

December 25, 2021  
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Day  
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

## **“Good News of Great Joy”**

*“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

When Jessie Parker found out that her friend Priya was staying in the student residence over Christmas break, she knew what she had to do. Priya was an exchange student at the local university, and both Jessie and Priya had become good friends since the first day of classes. Priya’s home was in India, so traveling over a school break was impossible. The thought of Priya spending Christmas Day alone in an empty residence hall was unthinkable to Jessie, so after phoning her family she walked across the hall and invited Priya to spend Christmas break with the Parker family. Since Priya was a Hindu, this would be her first Christmas, so Jessie spent time filling her in about the family’s Christmas traditions so that her friend would know what to expect on that festive day. When they arrived at the Parker homestead, everyone warmly welcomed Priya and made sure that she was comfortable in the guest room and that a place was set for her at the family dinner table. They attended Christmas Eve worship, and Priya was very impressed with the church’s decorations, the beautiful music, and the story of a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem. On Christmas morning, Priya awoke to the sounds and smells of the extended Parker family preparing Christmas dinner and getting ready to open presents. When all the family arrived, they crowded into the living room around the tree that was surrounded by a mountain of brightly wrapped presents. Priya sat in the corner in awe as the family sang Christmas carols and began passing out the presents. Since she was a guest, she did not expect to receive a Christmas present, but was content to share this new holiday with her host family. But then to her great surprise, cousin John came over to her with a gift wrapped in a bright red bow, handed it to her, and announced “this is for you, Priya.” It was a sweater that Grandma Parker had knit for her when Jessie informed the family that Priya would be coming to Christmas dinner. Tears welled in Priya’s eyes as she took the sweater in her arms and realized that she was truly welcomed into this family gathering, and that this holiday that was new to her was a day she was also invited to join in the celebration.

The shepherds who were *“living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night”* (Luke 2:8) probably had no expectation being invited to any gatherings or

celebrations on the night when the child of Mary was born in the stable in Bethlehem. Shepherds were outsiders at that time, since shepherding was considered a despised occupation. Shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on other people's lands and were often unreliable in caring for their flocks (Jesus identifies himself as the *Good Shepherd* in the Fourth Gospel in order to distinguish himself from the *"hired hand [who] runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep"* – John 10:13). Even shepherds who proved to be trustworthy and reliable lived difficult lives in which they were away from home, living with their flocks as they moved to find fertile grazing land, protected their sheep from predators, and made certain that all of the sheep in their care were present and accounted for (Jesus employs a positive image of a shepherd in his parable of the lost sheep in which the shepherd seeks out the lost sheep and then calls together friends and neighbors, invited them to *"rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost"* – Luke 15:6).

As these shepherds are tending to their flocks in the dark outskirts of Bethlehem, they are startled when *"an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them"* (2:9). It is to these lowly and outcast shepherds that the birth of the child of Mary will be announced; the darkness in which the shepherds dwelled is showered with brilliance as the people who wait in darkness have seen a great light, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that *"the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined."* (Isaiah 9:2). Typical of human responses to the appearance of angels, the shepherds at first are terrified; so after the angels encourages them *"do not be afraid,"* the shepherds become the first persons to hear the good news of what has happened in the little town of Bethlehem: *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."* (2:10-11). The announcement emphasizes the fulfillment of Israel's messianic hopes *today*: the long-awaited child has been born, again fulfilling the words of the prophet that *"a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."* (Isaiah 9:6). The child who is the fulfillment of God's promises of a Saviour, Christ the Lord is to be found as a *"child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger"* (2:12). The angel who announces the birth of the Christ Child to the shepherds is joined by *"a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'"* (2:13-14). These "herald angels" fill the heavens with the joyful news of this holy night: *"Glory to the newborn king!"*

It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of one who was to become emperor. In that familiar pattern, but from heaven, comes the good news of joy and peace occasioned by the birth, not of an emperor, but of the one who is proclaimed Saviour, Messiah, and Lord; *“and not in palace walls but in the fields, to the poor and lowly, the news first comes”* (Fred Craddock). The prophecy proclaimed by Isaiah is fulfilled: *“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD’s favour”* (Isaiah 61:1-2a). The hope of peace will be fulfilled in Jesus, *“he who shall command peace to the nations”* (Zechariah 9:10). The shepherds belong on Luke’s guest list for the Kingdom of God, along with *“the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”* (Luke 14:13).

