

The Christmas Story According to the Angels

Welcome to the third Sunday of Advent. This morning we are going to light the rose or pink colored candle. If you've wondered why one candle was a different color than the other three, it wasn't because the store was out of purple. The purple candles represent penitence since Advent is a time of repentance as we prepare our hearts for his coming. Some churches fast during Advent as a means of spiritual preparation for the coming of the Messiah, but on the third Sunday they break the fast as a sign of anticipating the great joy that comes with the birth of the Lord. It is a reminder to all of us to not forget that the message of Christmas is good news of great joy! Hear the good news delivered by the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 35:

Reader: Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you."

Congregation: Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Reader: And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.

Congregation: No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there, and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

And from Isaiah 40

Reader: You who bring good tidings to Zion, go up on a high mountain. You who bring good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up your voice with a shout, lift it up, do not be afraid;

Congregation: Say to the towns of Judah, "Here is your God!" See, the Sovereign Lord comes with power, and his arm rules for him. See, his reward is with him and his recompense accompanies him.

Reader: He tends his flock like a shepherd; He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

Congregation: Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom.

Reader: He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary and young men stumble and fall;

Congregation: But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.

Heavenly Father, as we light the Advent candle this morning we are reminded of your good news, that you are with us. The prophet told us to go to the high mountain and announce the good news, "Here is your God!" We announce today the good news of the coming of Immanuel, God is with us, that God has come in Christ to save us, to comfort us, to give life and hope to us. How glad and thankful we are for such good news. We are reminded today, that even though we may grow tired and weary, you don't. You have an endless supply of strength and power and mercy, and if we wait upon you, if we trust in and rely upon you, you will renew our strength. Grant that by your mercy we will run and not grow weary, we will walk and not faint. Enable us to faithfully carry your good news to all who will listen, to announce to all that there is cause for rejoicing and great joy: a Savior is born and he is Christ the Lord. Amen.

Turn with me to Luke 2 and I want us to look at the announcement the angels made. This is the Christmas story according to the angels and is perhaps the most familiar Scripture reference to the Christmas story. **"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, 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.'" Luke 2:8-11**

I had intended to go a different direction entirely for this message but I actually woke up Friday morning with this phrase in my mind and spirit: "good news of great joy for all people." I don't know that I have much of a sermon, but I just feel the need to tell you that in the midst of whatever you are facing or experiencing right now, regardless of how frightening or how depressing or how overwhelming things may seem in your life, the birth and the coming of Jesus

is good news! It is a source of great joy and it is for all people. No one is excluded. No one is left out. No one is beyond the reach of his life-altering good news.

The angel delivered the greatest message ever told to a group of shepherds on a Judean hillside. Good news of great joy! A Savior is born! These fellows weren't accustomed to hearing good news and they certainly weren't accustomed to angelic appearances. We aren't either, but Luke is just barely into the second chapter of his gospel and we've already had three angelic appearances. An angel had appeared to Zechariah to tell him he would have a son who would be the forerunner to the Messiah. I can see an angel coming to Zechariah, after all, he was a priest and was ministering in the temple at the time. An angel had come to Mary to tell her she would be the mother of the Messiah. I can see an angel appearing to one so holy as to be chosen to be the mother of the Messiah, but this time the angel was appearing to shepherds! They were the last group you would expect to be serenaded by angels, the last group to receive a heavenly announcement of great joy and good news. But perhaps that's the point. The shepherds desperately needed some good news and the angels chose them. Besides, who better to announce the birth of the one known as the Lamb of God than a bunch of shepherds.

These fellows needed some good news. Remember they were living in occupied territory. Occupied by the Roman army, subject to arrest, interrogation, conscripted to work for the soldiers at times. They were oppressed by Romans but also by the ruling class of their own people, the Jews. The shepherds were looked down upon, excluded from parts of society. They were like a lot of us, working class folks, just doing their job, trying to stay out of trouble and earn a living. They were in need of some good news when suddenly an angel appears with a message that would change everything, for everyone.

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord.” Why is this such good news? First of all, notice the angel said a Savior had been born. It may not sound like a big deal to you at the moment, but maybe that's because right now you don't think you need a Savior. You are strolling around with everything going well, no problems. A Savior is for folks in trouble. Right. The truth is, you're in trouble and if you don't realize it then you are in even bigger trouble. You are broken, you are lost, you are perishing, you are dying and you cannot save yourself. You can't change your heart. You can't atone for your sins. You need a Savior whether you know it or not. That was the good news the angel delivered. A Savior is born.

