

Good News, Great Joy

Series: Christmas at Grace

Luke 2:8-20

Kevin Maurice --- December 8, 2019

Good morning, Grace. I'm so excited for our time together today as we approach this Christmas season. This morning we're going to study a passage from the Book of Luke that is likely very familiar to many of you. Because from Luke 2 in this text we get the wording for so many of our Christmas cards, we get the layout of our nativity scenes. If watching the Charlie Brown Christmas special is a tradition for you, then these verses are familiar because they're from the Bible, but also Linus' speech about the meaning of Christmas.

And so, as we read and study together today, I'd like us to consider the following question: How should we respond to the birth of Christ? As believers, as followers of Jesus, as we remember the birth of our Savior, what is it that we're called to? How should we respond to Christmas? Because as I've studied this passage this week, I was reminded that this Christmas story is not this quiet, quaint, sentimental tale about which we sing songs and sip hot cocoa. It's actually a very dramatic, very precise call to action. The message of Christmas compels us to respond.

The Response of the Shepherds

And so, today I'd like for us to examine how we can do that. And this morning, together, we're going to step into the Christmas story and congratulations – you all have a part to play. So, if you were never in a Christmas pageant as a kid, or if you were relegated to playing a sheep, then this is your chance at redemption, because each of us is going to occupy and take on the role of a shepherd. I want us to read this passage from the perspective of a shepherd. And to better understand what our response to Christmas should be, we'll study the response of the shepherds. We'll see what they see, hear what they hear, and then do what they do.

Luke 2:8-10

... there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.”

So, please join me. Go ahead and open up your Bibles to Luke chapter 2. We're going to start in verse 8 through 10. The Bible tells us that “There were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock at night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. But the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.’”

Let's pause on these initial verses and let's study a few of the words that are being used here, because there's something important that's taking place in this text. But because it's so familiar to us, I think we're prone to miss it. We have shepherds, we're out in a field in the middle of the night, and an angel appears to them and they're terrified. The old King James Version used to say “sore afraid.” This translation says, “filled with great fear.” The Greek language that this was written in uses the term “mega-afraid”, which an awesome way to put it. They were mega-afraid.

Which makes sense. It's the middle of the night, an angel explodes into view, and then on top of that happening, look at verse 9 again. We're told that the glory of the Lord shone around these shepherds. And so, yes, their response, rightfully so, is mega-fear. Because the glory of the Lord is a unique phrase used in verse 9. It's the Greek word *doxa* and it means glory. Sometimes we translate it “honor” or “splendor”, some of the definitions we use for glory in an earthly sense. But the way that it's being used here, this word *doxa*, traces back to the way that it's used in the Old Testament. It's the glory, the manifestation, the presence of God Himself.

So, you see it in the Book of Exodus when the glory of God fills His tabernacle, His presence comes down and fills His temple. You can read about it. Isaiah talks about it in Isaiah chapter 6. He's standing in the presence of God's glory and He falls down in fear, convinced that

he's going to die. Ezekiel does the same thing in his book of the Bible. He says "In response to God's glory, I fell and I shielded my face."

Later on, in the New Testament in the Book of Luke, Jesus is with three of His disciples and they climb a mountain and He's transfigured in front of them. And this glory, this *doxa*, shines in and through and around Jesus. And the Bible tells us that the disciples with Him were very sleepy, but when they encounter this glory they become fully awake.

A Response Based on Joy, Not Fear

The same thing is taking place here with these shepherds. God's glory surrounds them, they're mega-scared, and then this messenger, the angel, speaks. And the message begins, "Don't be afraid." Fear is not the appropriate response here. Because the angel says, "I've got good news and it's of great joy." Great joy – there's that word mega- again – mega-joy. The angel's communicating, "In response to your great fear, here is good news --- gospel of great joy."

Luke 2:11-14

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!"

And what's this good news? " 'For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!'"

The good news, the gospel, is meant to eradicate great fear and replace it with great joy. And this message is so important that just one angel, one messenger, won't do the trick. It's as if all these other angels are listening in and they can't contain themselves any longer and so they burst out singing and praising – "Glory to God!" This good news is so tremendous that it causes angels to sing. And so, as we reflect on the birth of Christ, especially during this season, that can

and should be our response as well. We respond with joy. To the good news of the gospel, we respond with joy.

And so, I'd like to briefly show you an example of what it looks like when someone experiences great joy. Because it affects everything about them. It changes body language, it alters speech, thoughts, behavior. Joy is so much different than happiness because it's not just an emotion, it's not just a feeling. It's made up of something else entirely.

