LORD is God. It is he who made us, and we are his; we are his people, the sheep of his pasture. 4Enter his gates with thanksgiving and his courts with praise; give thanks to him and praise his name. 5For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.