Advent Week 3: Joy

Luke 2:8-14

Today as we begin our third Sunday of advent together, we will be looking at how the coming of the Christ child brings joy to those who trust in Him for their salvation. Before we look at this concept more closely, let us first take a quick look back at what we have already discussed the previous two weeks. In week 1 we learned that because of Christ we have hope and know that even though our lives in this temporary world will end, there is a reason to have hope. All who trust in Christ as their Savior are promised to experience eternal life in heaven with God for all eternity. In week 2 we learned that the Prince of Peace came to heal the broken relationship that existed between God and man after man’s fall into sin. Jesus Christ gives peace to His creation by restoring that broken relationship and giving to all who follow Him the assurance of their salvation. No longer do those who trust in Christ need to fear death or the grave. Our God has overcome both, so we can live in peace with God.

Today the theme is joy. When Jesus Christ entered this earth as a baby there was a lot of rejoicing because the Messiah that the nation of Israel had been waiting so long for was finally arriving. The Messiah would bring with Him the kingdom of God and would be ushering in a new kingdom of peace that will never end. Our passage for today comes from the 2nd chapter of Luke and includes verses 8-14. To set the stage for the message please read this passage with me once again: **“8 In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock at night. 9 And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood near them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. 10 And so the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; 11 for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.’ 13 And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army of angels praising God and saying, 14 ‘Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among people with whom He is pleased.”**

As we begin to unwrap the message this passage is providing for us, we need to first discuss the audience that was involved in this situation. We have here the shepherds who were out in the fields with their sheep. These people were considered to be the poorest and lowest members of society even though they were some of the hardest working. There are two actions that we see the shepherds involved in that is described for us in verse 8. Firstly, they are out in the fields watching over their sheep. This tells us that when the angels visit these men, they are already awake and have been keeping watch throughout the night. What is interesting about this is that these men are not sleeping, so it cannot be argued that they imagined this in a dream or that they had hallucinated this whole thing. These men were watching very carefully and therefore there was no mistake at what they witnessed. The other fact we cannot overlook is that there is a group of shepherds meaning that this entire group saw the same thing and therefore did exactly as the angel had instructed them. This cannot be a hallucination because never in the history of mankind has there been recorded a mass hallucination where a group all had the exact same vision of a false event. These men were the first evangelists to share the good news of Christ’s arrival with others. What a special gift that was!

The second action they are taking in verse 8 is that they are keeping watch meaning that they were protecting the sheep from predators or thieves who might try to take the sheep away. These men were faithfully being employed in the work they did for their livelihood and this is when God came to them with the good news. What is interesting regarding the shepherds doing their work is that this is a common situation we have found other people in the Bible doing when they called into service for God. Moses was serving as a shepherd over the flocks of Jethro when God called to him from the burning bush. Another example is when God called David to become the second king of Israel. He was serving his family as a shepherd as well. Shepherds can be trusted to follow the instructions of God and carry out their work. Shepherds are loyal to their profession and do whatever is necessary to protect their sheep. This is why Jesus called Himself the good shepherd who laid down His life for His sheep.

In verse 9 we find the shepherds being terrified by what they saw when the angel appeared to them. Why would the shepherds be so afraid of the angels? There are a couple of reasons. Firstly, when the angels appeared the glory of the Lord appeared as well. We know from Old Testament accounts of Moses that the glory of God is so bright that man cannot stand in His presence and live. Moses had a radiance come from His face because He had seen God face to face. The brightness of the angels most certainly lit up the dark sky and made the night as if it were day. Last April during the eclipse we experienced the opposite effect. The bright day becoming night during the afternoon was such a wonder. These men experiencing the glory of the Lord would be terrifying. Another reason they were afraid was because the sky was filled with the heavenly hosts of angels meaning that there were most likely hundreds of them appearing in the sky over their heads. This experience would be something they had never seen before and also something they would never see again in their earthly lives. An experience that they would surely never forget.

Seeing the glory of the Lord made these men fearful because they might think that by seeing this they might die. However, the first words of the angel tell them not to be afraid because this is not God coming in wrath, rather God is sharing with them a reason to have joy. Not only is the good news he is about to share with them for their ears only, this news is for all people. This verse carried with it a very important point that we do not want to overlook. Who did Jesus Christ came to save? He came for all who would place their trust in Him as Savior. This news the angel is bringing echoes the good news that God shared with Abraham when He called him from the country of the Chaldeans to become the father of the Israelite nation. God told Abraham that he would become the father of a great nation and that through that nation all the people of the world would be blessed. (Genesis 22:18).

As we continue in verse 11 the angel says that the baby born in Bethlehem is the Savior for all the world. There are two important aspects of His birth shone in this verse that I would like for us to look at closely. His birth is pronounced to have taken place in Bethlehem. At the time Jesus was born there were two Bethlehem’s. The first town with that name was in the northern part of the land of Israel and the other is the city where Jesus is born. This town also carries with it the title of Ephrathah. This means that this is the city of David where he was born and also where he was found and then anointed as the second king of Israel by the prophet Samuel. This is important because the prophet Micah (5:2) prophesied that the Messiah would come forth from Bethlehem Ephrathah and that He would be the king who would rule for all eternity. This is just one prophesy that Jesus fulfilled in His earthly life. In His life Jesus fulfilled over 300 Old Testament Prophecies. This speaks to the truth that He is the Messiah promised by God.

