

Luke 2:1-14 (KJV)

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. 2 (*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) 3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. 4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) 5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. 6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men.

THE NATIVITY IN SOFT FOCUS

I have always been curious about those places that do glamour photography. You know what I'm talking about. Those places where they use a soft focus lens and a perspective that makes us look better than we really look.

I've always been curious if maybe they could do something for me ...maybe not. Some challenges are just too great.

Sometimes I think we try to make the Christmas story more glamorous than it really is. We view the story through a soft focus lens and from a certain nostalgic perspective.

We hear the same story every year. Some of us can repeat it word for word. But, sometimes when we tell a story too much it keeps us from really hearing it. For us it is as familiar as turkey and dressing.

If you get a Christmas card depicting the holy family you will notice that they have definitely gone through the soft focus filter. Everything is lovely and fair.

Mary in her blue robe is gazing lovingly at her glowing newborn. Joseph is strong and handsome as he lovingly attends to the needs of Mary and the baby. The shepherds gaze in wonder as their sheep stand still like puffy balls of cotton in the background.

The angels are there as well. Their glory is streaming through the windows of the cozy looking stable, lighting the humble scene with a warm glow.

If you're lucky you may even get one of those audio cards. And when you open up this scene of wonder a little, tiny orchestra plays Joy to the World.

That's a nice picture. It's one I like to see each Christmas.

Certainly I prefer that picture to the crass commercial jingles that populate the TV these days.

THE REALITY

But, it wasn't like that. We have some farmers in our congregation and they can attest to the fact that a barn full of animals is not always the most pleasant place to be. Suppose those Christmas cards would not only attempt to recreate the sights and the sounds of that first Christmas but also the smell of the stable.

That would not be so nice.

And we also have some nurses in our congregation. They know that in the labor room things are not always meek and mild. Mary was a frightened teen-ager who was away from home as she had her first baby. Joseph was in way over his head.

And what were those shepherds like ... really? They were the undesirables of the first century. They were the ones on the lowest rung of the socio-economic ladder. Some may have even thought of them as scoundrels.

You've probably heard a version of this sermon before. It's a good sermon. The Bible talks about how the Son of God lowered himself to become one of us. Telling the story of Jesus' birth in a realistic way can help us understand the depth of God's love.

But, I've learned that those sermons never really catch on. It's not what people want. In a way it might not be what I want to hear.

THE COMFORT OF THE FAMILIAR

I still find myself desiring that idealized, Photoshopped picture of the nativity. You may have noticed that this evening I have even chosen to even read the Scripture from the King James Version of the Bible. I want to hear the old, old story told in the traditional way.

I want to sing the familiar carols. I want to see a God whose glory transforms a stall into a cozy place of safety and light.

I want to see shepherds who are transfigured by their discovery of the Holy in the middle of the night. I want to see a manger where the stench of the world becomes, at least for the night, a place where the sweet smell of a newborn baby becomes the dominant aroma.

I don't know about you, but I've had enough reality to last a lifetime. I don't want to hear about it on Christmas Eve. I want to turn off the news on TV and hear some Good News for a change.

I don't want to hear a word about taxes and politicians. I want to hear about a Savior.

That's why I've come to worship Christ the newborn king tonight. I have come for a vision of one who is inherently and undeniably good. I have come to see something beautiful. I have come to ponder something that is above and beyond this workaday world in which I live.

And I think you have come to see the same thing.

Somehow, some way we need to view the world through a different lens. Somehow, some way we need to get a glimpse of glory, God's glory.

In the hustle and bustle of a world that is constantly changing and often seems out of control I want something familiar. I want a vacation from all the shopping and the frenetic pace of daily life. I want something that is comforting and comfortable. I want something that is warm and cozy.

Luke's nativity scene is like spiritual comfort food. It's like chicken soup for the weary soul.

COMFORT AND JOY IN THE MIDDLE OF REALITY

But, that's not Luke's nativity scene. Luke tells the story of the incarnation; the story that brings us hope and glory, but that glory comes in the midst of our sorry reality.

It is not a hope that denies the problems of the real world. It is a hope that overcomes the problems of the real world.

In Luke's story the powers that be are not really in charge. The real power is not revealed in those that enforce the Pax Romana through their registering, counting and taxing.

That familiar power just provides the background for Luke's story. The main action takes place far from the halls of power.

It takes place in the fields at night. It takes place in a little backwater town called Bethlehem where a scared teen-age girl and her equally scared young husband can't find a decent place to birth their first child.

So they take refuge with the animals, with only the dirty shepherds and their even dirtier sheep present to notice.

Why does Luke tell the story this way? And, more importantly, why did God do it this way? The way God comes tells us something about the salvation that God brings.

SALVATION IN OUR DARKNESS

God comes to those that the world calls godforsaken. God comes to those that are just barely hanging on, those that are on the fringes of life.

A lot of my friends are reaching that age where things are not going so well in their lives. More than one Christmas letter is filled with the unsettling details of real life. I guess that goes for our Christmas letter this year as well.

We wondered if we should include so many sad details in a Christmas letter. Perhaps, we should be more upbeat. But, perhaps, that's why the Christmas story is so powerful. It is hope that comes in the middle of sad details.

Any fool can talk about God's power from a palace. It takes a prophet to talk about God's power from a stable. It takes a prophet to say that God and his glorious angels are present in the middle of the night in the middle of nowhere.

No matter how hard the powers that be try to organize and plan our lives; the fact of the matter is that our lives have a way of coming apart. The things that we love the most are vulnerable, fragile, and fleeting. Even the best of lives are filled with regret and disappointment, sickness and shame.

