

“Good News for a Change”

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before 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; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about

this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

“I’ll be home for Christmas.”

Bing Crosby gave voice to that sentiment in 1943.

Many people of course wouldn’t be home for Christmas that year.
The song was written during World War II.

And the last line of that tune reflected that fact.
“I’ll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams.”

I learned this week that the British did not want the BBC to play that song.
They thought the melancholy lyrics might be bad for morale.
On the other hand, this song was one of the most popular songs among the American troops.

Go figure.

One thing is for sure.
For a long time people have associated Christmas with coming home.

LEAVING HOME

So, it’s a bit odd that the story of Christmas is not about coming home to a place that is warm where everybody knows your name.

Quite the opposite.

The story of Christmas begins with a young couple leaving home.
The Romans had just passed a new tax plan,
and the Emperor was really excited about it.

But, this tax plan was not good news for everyone
... especially for the poor.

Too bad.
The poor had no vote in those days.

The ancient world was not a democracy.
It was a dictatorship.

So, when the Emperor said that everyone had to go back to the place of their birth to register for this new tax scheme, Joseph and Mary had no choice.

They loaded up the donkey and made their way to Bethlehem.

It was not a good time for a trip.
Mary was pregnant, real pregnant,
...great with child as the KJV puts it.

We learned last week that this was no ordinary child that Mary carried.
This child was the Messiah, the Son of God.
The angel had told her as much.

And Mary responded with her song filled with joy, praise, and hope for a better day.
She sang about a time when the poor would be lifted up and the rich would be sent away empty. She sang about a time when just and righteousness would rule the day.

But, now in the first act of our Christmas play,
the Empire strikes back.
A cruel reality is reasserting itself,
the "golden rule."

You know.
"He who has the gold makes the rule."

And the golden ruler cared not one bit how many lives would be ruined in his quest for wealth and glory. And so this couple had to leave home at a critical time.

BORN IN A MANGER

There were no friends and family to help them.
There was no warm place to stay.
There was only a stable and a manger, a cattle trough.

And it was in this place that the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of God was born.

I remember when our first child was born.
It was a time of excitement and joy.
And yet it was also a time of uncertainty.

What do we do with this child who is so helpless and needs so much?
It was really a good to have family and friends to help and encourage.

Joseph and Mary didn't have that kind of support, the support of home,
...at least not at first.

The Christmas story begins with a young, scared couple far from home.
And now they have a new baby to care for.
This does not seem like a story that will end well.

But, the birth in the stable was not the whole story.

SHEPHERDS

The scene now shifts to the countryside.
Shepherds are keeping watch over their flock by night.

Shepherds didn't have a very good reputation in those days.
If you couldn't do anything else, then you were a shepherd.

Many looked upon shepherds as shiftless, worthless people.
They were on the bottom rung of society's ladder.

And yet...
...the angel of the Lord comes to these shepherds.
The glory of the Lord shines in the middle of the night in a remote pasture.

No one saw that coming.

The angel of the Lord and the glory of the Lord
 appearing in the middle of nowhere
 ...that can be a bit disconcerting ... to say the least.

The Scripture says that the shepherds were terrified...
 ..."sore afraid" as the KJV put it.
 I wonder if that meant that they were so afraid it made them ache!

That's what happens when the glory of the Lord
 ...and the angel of the Lord light up the midnight sky.

It's overwhelming.

GOOD NEWS IN A MANGER

So, the angel seeks to reassure the shepherds.
 "Don't be afraid.
 There's a reason for this light show in the wilderness.
 I have good news for you.

There's been a birth in Bethlehem.
 And it's not just any baby.
 It's the Messiah, the Lord."

And where would they find this King?
 In the palace maybe?

No, they would find him in a stable,
 wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger.

A baby in a manger, a feeding trough for animals?
 This was not a fitting place for any baby...much less the Messiah.

And yet this was how the shepherds would know that they had found the
 right baby.
 That's your sign.

God was turning the most tragic tale imaginable

...a baby born in a stable and placed into a feeding trough
 ... into a sign of salvation.

If it happened today, the angels might say,
 "You'll find the baby under an interstate bridge
 in an old shopping cart covered with newspapers."

That's you King.
 That's your Messiah.
 That's your Savior.

That's you sign."

Really?
 Wow. What a sign.
 It would take an angel and the glory of the Lord for me to believe that sign.

Maybe that's why in our story the glory is amplified.
 The Bible tells us that at this point the whole sky is filled with angels.
 And they're all singing,

"Glory to God in the highest and on earth
 peace among those whom he favors."

Some of us remember the KJV of this verse.
 "Peace on Earth. Goodwill toward men."

Both translations mean the same thing.

God brings peace to the whole world.
 God brings good will to the whole world.
 God favors everyone.

THE SIGN OF THE MANGER

And the sign of this goodwill,
 this peace for the whole world ...
 is the sign of the stable and the babe in a manger.

This means that God is present in even the most humble and tragic of circumstances.

If the Messiah can be born in a stable and laid to rest in a manger,
if the Messiah can be placed in a shopping cart under an interstate,
then that's a sign.

There is no place bereft of God's salvation.
There is no place bereft of God's presence.

When you think about it,
this message is entirely in line with the song Mary sang last week.
In her song Mary said that God is coming to turn things upside down.

God's going to confuse the proud.

God's going to knock the powerful off their high horse, and lift up the lowly.

God's going to feed the hungry
...and send the rich away empty.