Notice how personal the message was. It was good news for all the people, but the angel specifically said, “A Savior has been born to you.” It was personal. He wasn’t just the Savior of the world, he was their Savior. No wonder it was such good news for the shepherds and it’s such good news for us as well. He is our Savior. He has come to save us from our sins. I don’t have to die and go to hell. A Savior has come and if I repent of my sins and believe upon him, he will save me and make me a new person. I can be born again into a new life!

Just who exactly is this Savior that is born? The angel said “He is Christ the Lord.” The word Christ is the Greek word for the Hebrew word Messiah. In Hebrew or in Greek it means “the anointed one.” To anoint means to smear with oil so literally it means “the one smeared with oil.” Why is that important? In the Old Testament there were three kinds of people who were to be smeared or anointed with oil. It was kind of like an installation ceremony where they came into office. **A prophet** was anointed with oil and recognized as a person who not only knew God but was anointed and chosen to speak for God. **A king** was anointed indicating he had a divine right to rule as king. He now had God given authority. **A priest** was anointed when he began his ministry indicating he now had the right to act as an intercessor between man and God.

When the angel said this Savior that was born was Christ, it meant that he was anointed for all three offices. Jesus was the prophet of all prophets who would not only speak God’s word to us, he was the word of God in flesh. He would perfectly reveal God the Father to us. Jesus was the king of kings anointed to rule over us and rule within us. Jesus was anointed the high priest who would offer his own blood as the sacrifice to atone for our sins and he lives forever interceding for us, the One holy and perfect mediator between God and man!

The angel said he was our Savior, He was Christ the anointed One and he was Lord. He is Lord, God in flesh. He was fully God and he was fully man. He was the fulfillment of Old Testament Scripture and the hope not only of Israel but he is the only hope of the whole world. He is Savior, Messiah and he has come to be Lord over all. He has come to not only save us, but to live within us as our Lord and king.

Josh Johnson spoke last Sunday about the fact the Jesus is a good king who has come to bring hope and healing to a hopeless and broken world. He has come to set things right. How messed up this world is. How messed up we are, and He has come to save us and be the Lord and king that rules and reigns in our hearts and lives. He is our only hope. This is the good news

for us but not only for us. This good news is not just for shepherds or for Jewish folk on the outskirts of Jerusalem. It is good news for all the people, everywhere, at all times.

About fifty years after these events and about 20 years after the crucifixion and resurrection, the man known to us as the apostle Paul was in Greece, telling the citizens of Athens that there was good news for them as well. Athens was a pagan city, known for their belief in all kinds of gods. They even had an altar dedicated to an unknown god, in case they missed one. To this pagan crowd, the apostle Paul declared, **“The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth...From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.” Acts 17:24-27**

Paul told them about the good news, that a Savior had been born, not just for the Jews in Israel but a Savior for them as well. He is a Savior, anointed to be prophet and king and priest. He is the Savior who has been appointed to be the judge of the whole world and God proved this to be so by raising Jesus Christ from the dead! Some of his listeners mocked the idea and turned away, but others said, “tell us more. We want to know about this anointed one who came to save us.” They discovered the good news of great joy was also for them! Sadly there are far too many today who have yet to hear the message of the angels.

I read an email from one of our missionaries this week and it kind of hijacked this message. If the Christmas story according to the angels was good news for all people then, it still has to be good news for the people everywhere.

We are all aware of this stream of refugees fleeing the Middle East and North Africa. They have now become political pawns not only between nations but in US presidential politics as well. There is no doubt this is a humanitarian crisis, but I can't help but wonder if once again God is determining the time and exact place where these people should live so they can finally have an opportunity to hear the good news and seek the Lord and find him to be their Savior as well, because the good news is not just for us in America, or those in Israel, but its for all the people.

In order to protect our missionaries and their work, I am not mentioning their names or the country in which they serve. Our missionary wrote, “For years the church has been praying

for unreached people groups to have an opportunity to hear Christ. In the midst of a terrible crisis I have had the chance to share my faith with people from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Algeria. Think about how impossible it is to reach people in these nations. And with the help of Convoy of Hope we are able to meet practical needs with the gospel. In my public posts I try to keep the Christian element at a minimal to ensure we have influence at the camp, but we are redefining these unreached people and turning them into previously unreached. The other night I was talking to a man who was from Iran and desperate to cross the border. He shared with me how difficult his life has been and so many of the disappointments. He has constantly been on the outs and this border closing was another in a long list. As he shared heartbreak after heartbreak, I told him God could do a miracle. Responding with the notion that miracles are impossible, he referenced Jesus feeding the 5,000. He was adamant that 2 fish and 5 loaves could not feed 5,000. I was taken aback and thought, “How could this Muslim know this story?” I asked if he had a Bible to read more about the story. Pulling a Farsi Bible from his jacket he flipped to the New Testament where he had been reading. I noticed the Bible because it was from a member of our team [given] a few days earlier. In the midst of a dark situation he is reading from the book of Life.

