

Christmas Eve 2011

The passage upon which the message is based is Luke 2:8-14. Some of us remember this as the gospel of Linus from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, where Linus again reads this most famous of Christmas passages:

Luke 2:8-14

<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> 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. <sup>10</sup> 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. <sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

*This is God's Word.*

I find Christmas to be a tremendously challenging time of year. All of us are actively looking *right at* the signs of the seasons. We hear the tunes in the stores. Where I shop for groceries, Christmas decorations went up *the day after* Halloween! All of us receive cards or see images of this manger. It is still a sign of *something* – but most of us are looking right past the manger, and we are seeing something else entirely. We're on our way to pick up gifts. The kids are out of school, so we have them to watch over. We're watching over our finances as the year comes to an end. We walk past Christmas trees at the office on our way to get a salary and performance review from the boss. Even the words on the Christmas card – we look past those to see family photos inside, or a check tucked in there. Why?

The manger, the baby, the star... they are just so familiar, that they are almost beside the point.

One of the great challenges of a passage like this one is letting its familiar images and themes *address you. Teach you. Lead you...* instead of lulling you into a saccharine slumber of sentimentality. The manger and the animals and the wise men have been portrayed in such a syrupy way that they can hi-jack your heart, and take it down a path of schmaltz and sticky sweetness instead of allowing these words to pierce your heart with their reality.

Let's see if we can scrape off some of the nostalgia:

The Angel says in verse 12 that it is the manger, and what is inside, that is a sign: "**This will be a sign to you:** You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

The angel says "don't miss this." And we cannot – we cannot let this sign become too familiar. But you know, even in *that* culture nearly everyone would have missed it, *except* maybe shepherds. Shepherds were at the bottom of the social ladder. Shepherds were considered

worthless liars. In fact shepherds were prohibited from giving testimony at trial, *so universal was the notion of a shepherd as a lying class of people*. No one would believe them!

It was the accepted caricature of a shepherd, that he had so much free time on his hands and so little human contact, that he would often be drunk to anesthetize himself from the cold and from his loneliness. Shepherds bathed, if they were lucky, monthly. They were more often than not, filthy and smelly. They were among the most unclean people in the culture. In a phrase, a shepherd was a "dirty, stinkin' liar." Imagine a scratch and sniff Christmas card that represented the REAL shepherd!

And yet the angel comes to them. *Why?*

**Two reasons. The Reason of recognition, and the reason of redemption.**

**First, the reason of recognition.**

A baby lying in a manger. The manger we think of is a sort of "Christmas crib." But a manger is *not* a crib. A manger is a feeding trough for animals. And this manger is the most famous animal feeding trough in all history.

It is a *great* sign for a shepherd – shepherds know their troughs! It is the shepherds who were told **who this child is**. It is shepherds that are told that this is "the savior." The Christ. The Messiah. The Lord. The sign of the manger makes it easy for shepherds to recognize Him.

But why does the angel COME FIRST – recognize first – the shepherds. What is it the angel recognizes in *them*?

Shepherds know that underneath all of the things they might try to do to make themselves presentable, there is still a dirtiness. Shepherds don't have to smell their underwear or their socks. They know something stinks. And shepherds know that people lie – to themselves and to others. And a shepherd knows better than almost anyone what it means to be "lost." That is their business. To know the importance of what it means to find the lost,

But maybe most of all, a shepherd is one who is going to know what it's like to feel judged by him or herself, and others... *that* will be the person that recognizes *this* sign.

These are the kind of people who will be able to look right at the sign of the manger and know exactly what it signifies: Sinners need a savior.

In the passage that Elder Don Price read, we heard the Angel's message to Joseph, where there was a command to call the child "Jesus" because he will "save his people from their sins." Not just from the Romans. Not just from the struggles of this world. But from their sins. And here, the angel – the messenger of the Lord – moves out and over the hillsides looking for the *most culturally sinful* people group known in the Middle East. The dirty, stinkin' liars. The angel looks for the folks that could never stand as witnesses in a court of law... to be a witness to the sign of a manger with a baby inside.

If you were making up a religion – if Christianity were a made up religion – you would never choose this group of people.

