

“Joy to YOU”
Luke 2:8-20
Dr. Jerry Nelson

Author John Shea described the celebration this way:

“She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them with slow solemnity
convinced every word was revelation.

She said they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home without getting lost.
The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside
the lady.

They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lited the roof.
Shepherds came and you could pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated to silver dollars.
The baby was God!

And she jumped in the air
whirled round, dove into the sofa
and buried her head under the cushion.
Which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.”

(John Shea in the Hour of the Unexpected in CT 12/6/99 p48)

Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields near
(Bethlehem) keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the
Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified. 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.
Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is

Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

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

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Historians tell us that the life of a shepherd was fairly miserable in those days.

Shepherds were not the brightest stars in the sky; not the pretty people of Israel.

They were one of the lowest classes of people because of their work.

They were comparable to the present day street-sweepers of China or the garbage collectors of Calcutta.

They were the nameless, faceless non-people of most societies.

They were in fact despised.

They couldn't testify in court because they were considered unreliable – men who didn't know the difference between "thine and mine".

Now there is no reason to think this was true of all shepherds but we can assume these were very ordinary people with ordinary problems.

With just a little imagination we can think of some of the circumstances of these men even that night as they were guarding their sheep.

I can imagine one of them had come to work that day having just heard from his wife that their marriage was over.

He knew things weren't good but this was a shock.

As much as he didn't want to he had come to work even though his confusion and pain was almost unbearable.

I can imagine another of them had just been told by his boss that this was his last week of work.

The price of meat was falling and the management didn't need him any longer.

His mind is filled with all sorts of negative questions: how will he feed his family, what will he do for income since he's not trained for anything else.

I can imagine still another working that night even though four days ago his child had died of pneumonia.

No, these are not the faceless people in our Christmas crèches and the nameless people in our Christmas books.

These were very real men – men whose problems and emotions would be little different than our own.

It is to these men that an angel appeared, and the text says, "The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." I would have been, too.

The angel made an announcement:

"Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

Those shepherds hurried off to Bethlehem and some time later returned to their sheep REJOICING. **Why?**

Why were the shepherds so happy?

Why the joy in the midst of ordinary, even difficult lives?

Did the wife of one of those shepherds visit him and say she had changed her mind about leaving?

Did someone come to another shepherd and say your child didn't die after all – it was just a bad dream?

What changed between the announcement, which they experienced with fear, and the return, which they experienced with joy?

Why are these men so happy?

Well, you might say, that is simple – they saw the Messiah.

Yes, it is that simple but what does that mean?

What did the angel mean when he said, "I bring you good news of great joy"? And what does it mean to us?

Somewhat obviously when I was earlier describing shepherds I was describing us – our situations – our lives.

No, not each of us is facing a crisis at the moment but sooner or later everyone in this room will come face to face with the difficulties of life.

Sooner or later we come to the realization that there are circumstances in life over which we have no control.

And that realization usually brings fear.

It is no exaggeration to say that many people live in fear.

Oh, we cover it fairly well most of the time but it's still there.

And it is fear that drives many of our actions.

We live in a frightening world.

Every week we hear of bombs going off in Bagdad, Tel Aviv or elsewhere in the world.

Even closer to home, what about the fears that plague so many of us today?

There is a fear of the future.

No matter what age we are, in our thoughtful moments we experience it.

Some wonder how they will make a living.

Some wonder if they will keep their jobs.

Some are driven to do almost anything – working too many hours, scrambling to look better than the next person, exaggerating the truth – anything to secure the future because of their fear of the future.

There is a fear in relationships.

Will I always live alone and lonely, will my marriage ever get better, will my child and I ever be reconciled?

There is the fear of poor health and death itself.

What happens if I get sick?

What happens when I die?

Just this week a woman went into the hospital for routine surgery and contracted the flu and died.

As much as we might like to think that we control these things, the truth is we can't guarantee our income, our relationships, our health or even our lives or the lives of those we love.

Someone wrote, "The dread of the unseen and the unknown lies coiled like a sleeping snake around our hearts."

We try to manage our fear by living from day to day with the foolish assumptions that some new person will solve our relationship future, that some new medication or discovery will secure our physical future,

and that **something** will happen that will resolve the fears we live with.

But our hearts are still afraid because we know those things won't solve the real problem, which is deeper still.

Tragedies worldwide and problems in our own lives are not brought on by unseen, uncontrollable cosmic forces.

The problem is not in Bagdad or Tel Aviv.

It doesn't take much introspection to realize the problem is much nearer – the problem is the sinful human heart.

We easily admit the mess the world is in and easily condemn the actions of others.

But the most fearful thing for us is that each of us is part of the mess and actions we condemn— in our hearts is that same self-centeredness that can so easily erupt in greed, envy, hatred, jealousy and too often does.