“I was in a rush at some point today to try and help fill some buses for those seeking asylum in our nation. I came upon a group of guys, who when I approached them looked very dejected. They told me they were not human... They pointed at me and said I was human, but they were nothing. I was shocked and told them that was not the truth and they they were human. They shook their heads and said again, ‘we are nothing.’ I extended my hand to shake theirs and they instantly took a step back. They had obviously been shaken by the closing of the border to certain nationalities and were broken. I explained why I volunteer and grabbed one of the guys on the shoulder and pulled him into a huge bear hug. I then let him go, looked at him and told him, ‘you are human.’ His eyes got moist and I gave him another hug. He let a tear drop. I hugged the other guy and told him that he was human as well. He was moist eyed as well and they thanked me for helping them feel like human beings again. I can work in some of the most difficult conditions knowing I’m making people feel human again.

“It’s easily the most haunting moment of this entire crisis. We have all heard stories of death while crossing the sea, but to meet a family who lived through it first hand. Walking through one of the tents I was drawn to a group of people with a lot of kids. They had only a few

men and mostly women and children with them. One of the guys spoke pretty good English and I began to simply ask what some of their needs were. I got the usual – shoes here and some pants there. But then the guy I was talking with said ‘I need a jacket for that man. He lost his daughter at sea.’ I was instantly taken back and he began to tell the story of how their boat hit a rock when it reached the shore. This cascaded the boat back into the sea and the waves sank the boat. The passengers were being dragged back out to sea or beaten against the rocks....that day a 7 month old girl and a four year old girl lost their lives from that boat wreck. As he had his phone open he flipped some photos. At first through his cut off gloves I could see the photo of the young girl smiling and then he showed me a photo I’ll never forget. It was two beautiful Syrian girls with a white sheet wrapped around the majority of their bodies. They were like two princesses laying motionless. The 7 month old had a white sticker on her chest with a #1 and the four year old girl had #6 on her chest. That would be how they would be laid to rest with another child who died as well in the sea. The man spoke softly how they washed the bodies and gave them a funeral like they would in their own culture. And then they moved on to a ferry boat and onward to Europe. As the father carried multiple backpacks, I grabbed one. I stayed with this group for a long time. I hugged the dad and as tears dropped from his eyes, all I could do was whisper a prayer and speak hope. I know when he closes his eyes he is missing his daughter. She might be buried as #1, but she will always be his princess. My heart goes out to them and I will never forget.

“I had one of the strongest God conversations with a man from Iran who was fleeing for his life because he was searching for a new religion. He has a Bible and will be reading it. I can’t help but think we have been praying for years for the countries bound by Islam and they are now coming to us. These Muslims are the most open, most progressive and willing to listen about Christianity. My entire time in the camp I have never seen anyone observe the hours of prayer for Islam. I have met people who are frustrated by Islam and want change. We will all remember these days as an incredible opportunity to share Christ with people from impossible geographic locations.”

He ended by adding, “Pray for these unreached Muslims to have dreams and visions and that the bible will speak to their hearts. Pray for safety and protection as the border has been closed to different ethnic groups.”

Those refugees the missionary is talking with and crying with and sharing the gospel with, those are the folks the politicians are talking about. I know. I'm not being naïve, but we don't get to talk about them the way everyone else does, because we are subjects of a different king and our king came to be their Savior and Lord. He sent us to announce good news of great joy to all the people and that means the folks next door and around the world. We have to figure out how to do that, bravely, wisely, graciously and lovingly, obeying our King, even to the point of laying down our lives. Don't get drawn into the trap of demonizing everyone out of fear. Instead, let's allow the Holy Spirit to draw us into intercession for these folks who so desperately need to hear this good news of great joy that a Savior is born, Christ the Lord!

“Good news of great joy that will be for all the people...a Savior has been born to you, he is Christ the Lord.” That's the Christmas story according to the angels. That's the good news that offers salvation and hope to all the people.