The author C. S. Lewis referred to it as this unsatisfied desire which in itself is more desirable than any other satisfaction. He said, "I call it Joy ... and it must be sharply distinguished from both Happiness and Pleasure. Because joy has one characteristic and one only in common with those; the fact that anyone who has experienced it will want it again. But I doubt whether anyone who has tasted joy would ever, if both were available, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world." Because joy is different. When joy moves in it fills the house and it changes things.

Video Clip: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nf2c_IY7QS0

And so, let's watch this clip, and I want you to look at this person's face, I want you to listen to her words, and I want you to see if you can spot the joy. All right?

When was the last time you were that joyful? That little girl is so filled with joy you can see it. In all of that her entire response was to a forty-five second movie trailer. She's going crazy. She loves it. And at the end she asks, "Again! Can I watch it again?" And what I love about her response, this little three-year-old, she doesn't even know how much more there is to come. She's tasted joy and yet she doesn't realize there's so much more. She's joyful about a movie she hasn't seen yet. She's excited for the announcement.

And that's what we have here in Luke chapter 2. It's an announcement. It's a teaser, it's a preview of what's to come. Because in this moment the angel isn't telling the shepherds the whole story. The angel isn't there to declare that the relationship between God and humanity has been restored or that the Kingdom of God is now a reality or that sin and death are no more. This is an announcement. It's just a foretaste of what's to come. But it's an announcement, it's a message, it's a trailer that's intended to bring about great joy. Because what you have in this moment in history, in time and space, is not only the glory of God manifest out in this field with these shepherds; the glory of God is manifest in a newborn infant child. And this breaking

through of light into darkness and good into evil of God's glory into the world is the turning point of human and redemptive history.

And the truth is that the gospel, the good news, the birth of Christ Himself, should cause us to respond with great joy. And remember, that's not just a feeling, it's not an emotion, it's something more.

And so, how do we do that? What does it mean for us to respond with great joy? How can you and I respond to the glory of God at Christmas?

Let's return now to our shepherds, our avatars out there in the field. And we're going to follow them on their journey. Because they're going to do three things in response to this message. The shepherds have three reactions to the good news of the incarnate Christ. The joy that the shepherds experience on this first Christmas gives us an idea for how we can respond to the Christmas event as well.

The Shepherds Seek Christ

And the first thing the shepherds do is to seek Christ. They seek the Christ that they've just been told about. The shepherds have moved from mega-fear to mega-joy, and what do they do upon hearing this proclamation? How do they react to seeing the movie trailer? They say, *That sounds awesome. Let's go see it.*

Luke 2:15-16

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

The Bible says it this way: "When the angels went away from them into heaven the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.' And so, they hurried and they found Mary and Joseph and the baby, lying in a manger."

For the shepherds it's not just enough to hear the message from the angels. They want to experience it for themselves. And so, they rush from the field into the nearby city because they want to be in the presence of the Savior.

Throughout the Old Testament the people of God were told to seek the Lord and to be in His presence. Presence is a common translation for the word "face." Literally, we are to seek His face. And so, that's what the shepherds want to do. And let's not overlook that what the shepherds have already experienced here in Luke 2, without even meeting the child – they've got the angels, the glory of God out in the field – what they've experienced in many ways is more than you or I are ever likely to experience on this earth. And yet, their response is still to go and seek the Christ, to spend more and more and more time in His presence.

And so, just as the shepherds did, we can seek His face too. We can seek to be in the presence of Christ. The Bible tells us in 1 Chronicles, "Set your mind and heart to seek the Lord your God." In the Psalms we're told to "Seek the Lord and seek His presence continually."

And so, what does that mean for us practically? How can we apply this lesson from the shepherds and how do we seek Christ? God revealed Himself to the world when He took on human flesh and became a man, and that's who the shepherds saw. And God continues to reveal Himself to the world through His Word. The Bible is the living and the breathing Word of God, and so, spending time in God's Word is spending time in His presence, spending time getting to know Him.

And so, this Christmas season, seek Christ in the scriptures. Take some time this week and read through the Christmas story. You can find it in the Book of Matthew chapters 1 and 2 and you can find it in Luke 1 and 2. Set a reminder on your phone to read it at the same time each day or listen to it in your car on the way to work or on the way home or on the way to HEB. Leave your Bible open and set it somewhere in the house where when you walk by it you'll be reminded of the good news of Christ. Take turns to read it before dinner or at bedtime with the kids. Seek Christ through His Word.

And you know, Jesus doesn't stay in the manger. In fact, the Christmas event is only recorded in two of the four gospels. And so, what happens after? The gift of the Word of God is that it allows us to find out. Now, not to scare anybody, but did you know that there are only sixteen days until Christmas Eve? Sixteen days! Which – don't worry, you can still get the gifts on time – Amazon Prime is awesome – but it's also sixteen days, highly convenient for us

because the gospel of Mark is exactly sixteen chapters long. And so, what a great way to prepare your heart and your mind and your soul for Christmas, by reading about the life of Christ right before we celebrate His birth. And so, if you'd like to join me for the next sixteen days, I'll be seeking Christ and reading one chapter a day from the Book of Mark and reflecting on the good news of our Savior's birth.