Each of us is a microcosm of the world's problems.

As I recall it, an English newspaper was running a series of articles on the problems with humanity and the editors encouraged an answer to the question, "What's wrong with the world?"

The journalist Malcolm Muggeridge responded with a two word reply: "I am."

Unrealistic hope of a better world fades when I am honest enough to realize that the problem in this world is me.

And the shepherds of Bethlehem were no different.

But into their world and ours came an angel saying,

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you."

God had come to save them and He has come to save us.

The good news that filled those shepherds' hearts with joy was that God had come to intervene.

Those shepherds heard with their own ears and saw with their own eyes the fulfillment of the truth predicted for centuries – the Messiah would come.

And when they saw the Christ, their minds leaped to the only reasonable conclusion – it's true – God does exist - God has come - It's not just wishful thinking.

Someone wrote, "Without the coming of Christ we would have had no assurance that God really exists as a personal God, perfect in love and mercy, and we would still have been overcome with fear as regards the invisible and the future, the present and the eternal. "

But God does exist, he has come.

Those shepherds would have remembered the promises of God.

Time and again the prophets had declared “the time is coming when I will make a new covenant with my people. I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. And I will put my law in their minds and write it **on their hearts.**”

And that means that the root, the cause, of most personal, national and international tragedies, heartaches, and troubles, - the human heart – is specifically what God came to change, to transform, that he might save his people.

Those shepherds were rejoicing because with the coming of Christ it would now be possible to change – to be freed not only from their guilt but also from their old evil hearts that produced so much pain for others and themselves.

Into their minds came a peace they had never known before.

The deepest fear, **that they were forever stuck with who they were and the world in which they lived**, was replaced with hope and peace.

By God’s grace he would re-make them.

That day, God established a beachhead for his Kingdom in this misery-filled world.

That day God began to change the world **one heart at a time.**

Those shepherds would likewise take on a whole new perspective on history and the future.

All around them as around us, were those who claimed nothing had ever changed since the beginning of recorded history.

They claimed there was no real evidence of a God who intervened in history or in their lives.

But these shepherds knew beyond any doubt that God had intervened.

And that same God would continue to intervene until he brings all things to the conclusion he, in his grace, has designed

Caesar was not in control, God was.

Fate is not in control, the sovereign gracious God of the universe is.

Likewise our future is not dependent on a President or Congress, on a war in Iraq, or NASDAQ.

Our future rests in the hands of the God who came AND is coming again.

Each of those shepherds could live knowing their lives were not controlled by fate but by the guiding hand of God.

And no matter how dark their personal circumstances seemed, and no matter how dark their national circumstances seemed – God was their Savior through Jesus Christ.

Robert Lewis Stevenson's favorite story was of a ship tossed in the seas perilously close to a rocky coast.

One frantic seaman who was laboring below who could take it no longer, rushed above to the control room, slammed the door behind him and frozen with fear watched the captain wrestle with the controls of that large ship.

Skill of mind and strength of hand enabled the captain to guide the ship through the threatening rocks.

The captain turned slightly, looked at the frightened man and smiled.

The young man returned below deck and assured everyone they would be okay.

When asked how he knew they would now be safe, he answered, "I have seen the Captains' face and he smiled at me."

God came and he showed his face to us in the person of his Son Jesus – He has smiled on us and he is in control of our world and our lives.

And notice also how **personally** those shepherds could take the message:

"Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to YOU!"

Isn't it just like God to come to the lowest, the despised, and the outcasts of society?

In the minds of most people of that day, the last people God would accept would be shepherds and lepers.

There are people in this place who fear that God will never accept them.

But to think that way is to miss the whole point of Jesus' coming.

He came to save people, people who are in trouble, people who are afraid, people who are sinners.

He stooped from heaven to pick up shepherds and us.

Beth Merizon wrote,

How **could** we be anything but true believers—

We **shepherds** who heard the news first-hand from Heaven!

There stood that angel on the grazing-ground
Like a white fan, Like a white blaze, lighting the air all around;
Telling us the Promised One had come,
And where He was,
And what His destiny.

And then that great arc of angels
Singing a Gloria.

We left our sheep that night
And found the Lamb.

(From Excerpts from a Widening Light by Luci Shaw)

Why were these shepherds so happy?

Because their fear was replaced with truth.

Charles Spurgeon wrote:

“There is no antidote for fear more excellent than the subject of that midnight song, “today in the town of David a Savior is born to YOU, he is Christ the Lord.”

I close with what I began:

“She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them with slow solemnity
convinced every word was revelation.

She said they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home without getting lost.

The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside
the lady.

They had to stay in a stable with an ox and an ass
but the Three Rich Men found them because a star lited the roof.

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