Why them? Because friends, to receive, or understand, or *obey* a sign, you have to know that it's *for you*. A couple of years ago, the Health Dept. came through the church and said we were required to have those signs that say that "all employees must wash hands." Shortly after that, I walked by the ladies room just as the door was swinging closed and I heard a child-like voice telling her mother, "No mommy, I don't have to wash my hands here; I'm not an employee!" See, you won't obey a sign unless you know it's for you!

Look, the angel says he has "good news for *all* people." But you say, "I don't believe in sin. I don't feel that sinful, and besides, even if I use your word 'sin', who am I hurting? I *do* feel goodwill to my fellow man. I don't hate anyone." In other words, "You've got that peaceful easy feeling."

Part of the problem is the translation. The way that you may have heard the message of the angels growing up, or in the Messiah, is:

Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace, good will toward men. (KJV)

And this sounds as if God is in heaven, happy with his glory, and if we are good and decent people, well, there will be goodwill toward all people. Something like that. That God simply *has* good will toward us.

And that is unfortunate. And the reason is that the KJV – translated many hundreds of years ago – used certain manuscripts for its translations – good ones. But not the oldest. It's a funny thing – we think of new as better. But when it comes to manuscripts, older is better. Fewer scribes or copyists involved, you see. And fewer copyists and scribes mean fewer errors. And the difference here is that the later translations have an added letter.

After years of copying, a letter finds its way in. A single letter can make all the difference!

Somebody posted on FB recently a picture of a sweet looking Grandma, with the phrase, "Let's eat, Grandma!" But if you took out the comma, it changed the meaning entirely. "Let's eat Grandma" And the caption said, punctuation matters! And so do letters. So that instead of "peace on earth, good will toward men", it should be something like "and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Or "On earth peace among men on whom his favor rests."

And what that means is that you may have a peaceful easy feeling here on earth. That's harder and harder to do today given all of the conflict around the world, but fine. That's what the Christmas cards say – peace on Earth.

**But, your REAL problem is, there is no peace between you and God.** There are people, you see, on whom his favor has NOT rest! The problem of "no peace", or the hope for some peace, is not between men and women, or between humans at all

**It is a problem of there being no peace *between God and us*. It's not a peace problem internally, or horizontally. It is a peace problem *vertically*.**

How do the shepherds recognize this? In a word, "Glory."

In v.9 the angel – the messenger of the Lord – appears to the shepherds **and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.** What is so interesting is that the angel has appeared before in Luke, but this is the first time he has shown up with the glory of the Lord.

And it terrifies. And here is why: When the angel comes this time, he isn't just saying that the Christ is coming, he is saying that the Christ is *here*. Jesus is God... at his birth!!

And the shepherds are terrified because in the presence of holiness, they see who they really are. That's what the glory does – it exposes the problem. It *exposes* imperfection. It's an MRI of the soul.

Long time members of Hope have heard me tell the story of my friend Rick. Rick found out in late 1990's that he had Multiple Sclerosis. He was devastated. He was a marathon runner, and a disk jockey at what was then the number one rated radio station in New York at that time – Lite-FM. And I went to a couple of parties with him after his diagnosis. And very few people knew. MS is slow and progressive. People would come up to Rick at parties and, like you'd say to anyone, they would ask "how are you doing?" And over and over again he would say "fine. I'm fine."

But once we were at a party, and a friend who DID know that Rick had MS said, "I've got someone over here I want you to meet. He is the world's most famous researcher in the field of MS."

Well suddenly, Rick wasn't fine anymore. He started the party with a peaceful easy feeling, but now, he had anything BUT peace. And for two reasons. One reason was... he was going to be exposed. It was going to be public. People would KNOW that he was not okay. That death could be nearer than he or they thought.

But the second reason Rick felt no peace is that suddenly everything ached. Anywhere that there had been pain – it suddenly hurt. Anything that he could no longer do, was fully apparent to him. He was NOT fine. Any pride he might have cover his condition to the casual friend, was *gone*. He was in the presence of someone – in his mind, maybe the *only* one – who could really explain everything that was wrong with him, and tell him if anything could be done about it.

