



Saint John United Methodist Church
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Message for December 19, 2021
"Images of Christmas: The Shepherds' Joy"
Speaker: Pastor Tom Grieb
Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

The News First Came to the Shepherds

Shepherds were on the periphery of high society. They were viewed more as common folk, not nearly as refined as others. For the most part they were a roughhewn lot. Their work almost demanded that. What they did was hard and exhausting. Shepherds just sort of stayed to themselves while the rest of polite society kept their distance.

It's interesting that God chose to deliver the announcement of Christ's birth to a group of shepherds. As the scripture reports an angel of the Lord appeared to them while they were *"tending their flocks by night."*

What that angel said has rung through the ages. *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."*

Upon hearing this from the angel, the shepherds went and saw for themselves. They would not be denied. *"They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger."* Later, the shepherds would spread the word about what they had seen.

Good News for All

You would have thought that the deeply religious would have been the first to hear. God chose otherwise. The announcement of Christ's birth was intended to reach all people, regardless of their status. The angel's announcement of the birth of Christ was not intended for just few or even for many. It was intended for all.

I don't know about you, but I am encouraged by that. The good news of Christ's birth is for all people.

Do Not Be Afraid

The announcement of Christ's birth, while short and to the point, was loaded with some important stuff. Right out of the gate the angel was quick to calm the fears of the shepherds. Because fear is so much a part of our lives, we can certainly relate to the shepherds.

Let's face it, fear is very much a way of life these days. We are anxious about our loved ones, our jobs, our health, and our futures. Our fears have been particularly keen during the pandemic, and we find ourselves wearied by them.

God speaks into those fears and lets us know he with us. He assures us that he will not forsake us. He wants us to know, *"I've got this."*

“Do not be afraid,” is a consistent theme throughout the Christmas season, and rightly so. Mary needed her fears calmed. So did the shepherds. We do as well. God’s every desire is to calm our hearts and give us peace, and he does that in Jesus.

It was Jesus who said, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* (John 14:27)

Good News of Great Joy

We could all stand a little good news these days. It seems we are bombarded by bad news all the time. You can’t access the news without hearing a lot about what’s wrong with the world. Even in our own lives there are things that pose a great deal of challenge. It seems we are always having to deal with something. Nobody said it would be easy.

God though provides a way to see us through the *“bad news”* of our lives to emerge to a brighter day, stronger and more in tune to him than we were before.

The news the angel delivered was *“good news of great joy,”* and it stands to this day. God sent his Son to provide the very strength we need to help us persevere through troubled times. I am thankful for Christ’s help every day. I pray for his help daily, and he always delivers.

We have all been taken aback by the destruction and loss of life caused by last weekend’s tornadoes. All of this has been something else. If anything, we have been left to consider what really is important. We are also looking for ways to help.

Right now, financial assistance seems to be the best way to respond. Later, there will be ways to help otherwise. The challenges will remain for months and years to come. Joe tells me we have already collected over \$10,000 for tornado relief. Thank you.

Many of you saw last week the CBS News interview of Joey Reid, the Pastor of First United Methodist Church in Mayfield. The sanctuary there was nearly leveled. Joey and his wife huddled in a closet downstairs while the tornado ravaged the sanctuary above.

Joey thought his life here on earth was over, and all he could think about was his daughter’s upcoming wedding. Joey and his wife live to tell their story. Joey shares that his wife and children are his most *“valuable possessions.”* Everything else is replaceable.

He also shares about the worship service he and his family had on Sunday with another United Methodist congregation. He asserts that the church is not the building, but the people. *“We are the church,”* declares the faithful in Mayfield.

Most inspiring is the story about the words printed on the one remaining bulletin intended for worship that Sunday. That bulletin was printed before the tornadoes struck. It is a profound word about joy, particularly given the circumstances that would soon come their way.

“Joy is often mistaken for happiness, but happiness can change by a turn of events. Joy is something that abides and that’s what we are holding on to.”

Little did they know what would soon befall them, and little do we. *“The joy of the Lord is my strength.”* (Nehemiah 8:10) God’s great gift in sending his Son Jesus Christ is every reason to be joyful, in spite of our circumstances.

A Savior Who Is Christ the Lord

All along, God knew what we needed. God knew full well that humankind was missing the mark when it came to what God expected. Sin had gotten in the way. Relationship with God had been interrupted. Only by sending his Son and our Savior Jesus Christ was God able to deal with that and bring us back together. The Savior of the world has come. That's the grand good news of this season.

Say what you will about all the bright lights and tinsel, all the good food and get-togethers, all the brightly wrapped gifts, it's the gift of salvation that forms the reason for this season of the year.

You and I need forgiveness and Christ makes that possible.

Guilt has way too much sway these days. It weighs us down to where it dictates the very lives we lead. Jesus breaks the power of sin and the guilt that follows. As the great hymn, *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing* puts it, *"He breaks the power of canceled sin, he sets the prisoner free, his blood can make the foulest clean; his blood availed for me."*

We Celebrate the Birth of Christ

I'm glad we are together this morning. I'm glad we will be together later this week. We are here to celebrate the birth of Christ and all God offers through him.

- Peace where there is fear
- Joy where there is sorrow
- And salvation where there is sin.

We are here to celebrate the birth of Christ in us.

A woman said to her friend as they looked at a manger scene in a downtown store window, *"Hum, look at that, will you? The church is trying to horn in on Christmas."* You bet it is.

Ours is a birthday party, of sorts. There is no cake this morning. God knows we have had plenty of it over the past couple of weeks. There are no gifts, although there have been plenty to come and go through these doors out to those in need. Thanks!!!

In the midst of it all, we honor Jesus the greatest gift of all. His birth is "good news of great joy." In him there is no reason to be fearful. After all, he brings salvation.

Let's hear then from scripture about that great gift as we read Luke 2:8-20.

Luke 2:8-20

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they 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. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.