And then if you'd like to continue to seek Christ and experience God through the scriptures, as Robert mentioned during the announcements, as a church in 2020 we're going to undertake reading through the entire Bible cover to cover. I'll tell you more about that in the weeks to come and I think there's a note about it in your bulletin. The point is this: seek Christ. One of the best ways to do that in through His Word. The shepherds ran over hills and through valleys and into a cave and up to a manger. You and I can open God's Word and read and see and hear from Christ Himself.

The Shepherds Spread the Word

Luke 2:17-19

And when they had saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

Let's return now to the text and see how else the shepherds respond to this good news. They run, they find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. "And when they had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child. And all who heard it were in wonder at what the shepherds told to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

The shepherds get to Bethlehem, they find the family. They've sought the Christ and the very next thing that they do is they spread the word. They start telling everybody the message. They share the good news that the angel shared with them. They spread the word.

Now I've got to tell you, I have never noticed this detail of the Christmas story until this week, studying it. I've read this chapter, passage, countless times. I've heard it. And I knew that

the shepherds go there, they tell people about what they heard and saw, Mary treasures these things up in her heart, everybody's amazed. I got that. But I was always under the impression that they were mostly in awe of the fact that the shepherds found them and that they had experienced these angels. And that's all still true. But as I studied this passage this week, I came to realize that it's the shepherds who tell Mary and Joseph that their son Jesus is the Savior and the Christ. And I never knew that before.

In Luke chapter 1 the angel Gabriel appears to Mary and he tells her she's going to have a son, she'll name Him Jesus. The angel tells her that the son will be the Son of God, He'll rule over the kingdom of God. But the angel does not mention the word "savior" or "Christ." The angels that appear to the shepherds say that. And so, it's the shepherds relaying that message, who tell Mary and Joseph who their son is. This is one of the most fascinating things to me about the birth of Christ, regarding the greatest pronouncement that the world has ever heard – the birth of the Savior, the Christ, meaning the Messiah. For this good news the shepherds got angels. Everybody else got some shepherds. Because in response to the glory of God, out of joy the shepherds spread the word. They did this as a natural overflow of their encounter and their experience with God. They weren't theologians or pastors or missionaries or priests. They were a group of shepherds who heard about the Savior and so they started telling people about Him.

And so, who in your life, in your circle of influence, in your friend group or your family, at work, in your neighborhood, at your school --- who are you being called to spread the word to? Because the truth is, if you're a follower of Christ, becoming more and more like Him in every area of your life, the inevitable overflow of your encounter and experience with Him will be to tell others about Him. And I'm not saying that that's always an easy thing to do, but I do think that maybe we complicate it and overthink it. And I think that we underestimate ourselves as messengers of this good news. Because if this group of shepherds can do it, then so can we.

And so, what if we did this? And listen, there are a lot of ways to apply this truth of spreading the word. But what if we did this as a church? What if we simply invited someone to church with us on Christmas Eve? In the weeks leading up to Christmas could you be thinking about and praying for God to reveal a person or a family to you? Someone that you have the opportunity to spread the word to? Pray for God to put them in your mind, place them on your heart, have them call you out of the blue. And then begin to pray for that person. Ask God to set things up in such a way as even to make it easy for you to simply invite them to join you for

Christmas Eve. Because the thing is, the opportunity that we have here as a church during the Christmas Eve is this is the time of year when there are Christmas songs on the radio and Christmas movies on TV and Christmas cards in the mail and there's Christmas everywhere you go. It's been that way since October. And there are all these little signposts that are pointing us to the truth of who Christ is and what He's done. And so, what if we just leaned into it and took advantage of this general increase in spiritual awareness that this time of year affords. And we just simply invited somebody to join us for church. We've got service and 3:00, 5:00, and 7:00 on Christmas Eve. And so, could you pray about, would you just consider texting or calling or speaking to somebody and asking them to join you? Bring them with you or meet them in the lobby. Just be a shepherd. Tell them about your experience with the Christ.

