

I Bring You Good News!

Luke 2:8–12 (NIV) 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.”

In the name of the Christ-Child whose birth we celebrate, dear fellow redeemed,

Have you noticed how often that what passes as good news isn't really all that good? For example, two weeks ago we awoke to horrifying images of the all the destruction left in the wake of the tornados that, among other places, struck the community of Mayfield, KY. Initial reports indicated that the candle factory in Mayfield had 110 workers inside when the tornado hit. Given the amount damage caused by the twister, it was feared that nearly all those people had perished. Hours later, however, we were relieved to learn that only eight people had died. As odd as it seems, I suppose you would say that was “good news,” right? Or how about this report of a recent opinion poll that seems to indicate that life is slowly returning to normal as we learn to live with COVID. Keep in mind, touted as good news, is the fact that the majority of Americans are now more afraid of cancer and heart disease than they are of COVID-19. Now maybe it's just me, but I'm having a hard time finding any good news in a poll that ranks people's deep-seated fears.

Given what I just shared with you, we might be left to conclude that what passes as “good news” is in the eye of the beholder. What one person sees as “good,” another might say is no good at all. But that's just not true when it comes to Christmas. No, today, like that angel of old, “I Bring You Good News! 1) For all; and 2) For always.

Even on that first Christmas, there was some confusion at first as to what was good and what was bad news – at least that was true for the shepherds out in the nearby fields of Bethlehem. There they were minding their own business, tending to the needs of their sheep when suddenly they were blinded by the glory of God, radiating from the angel of the Lord. Their reaction? Luke tells us, “...they were terrified.” (Luke 2:9). They were afraid, not because they were a group of small-town hicks who had never encountered a bright light before, but because they found themselves in the presence of God's holy angel.

Obviously, I've never had anything like that happen to me, but I do remember a night some years ago when I was sitting in my college dorm room, minding my own business. Suddenly I heard my name over the intercom system: “Joel Zank, report to the Dean's office.” Now, as far as you know, I hadn't done anything wrong. But as I made my way across campus, one thought occupied my brain: “This can't be good. Why does the Dean want to see me?” Has anything like that ever happened to you? Have you ever been called in to the principal's office, or received an email stating that your boss wanted to see you? What was the first thing that crossed your mind? I'm getting a promotion!? I must have made the honor roll!? I doubt it. If you're anything like me, you thought, “This is bad news! I must be in trouble.”

Now, imagine that it's the angel of the Lord who wants to talk to you, the representative of the Most High God, the God who sees every selfish thing we do, hears every hurtful word we speak, and knows even the shameful thoughts that drive all our sinful words and actions. This is the God who demands: “Be holy because I the Lord your God am holy.” (Leviticus 19:2). How would

you feel if his angel came to see you? If he's come to bring bad news, he has something much worse on his mind than a scolding. The punishment for sin is not simply a temporary suspension or even a pink slip. It is everlasting separation from God, a fate so horrible that it's often referred to as eternal death. Is it any wonder the shepherds were terrified?

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." (Luke 2:10). When I got to the Dean's office on that night long ago, he asked me if I knew why I was there. I said rather timidly, "I don't think I'm in trouble." He said, "I should hope not. I want you to be an R.A. I'll pay your room and board if you take the job." Wow! I hadn't seen that coming. It's hard to describe what I was feeling. Relief, happiness, gratefulness and so much more. But now, take those feelings and multiply them by a gazillion and you may begin to approach the feelings those shepherds experienced during that visit with God's angel. As it turns out, he wasn't there to scare them or harm them. No, he was there to give them good news, the best news ever, news that would cause great joy and relief, not just for those shepherds, but all the people, as in all the people of the earth – past, present, and future.

What was the news? The angel didn't keep them in suspense: **"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." (Luke 2:11).** Just like that, those shepherds got the news that God's people had been waiting on for many thousands of years, ever since the fall into sin. Born this day in Bethlehem, the town of David, is none other than great David's greater Son and Lord. Here is the long-promised Messiah, God's own Son, the One appointed and anointed by God to live in the name of each of us, the holy life that all of us owe to our God but cannot deliver. Then, after living as our perfect Substitute, it is this Savior, this Son born to us this day, that on another day, a Friday thirty-three years later, God the Father offered up on the altar of the cross as the all-sufficient sacrifice for every one of our sins – for all the sins of all the people who have ever lived and who will ever live on planet earth.