Christmas – specifically the arrival of God's glory in this baby – expose that God and humanity, since the fall, have been at odds. The reason the angels announce the advent of peace as a

*possibility*, is that there has been a war between you and God because you have been *fighting God for his job*. You **want His job**. You want to look at yourself and say, "Everything is fine."

Back in 2006, when my family was coming here from Princeton, I was waiting for boxes outside a liquor store in Montgomery. Ethan was 5 at the time. And to kill time, I had him sit on my lap and take the wheel.... "No Daddy, I can drive!"

I want you to sit back for a minute. It's Christmas, and you probably came here for a sweet message about angels and babies and shepherds. But sit back for a moment, and consider whether this paradigm, this model, makes sense of everything going on in your life.

Some of you are wracked with worry. Why are you overcome with worry most of the time? Because you want control of your life. You want your hands on the steering wheel. You believe you are driving your life... ***except when it feels like you're not***. You think you know better than God – or whatever forces you think are out there – how life should go. Anxiety is so often fighting God for ***control***. You want his job.

Or how about in your relationships? A lot of us believe that we will find a path to a successful and fulfilling life through our relationships. A marriage. And we believe that if we just find the right person, this person will make our life better. But what happens? Marriage *exposes* your problems.

Now you have some awareness that this might happen. But you think your spouse is going to sit down with you at these times and say, "Honey, you are so great, and so sweet, and so near-perfect... but I want to very gently show you some places where you need to grow." Well, that would be nice.

But no, the way that you find out in your marriage who you really are – the way you finally see what you are made of and what is hidden way down deep – is that your spouse irritates you to the point that this stuff, this junk, just starts coming up and out of your mouth from way down in your heart. That is the GLORY of marriage.

It exposes what is really way down deep in your heart.

And this shows you the distance between who you think you are, and who God is.

- In marriage, we want a spouse who is "a vision." He sends us a messenger who shows us our problems!
- We want *help from* our spouse, but what we need is *peace with* our spouse.
- We want a peaceful easy feeling at Christmas and from God, and he sends a messenger who terrifies, and exposes the hostilities that exist because of our sin, and his holiness.
- We want peace from God, and he says we need peace WITH God.

What can redeem this situation? **First** we said that shepherds had to recognize the problem – they were sinful, and God is holy. But what could fix this?

The angel said, (V. 10) "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ... And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

A baby.

Why did God take on flesh? Was it a trick? Another miracle?

No. It was to reconcile us. A *savior* was born. And look, this is amazing. This is *why* the angels come with glory HERE! Here is the man – this little baby – here is the man who is *perfect*. Here is humanity as it is *supposed* to be, who can stand up to, and even *within* such a holy light, still look good. In fact, the light – the glory – emanates from him!

And he will live an obedient life that we should live, AND he will die the death for the imperfect life we have lived!

What does that mean?

You worriers – you aren't worried enough! Your standards aren't *high enough*. You perfectionists in life and relationships – your standards of perfection... *aren't high enough!* You know you should be perfect, and you also know you never will be. Receive Christ, and God will always look upon you as if you are! You receive the record for his life.

Some of you say, that's not my problem. My problem is that I know I'm not very good or appealing.

*Your* fear is a fear of rejection – that people will look inside of you and see who you really are. Jesus comes to say, "I see things *even you* haven't seen – you're just seeing things based on *your* standards. God can see everything. You haven't even seen the worst!" And yet the baby comes to you, too. God says, "If you accept my son as your savior, then I only love you." He's born *a savior!*

That's how you will have peace – it's the only way!

Look, the angel doesn't say, "Forget fear!" as if your emotions are playing tricks on you. There *is* a reason to fear God! But the angel says "Fear not, FOR I bring you good news. Because God IS holy, but he has brought you a SAVIOR. A Savior has been born this day!

This is why Peace between God and humanity is so glorious here. If things are going to be on earth as they are in heaven, heaven has to come down here and reconcile us to him! God's will for you *IS* a joy for you, if you give yourself over to him. IN HIM – that is where peace is found. In the manger.

Let's Pray