

The Christmas message is a very personal, heartfelt message from God to us. When he announced the birth of his Son to mere shepherds in the hinterlands of Palestine so long ago, he revealed his heart to us; he showed us what his love looks like and what that love can do for each one of us. That's what we're going to talk about tonight.

## 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 with the appearance of angels. 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 we learn their physical appearance was startling! It was something that didn't happen every day. People were so alarmed by their appearance, in fact, the first thing an angel usually said to them was, "**Fear not**"!

Was it their size? Their features? Their abrupt appearance? Perhaps it was their light, which was absolutely blinding and breathtaking. "**For the glory of the Lord shone around them,**" as we read.

In other words, we know angels are not like the guy next door. They're unique in their appearance, and they're unique in their vocation. The word "angel" literally means, "messenger" in the original languages. In the Bible, angels were God's messengers. When the Lord had a message to send directly and immediately to a person, he sent it through an angel.

God's angels minister to people in many different kinds of ways. For example, Jesus said, **Matthew 18:10**, "**See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father....**"

We also read that angels were involved in the transmission of God's Word to us. St. Paul wrote that God's teachings were "**put in place through angels**" (**Galatians 3:19**) that we might repent and know Christ.

St. Paul also wrote that he preached "**In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and the elect angels**" (**1<sup>st</sup> Timothy 5:21**).

And we read that the archangel Michael rebuked the devil on behalf of Moses (**Jude 1:9**). Indeed, why can't we pray that Michael and all the angels would protect us from the devil?

Luther wrote "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).

That's something to think about.

In the Gospel, we heard about how God sent his angels to shepherds watching over their flocks, mere shepherds, ordinary men, performing ordinary work in the middle of nowhere.

The angels proclaimed to them, **Luke 2:10-12, "Fear not, for behold, I bring YOU Good News of a 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."**

I'd like to point out four things concerning the shepherds and their experience and what that means for us. First, consider the shepherds themselves. They were men of the field, men 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 simple men.

Secondly, consider the message the shepherds received: The angel proclaimed, **"Fear not, for behold, I bring YOU Good News of a great joy."** Four times the angel told the shepherds that this Good News is **"for you."** Now if I told you I just bought for myself a brand new 100 inch flat-screen TV, you wouldn't think, "Hey, that's good news." In fact, you might be a little jealous. However, if I told you I bought a brand new 100 inch flat-screen TV for YOU, now that 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 pillar of the community there 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 I'm thinking about as regards the shepherds is how they came to faith. The message the angels gave to them was entirely outside the box. I mean, that they would find the King of Kings and Lord of Lords in a cow stall, in a manger, born to an unwed mother? 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 by grace.

So the shepherds went to Bethlehem, and they gazed upon the Baby Jesus, and they believed. And right then and there in the little town of Bethlehem they began a new life. A supernatural confidence welled up inside of their hearts, and they were changed forever.

And this brings us to the fourth point concerning the shepherds’ experience. What happens when you experience something which changes your life dramatically? 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.

I don’t want to gloss over how difficult sharing this story must’ve been for the shepherds. 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.

For who but God himself would choose people without an education, without poise, without couth to tell others 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—well, maybe not so scruffy. But 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 Hollywood is only about 15 miles away?!” And we say, “Uh, yeah, so I’ve heard....”

But the Lord brings us hope at times when there is no hope, light where there is nothing but darkness, peace when our lives are out of control! The Lord pours his hope and his love down upon us with his words, **“unto YOU is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”**

This is the Good News of Jesus Christ. And like the shepherds, we believe.

For me these words 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!”** These words nurture the love God has for me in my heart.

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”** floods over me.

Remember how the shepherds were so excited, **“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”**? That’s what our testimony is: a public witness about how Jesus has lifted up our hearts.

Friends in Christ, this week may you rejoice in the knowledge that your closest allies are the angels of God and they are helping you to walk with Jesus.

This week may you live with this meditation on your heart, that this good news is for YOU and for all of those whom you love, that the Lord has reached down to you and proclaimed, **“unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”!**

And this week may you have the opportunity to share the good news of Christmas with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.