There is no way to overstate the importance of this Christmas gift. Because of this Child, we and our children and all who believe in Jesus will not suffer the punishment of hell. Instead, we all will live in the mansions of heaven forever. This is what the hymn writer means when he says: *"the hopes and fears of all the years are met in him tonight."*

This Child, our Savior Jesus, takes away our fears and gives us hope – the sure and certain hope that he is with us and for us to bless us every minute of every day. So yes, I Bring You Good News! – News that is for all and for always. What do I mean by that – for always? Simply this, that the good news of Christmas causes great joy not just at this time of year. In other words, Christmas joy isn't something we pack up and put away with the Christmas decorations and ornaments – at least it shouldn't be.

Jesus lived, died, and then rose from the dead to be the constant source and continuous cause of our joy – not just when life is going well, but also, and perhaps I should say, especially when life is not going well. I think of the directions the angel of the Lord gave the shepherds. The angel could have said his piece and left. After all, good news is good news. What more did the shepherds need? Well, in his love, God decided that those shepherds needed a sign, one beyond the glory they had witnessed that night in the dark fields of Bethlehem. So, the angel told them: **"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (Luke 2:12).**

I have no idea the shape or form the glory of God took as it shone around the shepherds on that first Christmas night. It sounds like it was some sort of bright light, doesn't it? Regardless of how it looked, I'm guessing that once you saw it, you'd never forget it. Of course, you and I haven't seen it. So, what are we left with? We're left with everything that we need. We have the sign the shepherds received at the manger. We see the glory of God's love in the person of the Son he gave

to us. That evening, the shepherds found the Son of God, not in a warm palace, not swaddled in fine purple linen, or placed in a royal crib. They found him in a barn, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough. Why? Because this was the birth he chose for himself, a sign to show us that from the start he had come to earth to make himself nothing, taking the very nature of a humble servant who came to us for no other reason than to give his life as a ransom for our sin and so buy us back from the guilt and punishment we well deserved. This is our sign as Paul puts it so beautifully in **2 Corinthians 4:6: For God, who said, “Let light shine out of darkness,” made his light shine in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God’s glory displayed in the face of Christ.**

God has “burned” the sign of Christ’s love into our hearts because he knows how forgetful and how foolish we Christians can be. We look for and find signs in all the wrong places. We assume that when something goes wrong in our lives, it’s a sign that God is angry with us and perhaps has even abandoned us. Maybe you feel that if you’re having a hard time making ends meet, or your marriage is on the rocks, or sickness or injury has touched your life, or someone close to you as died. Aren’t these and all our troubles signs that our relationship with God is broken? Not at all. Our troubles, together with all the hurts and heartaches they cause are painful reminders that it is our world that is broken by sin and its disastrous effects. Rather than a sign that something is wrong between our God and us, trouble is a reminder of how desperately we need the Christmas gift he sent to us in the person of his Son.

When troubles come, and they do every day, take a moment to picture the humble Christ child – the One who set aside the glories of heaven to be born on earth so that he could die to make us his own and rise from death to keep us his people. This is your sign, the only one that matters: Jesus’ love for you is boundless and is matched only by his infinite power, the power he uses to turn every trouble into a blessing for you and for all his people. This is the comforting truth Paul has in mind when he writes in Romans 8: **No, in all [our troubles] we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** ³⁸ **For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers,** ³⁹ **neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:37-39).**

This is the sign and assurance of Christmas and the cause of great joy, joy that sometimes shows itself in bright smiles and loud laughter, but more often than not, is expressed in the quiet confidence of God-given faith. I was reminded of this recently as I read the letter of a Christian friend who has terminal cancer. Here is a man who takes the time to make sure that the people he cares about understand that he’s not sharing bad news or trying to make difficult news palatable. Instead, he shares his great joy with these words of great encouragement: *“Please remember that the Lord is leading me. He has forgiven my sins by his grace and given me the gift of faith in Jesus. I know where I am going. I am going to the Savior who loves me for all time and eternity. I am going home forever to the glories of heaven. I am on the way to the eternal victory celebration.”*

The good news of Christmas changes the way we view all other news whether that happens to be news about tornados, or disease, or even death. Our God who became one of us in the person of Jesus is with us and for us. Because of Christmas, he is ours and we are his forever. Amen.