If you're a paper person we've got these great-looking cards with directions and service times that you can take with you this morning. You can put it in your car, throw it in your backpack, put it in the diaper bag, whatever, and when you're on the playground with other parents or at work or school, just be praying, *God, would You reveal somebody to me so that I could invite, to spread the word to? Would You even make it easy for me?*

Now we're at church, and so I believe that we're a family, and I'm going to be very honest with you. Doing this makes me incredibly anxious. I am mega-afraid of it in some ways. I get kind of fearful. And I understand how that sounds because it's my job. But I get preoccupied with the fear of what somebody might think or how they'll take my invitation or what they're going to think of me. And I have to tell you that I have been so convicted by God's Word this week, because as I've been reading through Luke chapter 2, what I've seen is that the gospel message should drive out my great fear. And just like a shepherd, I can respond with joy and simply tell others about this good news.

My wife and I are currently expecting our second child, and so on Mondays and Thursdays we have the privilege of attending a birthing class. Super fun! And for three hours for the next two classes we get to spend time with and interact with these five other couples whom we had never met before and would likely never cross paths with again. And this week as I've been reflecting on these passages I've been thinking and praying about those couples in our class. And I've just been praying and asking God, *Would You show us who we could invite?* And I'm asking Him, *Could You open a door for us? Could You make it so that conversation is just*

so easy to have? Would You make it obvious to us that, yeah, You're in this; You want us to say, "Hey, why don't you come with me to church on Christmas Eve?"

So, I'm going to take that card with me today, I'm going to put it in my bag, and I'm going to continue to pray for those couples in my class and see who I could be a shepherd to right where God's placed me. Because I get to spread the Word. So, who is it for you?

The Shepherds Praise and Glorify God

The gospel of Christ sets these shepherds out on a journey. They seek Him, they spread the word about Him, and then their final response, the final aspect of their experiencing the joy of the gospel birth, is found in Luke 2:20. It's the last verse we'll study today. And it's the last look we'll get at the lives of these anonymous shepherds. It's the last time we see them, because now they have to go home. They have to go back. There are sheep running around somewhere that I imagine were left out all night. And what I want you to notice is Luke 2:20 is how they go back. How did they go back?

Luke 2:20

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

"And so the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them." They go back home, they go back to work. They've experienced the glory of God lying in a manger, and then they have to return to their normal, everyday, mundane lives. But notice what they do as they return. Collectively as a group of people that has experienced God together, they praise and glorify Him. Glorify – there's that word *doxa* again. They're reflecting back the glory of God to Him. They heard the good news, they experienced joy, they sought Christ, they told others about Him, and now they praise God together. They praise God together.

And I love this final glimpse of the Christmas story because we see the community of God being built into the very fabric of the advent of Christ. Because the gospel draws us into God's story of redemption and it also draws us into God's community. And so, how do we

continue to experience the good news with great joy? How do we remind ourselves of this mission that the shepherds had and that we're called to? We do it together. We do it in community. We remind one another of the joy that the gospel, that the good news, that Christmas, calls us to. And so, we praise God together.

And that's why we sing together as a church. This is what followers of Christ have done throughout the centuries. We sing songs to God to praise Him, to glorify Him, and to remind ourselves of the truth of this good news. And you can see it – it dates back even to that first Christmas. We come together to corporately express the infinite value and glory of God by lifting our voices in song about who Christ is.

And so, we're going to do that together today. I'm going to invite the band back up and they're going to lead us in singing a doxology together. Now if you have experience in or grew up in a more liturgical church setting, you may be very familiar with the "Doxology." It simply means "words of glory." We've spoken several times this morning about this word "glory" – *doxa*. That's where we get it from. And so, what better way to glorify God than by singing a song of glory?

So, we're going to sing this "Doxology" today and we'll also close with one final Christmas song. And the "Doxology" that we'll close with this morning has been sung by the Church for 350 years. It's a song that believers have sung and chanted and recited as a way to praise and glorify God. In case it's new for you, here are the words:

Praise God from whom all blessings flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

Listen, I don't know what song the shepherds sang as they returned home that night. But we know that they praised God out of the joy that was an overflow from this good news of the birth of Christ. They glorified God, they spread the word, and they sought Christ. And in the weeks and the days leading up to Christmas, that's my prayer for us, that we could do the same.

So, would you please stand and join us as we glorify God together?

[The band plays.]

Praise God from whom all blessing flow
Praise Him all creatures here below
Praise Him above, ye heavenly hosts
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

[Repeat]

Amen.

Father, we thank You for who You are. God, we thank You for all that You've done. We thank You for loving us and choosing to send Your Son, that He would be born, live a perfect human life, and die on a cross for our sins. God, we thank You that that's not the end of the story, that He rose again and has brought us into this redemption, this family, this community, that we've been adopted as Your sons and daughters. And it all starts in that manger. God, we thank You for that. And we pray that this Christmas season You would lead us, You would guide us, show us how we might seek You, who we might be able to invite. And help us to continue to praise and glorify You in everything that we do. And we pray these things in Your name. Amen.