

Joy to the World

Many of you know that I love telling dumb jokes, and since this week's advent theme is JOY, I wondered if it would be alright for me to share a few jokes with you this morning:

What do you call a disease you get from Christmas decorations? **Tinselitis!**

What did one sheep say to the other sheep around the manger at Jesus' birth? **Fleece Navidad**

What did Adam say on the day before Christmas? **It's Christmas, Eve!**

What's a dog's favorite Christmas carol? **Bark, the herald angels sing.**

What do you call a woman pregnant with her 2nd child around Christmas? **My Wife**

[That's right! We're Pregnant!]

In all seriousness, we're just really excited about baby #2 and wanted to let you all know. Pregnancy announcements are fun, and we can't wait to welcome another little one into our family as well as into this church family.

The last few weeks we've been reading about Mary's birth announcement. First, first she hears from the angel Gabriel that she will bear a child despite her virginity, and then last week we read about the song she sang when she shared that news with her relative Elizabeth.

This week we'll read about how the news goes public as angels announce Christ's birth to shepherds in the night.

Turn with me to Luke chapter 2 verse 8.

READING

Luke 2:⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

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

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ 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."

May God bless the reading of His word this morning. Amen.

My message this morning isn't complicated. And I hope that if nothing else, we'll walk away encouraged by the simple and joyous truths communicated through this short Christmas story.

The first simple truth is that **THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE IS FOR SIMPLE PEOPLE**

I. THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE IS FOR SIMPLE PEOPLE (2:8-10)

It's common for preachers to spend a great deal of time explaining how interesting it was that the angels appeared to shepherds that night. I've heard it said that shepherds had particularly dirty jobs and were some of the most looked down upon folks in their society because they would have been ceremonially unclean according to the religious elite. But that's actually a bit inconsistent with the what else we read about shepherds in scripture.

Sure, tending sheep out in pastures WAS not and IS not a particularly sought after profession. But that doesn't mean it wasn't a noble or respectable way of life. Shepherds make an honest living caring for creatures that can't care for themselves. The image of the shepherd was often applied to kings and leaders who were particularly compassionate and cared about their people.

- Jesus himself later speaks of himself as the Good Shepherd, and tells a parable about the shepherd who leaves the 99 to go after the 1. None of his listeners balk at that idea.
- Psalm 23, one of our most popular psalms, starts out - "The Lord is my _____"

So when the angels give this news first to shepherds, and they become the very first witnesses of Christ's coming - it tells us something about the character of this child and what kind of Savior and King he will be, **because we see what kind of company he keeps.**

Jesus enters the world in the company of common workers - particularly those who symbolize great care for others. **This is the kind of Messiah that has come.**

By the way, we know exactly why the announcement was first given to common people and not kings and elites. When the shepherds heard, they went and saw and rejoiced and then told everyone what great news they'd heard and witnessed. When King Herod heard about it from foreign visitors, the first thing that he did was start cooking up a plot to have Jesus killed!

The coming of Jesus was good news for EVERYBODY - including Herod - but we don't all respond to good news the same way. Some of us have been so hardened and twisted by our sin and brokenness that we have forgotten what good actually looks like. And when good news actually comes our way, we view it as a threat to the whole web of sins and comforts that we've built up to protect ourselves from being hurt. And for whatever reason, those of us who have more wealth, power, and status seem to have a harder time accepting the Gospel.

That's why Jesus says it's easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God. Not because Jesus' grace isn't sufficient, but because they have difficulty receiving it.

The Christmas message - the Gospel that Christ has come near to save - is for simple people. That's why we're encouraged to have faith like a child. Us adults complicate things too much.

II. THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE IS SIMPLE IN CONTENT (11-14).

The Christmas message is for simple people, and the Christmas message is also SIMPLE IN CONTENT.

Us Christians can often stumble over our words and doubt ourselves when given the opportunity to share our faith with others. I think sometimes we second-guess ourselves because it almost seems wrong how simple the Gospel message is. So we over complicate it with theological jargon or we try to do everything we can to convince the person we're talking to that they ARE in fact a sinner so that they'll just get on with it and accept Jesus.

It's really not that complicated though. The problem isn't just that we need forgiveness - it's that we live in a fallen world. You may fight an uphill battle to get someone to admit they need forgiveness, but it doesn't take much to have anyone acknowledge that there's something not right with the world.

We've all messed up, or at least we've had someone do something messed up to us. There's war, poverty, strained and fractured relationships, shame, regret, despair...I could go on.

The more cynical and less religious resign themselves to the belief that this is just how the world is. It's all chaos and random chance. The best we can do is to appreciate the precious rare moments of beauty we can find.

The Gospel tells us that the world was not in fact created in chaos and chance. God created all things good, and He set this all in motion out of the abundance of His creative love.

It was humanity's rebellion and rejection of that relationship that brought sin and brokenness into the world. We looked at all the good and truth and beauty around us, but then we listened to that voice of temptation that said, "Y'know, maybe we could do it better on our own." Adam and Eve eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil was essentially their effort to discern what is good for themselves rather than having to rely on God.

So we tried. Only problem is, we're really bad at doing it on our own. We lie, cheat, steal, wound, kill, lust, and do just about anything necessary to keep things going well for ourselves - all the while, generally feeling like our actions are justified. It's hard to own up to our own sin, but it's not difficult to recognize that the world is broken and hurting.