The other aspect the angel brings up is that Jesus is called the Savior. Now, what did the people expect the Messiah to be? They were expecting a political leader who would lead a revolt to free them from the power of the Roman Empire so that Israel could once again become a sovereign nation. This is not, however, what the prophets spoke of when they prophesied about the Messiah. This Savior came to deliver the people from their captivity to sin and the consequences of it. Jesus Christ is the Lamb of God who took upon His shoulders the sins of the entire world and then after having paid the penalty for those sins rose from the dead to show that sin and the grave have been defeated. This good news that was for all the people is that now the broken relationship between man and God has been restored and everyone who trusts in Christ for salvation are now seen as being perfect in His sight.

The shepherds are then provided a sign to look for as they headed on their way to the stable. The baby would be found wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger, which is a feeding box for the animals. What is the significance of this sign? The first aspect of this sign is that this is a child that is born in the humblest of circumstances. When speaking of such an important person the teachers of the law had the idea that this Messiah would similar to king David or someone with a lot of power and prestige. This made the shepherds feel very comfortable because the Christ child identifies with them in their humble situation. We see later in the ministry of Jesus that His humble origins become a stumbling block for the Pharisees. In the Gospel of John this comes up when He is explaining to them that God is His Father. **“40 Some of the people therefore, after they heard these words, were saying, ‘This truly is the Prophet.’ 41 Others were saying, ‘This is the Christ.’ But others were saying, ‘Surely the Christ is not coming from Galilee, is He? 42 Has the Scripture not said that the Christ comes from the descendants of David, and from Bethlehem, the village where David was?’” (7:40-42).** Then later in the passage Nicodemus is criticized for believing in Jesus and is accused of being a Galilean. They tell him that no prophet ever comes from Galilee. The humble origins of Jesus blinded many of the intellectuals and haughty who thought that their status in the temple made them more knowledgeable than others. These signs provided by the angel give us evidence of how God chose to reveal Himself in Christ. Our Savior identifies with us in His humiliation and therefore our God understands our predicament. God’s love allows us to experience the joy in the coming of Christ that gives our life meaning and purpose.

As we conclude the passage, we find the angelic army of God proclaiming the good news to the shepherds through their praises. This army serves as those who do the work of God both in heaven and on earth. Angels serve many different roles in Scripture including being God’s messenger, fighting for His people against their enemies and appearing in visions of the prophets to show them what must happen in the future. The shepherds were amazed by what they saw and what was being said by the angels. What we need to do is look very closely at what the angels are saying regarding Jesus as well as those who are impacted by His arrival.

They first sing glory to God praising Him for making these things known and also praising Him for the salvation that is coming through Christ. The rest of the verse is interesting and I would like to unwrap this for us all. The angels conclude their singing by saying that peace is given to those who whom He is pleased with. Last week as we were discussing this in Sunday School, I heard someone say that this was somewhat uncomfortable. What did the angels mean when they said this? The first point that must be made is that no person who has ever lived can ever do anything by their own deeds to be acceptable to God. This means that all people are born in sin and inherit the sin nature of Adam. By our own works of righteousness, we cannot please God, so we know from the very beginning that everything God does for us is because of His grace. So, what is the good news and how does someone become acceptable to God? The good news is that God sent His Son to this fallen world to purchase the salvation for those who believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and accept His sacrifice for their sins. Therefore, those who God is pleased with are those who accept Christ as their Lord and Savior. This is the only way to be made right with God. The angels were therefore making known to the shepherds that this child is bringing with Him the favor of the Lord to all who trust in Him for their salvation. As we said last week, when someone places their faith in Christ they are no longer living in rebellion to God, they are now reconciled with Him and are now living in peace with Him. Jesus brought this with Him and now all of creation is praising God for this good news!

Now that we know all of this, what should we do with this information? After the shepherds are told the good news and given the sign to look for, they immediately left their flocks and went to see the child. They were faithful with the task they had been given and they became the first evangelists since they shared with others what they had heard and seen. This is what you and I are called to do every day of our lives. God reveals to us His will through His word. Once we have been fed with that word God wants us to share this good news with everyone. If you know someone who is struggling, not only can you be there to provide encouragement, but you can also share the gospel with them which will bring them reconciliation with God, which is the greatest gift that you can possibly give them. Let us follow the example of the shepherds by telling everyone the good news of Jesus Christ.

Finally, let us also share the good news of Jesus Christ by being people who are known for our joy. Followers of Christ should be the happiest people in the world. It is at this time of year when Ebenezer Scrooge makes his appearance. We know him as the grumpy, old wealthy man who despised Christmas because he did not value anything in life more than his money purse. The transformation Scrooge goes through happens after an encounter with 3 ghosts. The transformation that you and I go through is not by ghosts, but by the power of the Holy Spirit who helps us to recognize that we are sinners in need of salvation. When Jesus Christ reaches into our lives and restores our relationship with God we should respond with joy and a happiness that the world cannot take away. In what ways can we show this joy towards others? The first thing we can do is remind others that every good gift we have comes from God and that the greatest gift of all time is the gift of His Son who came to make God known and to purchase our salvation through His blood. We have been given a gift that we cannot repay. However, one way we can show appreciation is by living as people of joy and taking every opportunity we have to share the good news with everyone. When people see our joy and also that we share it with others they will know we are His followers and we can bring glory to God through our example. As we continue to look forward to the birth of Christ may we be known as His joyful people who share with others the life changing power of the gospel. Let us pray.