

Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” That is how the angel began the message to the shepherds, announcing, as the King James Bible and some of our Christmas carols put it, “glad tidings of great joy.” We hear these words every year on Christmas Eve, the story of Mary and Joseph travelling down to Bethlehem, the story of the angels and the shepherds, and the baby laid in the manger because there was no room in the inn. But precisely because they are so familiar, these words can easily rush over us without their underlying message sinking in. So tonight I want to take a few moments to dig into the angel’s message to help us appreciate why it was and *is* such good news.

In order to get at this, though, I think it would be helpful to start by trying to imagine what sort of news *you* would find to be really good news tonight. I’ll give you a moment... I expect that what you thought of will very much depend upon your current circumstances, and so is likely be very different from other people here, or not here. If, for instance, you are living with a terminal cancer diagnosis, then really good news for you would be, “all the scans are showing that your cancer is in remission. We’re not seeing any sign of it.” Or let’s try this example: maybe you are deep in debt. In that case, really good news would be that your debt has been cancelled. And if you are homeless in Champaign this weekend, then really good news for you might be as simple as a warm place to spend the night. All of those examples are of life-changing good news that depend upon underlying bad news. But what does really good news look like if your life is pretty good right now? If that’s you, what did you think of? Would it be really good news if things just didn’t change much in new year? I mean, it would be nice, for sure, if life is going well for you, that that didn’t change. But would you count it as “really good news?”

Okay, with that little exercise in mind, let’s turn our attention to that Christmas story that we know so well, and remember first who were the recipients of those “glad tidings of great joy,” also known as “really good news.” They were shepherds. Do you know any shepherds? Maybe you do. Helen and I met one a couple of months back when we attended our goddaughter’s wedding down in Texas. The venue was a brew pub outside of Austin that had its own flock of goats, of all things. And you could arrange to have the goats show up at your wedding, if you wanted, which our goddaughter did. But maybe because this was Austin, this shepherd was a 30-ish hipster, and if she was your only experience of a shepherd that would not help you at all with understanding the Christmas story. So think instead of migrant farm workers or day laborers, people who do jobs no one else wants to do, and whom most of the rest of society looks on with some suspicion, and maybe a little fear, people best kept out of sight and mind by more respectable folks like you and me. Then you have an idea of what sort of person God chose to send the angels to.

Why would God do that? Maybe it’s because they of all people would be best equipped to recognize the angel’s message as the really good news it was meant to be. Because this is the message. “There is a new king in town who will be a savior for you, one you do not need to fear, who will not take advantage of you, but who will rescue you from your difficult existence and bring true peace. And this is good news for *all* people, not just the usual suspects, not just the one-percenters and the well-connected.”

Shepherds and migrant farm workers can instantly hear that kind of message as “glad tidings of great joy.” Others maybe not so much. And still others will be downright hostile. On Sunday we heard Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth, but that reading stopped before we heard how news of his birth was received. Because that’s the story of the Wise Men, who come to Jerusalem looking for the newborn king of the Jews, and we save that reading for Epiphany. But you’ll remember how in

that story King Herod, the current king of the Jews, did not receive the Wise Men's announcement as "really good news" – because obviously that would put him out of a job, and out of power. But it wasn't only Herod. "All of Jerusalem," Matthew tells us, was frightened with him. In other words, there were lots of people besides Herod who were invested in how things were currently working and who didn't want anything to change. They certainly didn't want a new regime. Nor did they want good news for *all* people, because good news for other people would mean less good news for them, or so they thought. They didn't want a savior king either, because they didn't have a difficult existence to be saved from. And they didn't want true peace, because the Roman kind of peace was what was working for them at the moment.

And right here is where I have a quibble with the Christmas Proclamation that we heard at the beginning of the service tonight. That is a tradition here at Grace, but only this year did I notice its problematic claim that at the time of Jesus' birth "all the world was at peace." That's true only if you believe Imperial Roman propaganda. Because the famous "Roman Peace," the *Pax Romana*, was in fact a brutal and oppressive reality for the peoples conquered by the Romans, people like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds. And the census in our reading tonight was one of the tools of that false peace, providing data used to extract the maximum amount of wealth and manpower from Roman subjects. This was not what the angels meant by peace. If it were, why would they need to proclaim it? And why would they say, "do not be afraid"? The Roman Peace *wanted* you to be afraid. Very afraid. That's what crucifixions were all about, another way the Romans enforced their peace.

So here we are, braving the weather tonight to come out for Christmas worship, or making the effort to tune in online, hoping to hear some good news, maybe even "really good news." So are you hearing it? A king is born to you. Do you even *want* a king? You have a savior to rescue you from your difficult existence. Do you *need* savior? Do you even *want* to be rescued from the life you're living now? And this savior king and the peace that he brings is for *all* people. Is that appealing in any way? I mean, how good can something be if it's not exclusive? How much better if it's only for a select few, and you are one of them? Am I right? Maybe this whole Christmas in church thing was a bad idea. Who needs it?

If that is you tonight as you hear the supposedly "glad tidings of great joy" in our readings and hymns, you are not alone. There are loads of people across the country and around the world who would agree with you, and who actually wouldn't *think* to step foot inside a church this evening, for all kinds of reasons – some of them good, and some maybe not so much. But as long as you're here, or tuning in, let me share with you the rumor that the Christian church has to share, when it is doing what it is supposed to be doing. I say rumor, because I can't prove it. Lots of rumors turn out to be nonsense, I realize. But some turn out to be true. That's the best I can do on the certainty front. But here's the rumor we cling to: it's that the angel's message of a savior king come to bring real peace on earth really is the best news we humans could hope for. It's that this baby born in a barn is God sneaking in the backdoor of our world to live among us as one of us in order to right what is wrong and to repair what is broken. It's the conviction that our self-centered, Roman-peace approach to maintaining our way of life is not really the good life, not life as it was meant to be, and that we really do need to be rescued from it. And it's the promise that by his incarnation, death, and resurrection, this Jesus frees us from our captivity to sin and opens to us the way to life that really is life, life that is not diminished, but that is rather enhanced by being for all people. It is our trust and hope in this rumor that brings us out on a night like this to hear and sing this really good news. A savior king is born to us and to all people. May we rejoice in this news, and may the peace of God, proclaimed by the Christmas angels, the peace which pass all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.