Here's the beautiful thing though. God didn't give up on us. He totally could have. He could have let us die and be done with it.

Instead, he picked a family to start over with. He said, maybe if I start over with Noah, things will work out. It wasn't long though until we were right back where we started.

It didn't work. God could've given up then. But he didn't.

He called out Abraham and said he'd bless this family so they could be a witness to the whole world of God's faithfulness and love. Just look at Abraham and his descendants and you'll see the way that I love. And that didn't work. God could've given up then.

But He didn't. He said, maybe if I can just make them see - maybe if I give them specific instructions on how to live differently, and maybe if I give them a way to know how they can get right with me and know that I forgive them, then they'll finally repent. Maybe if I give up some of my cherished creatures then they'll see and they'll know the cost of their sin and the depth of my grace, and they'll turn back.

And it didn't work. He could've given up, but He didn't. He said, maybe...what if I give them me?

What if I come down on their level, show them that I understand, that I can empathize with their struggles. What if I show them how to endure temptation and persecution without sin? What if I teach them from my own lips what my Kingdom looks like?

What if I let them look me in the eye...show them that I'll never leave them or forsake them even when they're scared and doubtful...What if I let them kill me?

What if I give them me?

What if I look them in the eyes while they pour out all their fear and anger on me, and I say "I forgive you! I know you don't know what you're doing!"

What if I give them me? Surely they'll see then.

And so He did. He flung the door open wide for forgiveness and welcomes us into His outstretched arms. He invites us to look and see. Look - this is death, but THIS - this is LIFE!

All that He asks is that we see, that we feel our need for Him, and that we confess and repent.

Romans 10:9 - "If you confess with your mouth, "Jesus is Lord," and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

1 John 1:9 - "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

The message is simple. Rejoice, repent, and believe, because the God has come to save us from ourselves. The God of the Universe has come in the flesh in the person of Jesus, and through his life, death, and resurrection He has put to shame all the powers of sin and death.

He's given us the Holy Spirit so that we might be united with God as partner to bring light and life to the world.

And as if that weren't good enough, Our savior is coming again - He'll return and finally set all things to rights, making all things new again.

All we have to do is repent, believe, and receive this gift of grace that we might live a new life.

The Christmas message is for SIMPLE PEOPLE like us and it is SIMPLE IN ITS CONTENT AND THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE INVITES A SIMPLE RESPONSE.

III. THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE INVITES A SIMPLE RESPONSE (15).

The shepherds could have responded in any number of ways to the angel's proclamation. They could have heard it and said, "Wow! Isn't that interesting! What do you suppose it all means?" And they could have had a stimulating theological discussion around the fire that night.

Or they could have said, "We've always believed these truths. After all, we're Jews, you know! Every good Jew believes that the Savior will come from the city of David. Now he's come - I suppose it's about time. Thanks for telling us!" And then gone right back to their work.

But no! The shepherds heard the angel, and they left their flocks and went straight to Bethlehem to see this thing the Lord had made known to them. Their lives were never the same for it.

They heard of what God was doing and went to see for themselves - not out of doubt, but because they wanted to meet this Savior face-to-face.

It's amazing how many of us fail to make that next step. There's something admirable about believing in God without seeing, but there's a difference between faith that doesn't need proof and piety that doesn't desire personal relationship or response.

I hope you hear what I'm saying here: The simple response that God desires is not just intellectual belief. God says, "Come. See. Experience me and let me be involved in your life."

True belief for Christians is more than just intellectual assent. It's entrance into a covenant relationship that results in faithfulness and obedience.

If you have truly believed in God's Son, you won't be going on about life just as you were before. There will be changes in the way you live. No one is saved by good works, but saving faith always results in good works.

What are these good works? It can look a lot of different ways, but the shepherds show us two types of works: **(1)** Spread the Word, and **(2)** Glorify God.

¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

They just couldn't keep this news to themselves. Granted, it was probably the best story they'd had to tell in a while other than, "Hey, guess what happened to my sheep last night - fell into a hole, AGAIN" - But THIS was amazing news. God is on the move!

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Not only could they not stop talking about it, they couldn't stop thinking about it and praising God for it either.

And that was it. It was enough.

As SIMPLE PEOPLE hearing a SIMPLE MESSAGE of joy and salvation, the shepherds and now us are invited to a SIMPLE RESPONSE to come see, and to rejoice and tell others about the good news we've received.

CONCLUSION

Our closing song today is a popular Christmas tune called "Joy to the World," by Isaac Watts. This song is actually a bit of an outlier compared to other Christmas tunes because it is not based on the nativity stories from Matthew or Luke, but adapted loosely from Psalm 98, which says, **"Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth; break forth into joyous song and sing praises"** (Psalm 98:4).

That psalm looks forward to the day when the Lord will come to judge the world in righteousness. In this hymn, Watts reinterpreted the psalm to through a NT lens to rejoice in the coming of the Christ as our Lord and savior both accomplished in the Nativity and awaited in his return to put all things to rights.

Just as the angels declared in joy to the Shepherds the glory of God's presence and peace being made manifest in Jesus, Watts now envisions all of heaven and earth singing out in joy at Christ's return. For the curse of sin is broken and the Lord will reign forever in the wonder of His unfailing love.

May we sing and rejoice in simple response to this simple message of joy for a simple people.