The grace of God does not come from the top down.
It comes from the bottom up.

For those of us who feel like we've just hit bottom,
that's pretty good news.

MERRY CHRISTMAS ANYWAY

I was watching a political commentator talk about everything that was wrong with our country this year.

We don't have the money to take care of those who were devastated by the hurricanes,
...our infrastructure is in shambles,
...the national debt is exploding,
...our politics is becoming more "tribal" and vicious.

On and on he went.
But, after reciting all these ills,

... he seemed to realize how pessimistic it sounded,
and he said,

“I hate to be so negative.
I know its the holiday season.
But, well it’s the truth.
...Merry Christmas anyway.”

Merry Christmas anyway.

For him it was a cynical attempt at humor.
But, I wonder if that phrase doesn’t really get at the heart of the Christmas
story.

In a way the Christmas story begins with a recitation of all that was wrong in
the ancient world.

The Emperor is disrupting lives and raising taxes,
A crazy old king is acting in erratic and dangerous ways.

Poor people are forced to live in terrible conditions.
There is no room in the inn,
and a child is born in a stable and laid in a manger.

Bad news at Christmas is nothing new.
It was there from the very beginning.

And what does the Lord do with that bad news?

He does not ignore the suffering and pain.
He comes down right in the middle of it.
His Word is made flesh in a stable.

And who are the first to hear the good news?
Not the ones you might expect
...not the kings, or the political and religious leaders.

This good news is first proclaimed to shepherds,
...guys who are doing the worst job in the ancient world
in dark and difficult circumstances.

Into this pitch black world, the light shines.
And God says to the world,
“Merry Christmas anyway.”

But, God’s greeting is not cynical.
God’s light is coming into the world ...
and the darkness will not overcome it.

After all this is the Creator of Heaven and Earth.
Is anything too hard for God?

No, as the angel told Mary,
“With God nothing is impossible.”

GOOD NEWS FOR A CHANGE

And so, God’s greeting is life changing and world changing.

This is (as my sermon title puts it),
“Good News for a Change”.

When the Word becomes flesh,
when God comes into the lives of the least and the lost, something hap-
pens.

The Good News is this.
The world is not going to stay the same.
The new creation has begun.

It was not just any word that came on that night long ago. It was the living
Word of God.

What makes the birth of Jesus special,
what makes the birth of Jesus a sign,
...is the humble circumstances of his birth.

God is making a statement about the nature of His kingdom in the birth of
the Savior.

Who would believe that the Son of God would be born in such humble cir-
cumstances?

The Empire wouldn't have believed such a tale.
The politicians wouldn't have believed.

But, the shepherds... they did believe.
And now they were no longer filled with fear.

Now they were filled with the hope of heaven come down to earth.

GO AND SEE, GO AND TELL

And when the angel band left,
the shepherds felt compelled to go and see
"this thing that has taken place".

No one would have ever thought to look for a king in a stable, lying in a manger.

But, the glory of God,
the light shining in the darkness gave the shepherds a new perspective.

They ran at top speed to see for themselves what the angels have proclaimed.

And they were not disappointed.
They find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

And then the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph
and anyone else who will listen the good news from the angels.

This baby born in a stable and lying in a manger is the Messiah, the Lord.

Well, as you can imagine,
people were amazed at this message.
They had never heard anything like this before.

PONDERED

But, Mary had heard this message before.
The amazing story of the shepherds confirmed what she had already heard from her visit with the angel.

This was no ordinary baby that she laid in a manger.
It was the Messiah, the Lord.

Mary treasured the message from the shepherds
...and she wondered what might happen next.

There was good reason to ponder that question
... we know that this story is just beginning.

There will be more for Mary (and us) to ponder in the days ahead.

HOME

The shepherds went back home,
back to their old job,

Their job was the same difficult job that they had before, but they were not
the same shepherds.

When the light of God comes into your life, everything changes.
They didn't go back to the drudgery of the same old, same old.

They returned to their job with a song in their hearts,
glorifying and praising God for all that had been told them.

Mary and Joseph were forced to leave home that first Christmas.
And we know that they will have to live away from home for several years.
They will have to hide from a crazy, old king named Herod who wants to do
them harm.

But, now as they gather around the newborn babe,
they realize that home has come near to them.

The shepherds told the story of the angels to Mary and Joseph as if they
were old friends.
And now this stable,
this place that had seemed so cold and far away,
... now seems strangely warm and inviting.

God's Son has left heaven to make a home on earth.

And the glory of that event has transformed a cattle stall and a manger ... into a place of glory.

Home, they say, is where the heart is.
Well the heart of the Christian faith can be found in the story of Jesus.

This child, the Bible tells us, is born a King and Savior for "all the people."

That includes us.
And that's where we find home.

It's odd.

Christmas can be (as the song puts it) "the most wonderful time of the year".

But, at the same time Christmas can make us feel strangely unsettled, whether we make it home for Christmas or not.

The joy of the season reminds us that all is not right with our world.
It causes us (along with Mary) to wonder about what might be next.

That's why we need to tell this story every year.

We need to remember that when we feel unsettled and far from home ... God in Christ comes near to us.

We believe the Spirit of the risen Christ is with us today.

And Christ is born in us ... even today.

May Christ be born in us this Christmas season.

And may we leave this place like the shepherds,
... glorifying and praising God for all we have seen and heard.

That's how we truly make it home for Christmas.

Amen.