- “Let it be said clearly this night. Heaven and earth meet in obscure places, not in the halls of power. Shepherds and angels. A birth in the city of David, but far from a royal residence. And that birth, that joy is for all peoples, just as the census was said to have been ‘peace (good will) to those with whom God favours’ is not a phrase designed to limit God’s favour and peace to a few. We human creatures, along with God’s other creatures, have been favoured. The light came in those dark fields and that dim room in Bethlehem because God longs, has always longed, for us to know and love God.” – Sarah Henrich.

The response of the shepherds to the angel’s announcement and the heavenly chorus is described in three stages: their conversations with each other; finding Mary, Joseph, and the child; and their report of the angelic appearance. Throughout this account, the emphasis falls on the confirmation of the things that had been spoken to them: they decide to *“go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”* (2:15). When they enter the stable in Bethlehem and find the *“child lying in the manger”* as the angel had promised, *“they made known what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.”* (2:17-18). While the witness of the angels fills the stable with awe, Mary’s response is unique: *“But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”* (2:19). Her response echoes the reaction of Jacob to the report of his son Joseph’s dreams: *“So his brothers were jealous of him, but his father kept the matter in mind”* (Genesis 37:11) and Daniel’s response to the visions he has received: *“As for me, Daniel, my thoughts greatly terrified me, and my face turned pale; but I kept the matter in my mind”* (Daniel 7:28). Mary is not only “the servant of the Lord” (1:38), but she also quietly considers the meaning of these

wonderful events. *“Thus Luke shows that Mary must have sought to interpret these events surrounding the birth of Jesus and have succeeded, for she became a model Christian believer.”* (Raymond Brown).

The shepherds who were the first to hear the good news of the birth of Jesus now join in the chorus of witnesses as they *“returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”* (2:20). They continue to share the good news of the angelic chorus so that *“from that moment, the angels’ song has never gone silent. It continues down the centuries in constantly new forms and resounds anew at the celebration of Jesus’ birth.”* (Pope Benedict XVI).

- “The shepherds put things together well enough to become jubilant. They’re promised a baby, they see a baby, and they recognize that the rest of what they have been told is true. Here he is, the One whom God has sent to show God’s favour ... Here Luke shows us the first steps in a long journey of trusting that God’s favour is for all people and that there are signs, even in our own darkness.” – Henrich.

As the shepherds came to Bethlehem to witness the child of Mary lying in the manger, the proof of the angels’ joyful announcement, we come together on this Christmas Day to rejoice in the good news that *“unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.”* It is the good news that the child born on that first Christmas Day is the one whose birth fills us with joy on this Christmas Day and on every day in which we live in the sure and certain hope the child born of Mary is *Emmanuel*, “God with us,” and that nothing can separate us from the love of God that is ours in the one who is the *“Saviour, Christ the Lord.”* It is the good news that fills us with joy because the child born of Mary is the child who has is born *“to you this day.”*

- “The little word ‘you’ should make us joyful. For to whom does the angel speak? To wood or stones? No, he speaks to human beings; and not just to one or two, but to all the people ... Thus we should receive him joyfully, as here the angels say: ‘To you is born a Saviour.’ Is it not a great and marvelous thing that an angel should come from heaven with such good news? Is it not a wonder that afterwards so many thousands of angels are filled with overflowing joy, which makes them desire that we should also be glad, and should receive such grace with thankful hearts? And therefore we should write this little word (with flaming letters) in our hearts: ‘To you!’ and should joyfully welcome the birth of this Saviour.” – Martin Luther, 1544.

From the moment the present was placed in her hands, Priya knew that she was no longer a stranger or a guest; she was a beloved member of the Parker family. Their celebration was now her celebration; the joy and gladness that filled the room now filled her heart as she knew that this day was for her to celebrate. It is the joy that we all experience as we hear the angel announce to us that the child born in the manger in Bethlehem is the child who has been born “to you,” the gift that is good news of great joy for all the people: “*unto us a child is born!*”

Amen.