And so, God comes to us not where we are strong and in charge. God comes to us where we are weak and vulnerable. God comes to us where life is most fragile and tenuous. God comes to us in a manger.

What does this mean? It means that the salvation God brings really is going to change things, and it's going to change things from the ground up.

God didn't come in Jesus to make things just a little bit better, to tinker with the system and make it work just a little bit better.

God in Christ came to turn over the tables and recreate the world He created in the first place. God in Christ comes to resurrect and redeem and not just to rehabilitate.

FEAR AND CHANGE

You may have noticed that in some respects the Good News of the Christmas story also brings a measure of fear. Mary was afraid when the angel came to her. The shepherds

are “sore afraid” when they saw the glory of God in the night sky. And if we hear the story correctly we will be afraid too, at least at first.

When the Spirit of God comes into our lives, that Spirit calls us (like the shepherds) to go somewhere else and find something different. We might not be happy where we are but at least it is familiar and to a certain extent comfortable.

But, deep down inside we want something more. Like the shepherds, we want a life that is greater than the grind of the night shift in the middle of nowhere.

There are many people these days that refer to themselves as seekers. These seekers want to find something more in life. They want to look beyond the struggles of everyday life. They want to hear a story that points to something greater, something unexpected.

To the seekers among us tonight I would say, “You have found your story.” Despite appearances to the contrary, despite the wars and rumors of wars, despite high taxes and Machiavellian politicians, God is at work in our world.

Think about it. If God can come through the child born to a young mother on the fringes of an ancient society, God can come to us.

The birth of Christ demonstrates in story form what Jesus will demonstrate through his life and teachings. God is with us and for us. No place is too remote. No circumstance is too humble. God chooses to come and live among us.

As the Christmas carol puts it, “the hopes and fears of all the years” really are met in Him tonight. This is the Good News tonight. “Unto you a Savior is born.”

Who would have thought such a message would have come from heaven in the middle of the night to shepherds? What kind of way is this to broadcast such important news?

It turns out that its God’s way. God has a history of choosing unusual places and unusual people to be his prophets. As the apostle Paul once put it, God does that to show that the power comes not from us but from above. The news of salvation always comes from heaven to earth and not the other way round.

And so, in a dusty little insignificant town called Bethlehem and in an isolated field in the middle of the night, the message of hope is proclaimed to all people. When you get your news from heaven, word travels fast, and the words are effective. After all it was through the Word of God that the universe was created.

When God speaks things change; God’s words change things forever. And those words can still change you even tonight.

GOOD NEWS FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE

Maybe God first came into the world in this humble way to let us know that there's no place where He is not present. There's no place too remote and there's no person too weak to be a recipient of the Good News.

He's present even in the lives of those people whom we sometimes pity and even ridicule. He's present here and now for us all.

Ken Davis is a Christian speaker who uses humor to make his message more effective. But, he tells of a time when, as a high school student, he used his humor to hurt someone who was weaker than him.

He said that when you don't understand that God loves you and accepts you just as you are, you spend your life trying to prove your worth. And one way that you do that, especially when you're in high school is by making fun of someone else, stepping on someone else in order to lift yourself higher.

That's what he did one year at summer camp. There was a young boy at camp that year that had physical and mental challenges. He walked in an unusual way and talked in an unusual way. So Ken decided to imitate this boy, and he was good at it.

He could walk in the same strange way that the little boy walked, and he could imitate his speech impediment. The kids loved it. They laughed and laughed, and Ken felt better about himself at this young man's expense.

Ken said that the real reason he was so cruel to this boy was that he had been teased himself, and now he was trying to lift himself up higher through teasing this boy. And so he did it all week long. Unmercifully he teased the little boy.

Finally, the time arrived for the kids to go home. They were all lined up with their sleeping bags and clothes waiting for the bus to arrive.

And about that time he heard this little boy shouting as he ran toward the camp. Ken was ready to imitate the hapless child once again. This would be one more chance to gain favor in the eyes of the group at his expense.

And so Ken strained to hear what Bernie had to say so that he might imitate it. And as Bernie drew near he heard him shout, "Good news. Good news." What on earth was this all about? And the shouting grew louder as he breathlessly made his way into camp.

"Good news. Good news."

And Ken said that with fire in his eyes Bernie looked at everyone and said, "Good news. Good news. Jesus loves me."

And then Bernie was off to tell the rest of the camp. He could hear his voice as he made his way from place to place, “Good news. Good news. Jesus loves me.”

Ken didn’t make fun of the boy that day. Ken said that for the first time he really understood the good news because of an evangelist named Bernie.

Bernie knew that God loved him, just as he was and that made him excited and happy. He didn’t have to prove anything to anyone. Jesus loved him. And that filled him with unspeakable joy.

And now Ken knew. He didn’t have to make fun of other people. He didn’t have to try and gain power by stepping over others. God loved Ken, just as he was ... even when he didn’t act like God wanted him to act.

Good news. Good news. I bring you a message that will take away your fear, fill your heart with joy and change you forever.

God has sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

Good news. Jesus loves you.

One commentator said that the Christmas message begins with parents who are poor, a mother in labor with no place to go, a newborn child with no crib for a bed, and visitors who come to see the child who have no influence.

She concludes,
“So you see, there is no reason for fear.

There is no barrier to overcome. No person is too poor, or too uneducated, or too insignificant to come to the Christ child.

He is sent by the God who is vulnerable. Such a wonderful truth can only be contained in an open, receiving adoring heart.”

Open your heart to that news. May Christ be born in you this Christmas season.

Amen.