

When God announced the birth of his Son to shepherds in the hinterlands of Palestine so long ago, he revealed his heart to us; he showed us what his love looks like and how it can transform a person's life. Tonight, we're going to talk about what this means for our walk with God and with one another.

OPENING PRAYER

LUKE 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸ And in the same region 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. ¹¹ 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!" ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁷ And when they 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. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In the Gospel, God revealed the birth of his Son to shepherds with the appearance of an angel. Today's TV shows and movies make the appearance of an angel seem like an everyday occurrence, along with demons, vampires, and zombies! But in the Bible their physical appearance was not something that happened every day. People were so alarmed by their appearance that nine times out of 10 the first thing an angel said to them was, "**Fear not!**"

Was it their size, their features, their abrupt appearance? Perhaps it was their light, which was absolutely breathtaking, **“For the glory of the Lord shone around them,”** we read.

The word “angel” literally means, “messenger,” as in, when the Lord wants to tell someone something, he often sends them an angel.

In the Bible, angels minister in several different kinds of ways. For example, Jesus warned, **“do not despise one of these little children. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father...” (Matthew 18:10).** Children are loved so very much by the Lord that if anyone would take advantage of their vulnerability, they will be judged swiftly and decisively.

St. Paul wrote that he preached **“In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and the elect angels” (1st Timothy 5:21):** Angels listen to what we say, and they rejoice when we speak truth; and they groan when we lie. God’s messengers give witness to the accurate teaching and preaching of his Word.

Luther’s study of the Bible brought him to the conclusion “That angels are with us is very sure, and no one should ever have doubted it. It is certain not only that they are waiting for our coming into (heaven), but also that they are truly around us in this life, providing for and guiding our daily work.... Therefore, we should learn that our best and most loyal friends are invisible..., who by their faithfulness and benevolence and by their many services of friendship greatly excel our visible friends” (WLS 23f).

In the Gospel, we read God sent an angel to shepherds watching over their flocks—mere shepherds, ordinary men, performing ordinary work in the middle of nowhere.

And he proclaimed to them, **“Fear not, for behold, I bring YOU Good News of a great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ 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” (Luke 2:10-12).**

There are four interesting things here concerning the shepherds and their experience: First, there are the shepherds themselves. They were men of the field, people without any special privileges or pedigrees to speak of. They were scruffy and unkempt, generally despised by the intelligentsia in the cities. On a good day, they might enjoy a hot meal, fresh water, and a peaceful night under the stars. They were ordinary people like you and me.

Second, the angel's message to the shepherds was profound: They proclaimed, **"I bring YOU Good News of a great joy."** Four times in this passage the angel used the pronoun "you," blessing the shepherds with the knowledge that this Good News was for them. If I told you I just bought for myself an 80-inch flat screen TV, you would probably not sing the Halleluiah Chorus on my behalf for this good news. However, if I told you I just bought an 80-inch flat screen for YOU, you just might sing for this would be very good news, indeed!

To the shepherds, the angel did NOT say, "God has declared to everyone who holds a position of power and authority," or, "to everyone who works in the church," or "to everyone who is a so-called pillar of the community is born a Savior." Rather, the angel proclaimed, **"unto you (mere shepherds) is born this day in the city of David a Savior"!**

The third thing is how the shepherds came to faith. The message of the angels was entirely outside the box. I mean, that they would find the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a manger lying amidst farm animals? Really? Unbelievable.

I like the way Luther put it. He said the Holy Spirit gave the shepherds faith and "they were made worthy to hear every angel in heaven singing a cantata just for them." It was all grace.

So the shepherds went to Bethlehem, and they gazed on the baby Jesus, and they believed. A supernatural confidence welled up inside of their hearts, and they were changed forever.

The fourth thing is the shepherd's transformation. As a case in point, what happens when you experience something which changes your life dramatically, like a new car or job? You talk about it. You tell everyone you know about it. So it

was for the shepherds. As crazy and as unlikely as the story sounded, they shared it with everyone they met.

But consider how difficult sharing this story must've been for them. For it was all quite foolish, that the Lord would reveal the Messiah in this way. In fact, it was scandalous!

But the Christian faith is foolishness, it is scandalous, to the world.

But who, except for God, would choose people without an education, without poise, without couth to tell his story?

Who else but God would choose people who are difficult to love, to demonstrate the power of his love?

Who else but God would reveal his work of redemption, his salvation of the world, through weakness and vulnerability?

We are not so different than the shepherds, are we? They were ordinary people living their lives day-by-day, making sacrifices for their families, playing the hand life had dealt them the best they could. And so are we.

The Lord said to the shepherds, and he says to you and me, **“unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

Luther said our hearts should leap into flame as we envision this story and hear the angels' song! But, alas, having heard it so many times, he wrote, we receive it as a “frigid historical fact.” It's as though we're bored with it. We respond to the story of Jesus' birth just as we'd respond to a tourist who exclaimed, “Did you know that Disneyland is less than 15 miles away?!” And we say, “Uh, yeah, so I've heard....”

Nonetheless, despite our spiritual inertia, the Lord continues to build on what he started so long ago. He fills our hearts with hope when all seems hopeless all around us; he shines light on our path when there's nothing else but darkness; and he pours down on us his peace when our lives are out of control. His love

bubbles up from our hearts as we receive these words as our own: **“unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

These are words of comfort and confidence. When I’m lonely, the Lord reaches down to me and proclaims, **“unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior!”**

When I’ve lost my sense of direction and feel adrift at sea, the Lord reminds me, **“unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior.”** With this kind of assurance, my confidence is renewed, and **“the peace of God which surpasses all understanding”** pours over me.

The shepherds were so excited, they were **“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”** So too is our testimony, that is, a public witness about how Jesus has lifted up our hearts.

Friends in Christ, tonight let us rejoice in the knowledge that our closest allies are the angels of God and they are guiding us in our walk with Jesus.

Tonight, may our spirits be renewed with these words on our hearts: **“Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

And this week as we spend time with our families may we have an opportunity to share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.