

# CHRISTMAS 2000

*Pr. William P. Terjesen*

LUKE 2:8-14

In the Christmas account, the angel of the Lord appears with the good news to shepherds watching their flocks in the fields by night. Why them? What marks them as appropriate recipients of this angelic visit? Nothing in particular, and that's just the point. They were just ordinary people doing their jobs. Nothing is said about their piety or about their wickedness. They are just like us, both in their lives and in their true spiritual need. However we may appear to ourselves or to others, before the bar of God's judgment we are guilty sinners subject to judgment and wrath. Rich, poor, kind, nasty, famous, obscure, you name it, there is one overarching reality that unites us: without Christ we are lost sinners heading for eternal damnation.

A lot of the time we manage to push this fact out of our consciousness and to ignore it. But we do so at our peril. Then there are those times when something happens to show us our deficiency and remind us that all is not well. This is what happened to the shepherds. They were just living their lives and doing their jobs when suddenly they were confronted with the angel of the Lord and the glory of the Lord. The Bible tells us that they reacted by being 'sore afraid'. Why? Because however well they had managed to ignore their lost, sinful condition up till that point, now that they were seen in the light of the glory of the Lord, they saw themselves for what they really were, and they were frightened at the prospect of judgment, wrath, and damnation. The angelic presence and the glory of the Lord were for the shepherds a powerful preaching of the Law of God which shows us our sin and its consequences.

When we hear the preaching of the Law, the application of the 10 commandments to our lives, we are confronted with God's holiness and righteous judgment, and being shown our sins and our true spiritual need to alarm us and shake us out of our lethargy. As long as we view ourselves in terms of the world and its values and comparisons, we feel fairly secure. This is why there is so much indifference to Christ these days. People don't know the 10 commandments, or if they do, they understand them in a shallow and cursory way. We are experts in self-justification and false security, and so we yawn and look at our watches when we are being told about the good tidings of great joy for all people. We don't think we really need a savior so what's so great about this gospel business? But the moment we see ourselves in terms of God's holiness, majesty and righteous judgment, revealed by the Law, we know what we really are, and we become alarmed. Like the shepherds we stand in the light of God's glory and presence as condemned, lost sinners deserving of nothing but wrath and hell. The sooner we realize this the better it will be for us.

The shepherds were afraid because they were lost sinners in the presence of the Holy God, and that means only one thing: wrath. Apart from Christ, you and I are in the same condition and heading for the same destination. Whether we realize it or not, ignore it or not, we are sinners, weighed in the balances and found wanting. We are unclean in the sight of God and fit only for damnation. And if there is no rescue, no deliverance,

that's the way it will play out for us.

But God does not desire that any should perish but that all should come to repentance. The angel came, not to condemn and dispatch, but to announce the Great Good News that alleviates fear of judgment and wrath by the promise of Savior, a rescuer for us. This is why the Christian faith is gospel; good news. It is the announcement that in Jesus Christ God has done what was needed to rescue us from our lost, condemned condition and to free us from fear of wrath and give us confidence before God. The angel was the messenger of good news from God to the shepherds, and indirectly, to us. The Christian Church and its pastors and people, each in their appropriate calling, are the messengers of good news from God to the world, telling people what Christ has done to rescue them from hell, and calling them to receive Christ's benefits by believing in Him. What happened on that first Christmas 2000 years ago tonight has been happening ever since, and is happening tonight: God's appointed messengers have been telling the good news to sinners and calling them from unbelief to faith in Christ. Tonight in this place, I am the angel and you are the shepherds. Don't let the good tidings be wasted on you.

As I said above, the shepherds were afraid, not because the angel was scary, but because the glory of the Lord made them aware of their own polluted condition. God first shows us our sins and our need so that we will thankfully receive the good news in faith when we hear it. The gospel tells us, "Fear not." Yes you are a sinner, but God wants to save you, and has accomplished all that is necessary to do so through His Son Jesus Christ. This is good tidings of great joy: Christ has come to save sinners! When I look to myself, I see sin and pollution deserving of wrath and hell. But when I look to Christ I see my rescuer who has solved my sin problem and made the Holy God my friend. Believing in Christ casts out fear and gives birth to joy.

The angel says that this good news is for all people; it is a universal gospel. That means that the promise of salvation may be confidently believed by anyone and everyone. If people end up in hell it is not because God didn't do enough to save them; it is because they would not repent and believe the good news which was meant for them. This universal invitation to joy through faith in Christ is further applied to you and me and all people with the words, "for unto you is born..." This little word, 'you', includes the shepherds, and everyone else from then until now. Don't let the devil deceive you into thinking that Jesus is not a Savior for you. He was born to save you. When you believe this promise, you have what it contains: forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and everlasting salvation.

Christ the Lord, our Savior, was born for us on that particular day in Bethlehem, David's town. For you and me God became flesh. The baby in the manger is the Son of God; the Incarnation is a historical fact. He came in fulfillment of ancient prophecy, at just the right time, to save us by taking upon himself our flesh and by dying for us as our Ransom. People who don't or won't realize their sinful, lost condition, are not moved by this announcement. The Pharisees and Sadducees who appear later in the gospel story, were untouched by Christ's message because they believed that they were already saved without him. This is why Jesus said, "I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." But those who are alarmed by their sins, who sense their guilt and know their need, are stirred to faith and hope by this wonderful announcement that Christ is born for us. It really happened, and its benefits are just as real.

The shepherds have heard the good news, but now they are going to see Christ Himself. "And this shall be the sign unto you..." A sign is something that indicates or points to something. Here it is an indicator that the promise of salvation in the good news attending the birth of Christ is true. The sign has two aspects: the baby will be to all appearances an ordinary newborn baby, and it will be lying in a manger, a feedbox. Thus there is an incredible contrast between what is said about Christ in the angelic announcement, and the condition in which He is found. You can be assured that in all the world that night, there was only one baby lying in a feedbox. The shepherds were confronted, as we are, with the mystery of the two natures of Christ. The announcement tells of His true divinity, and his form and circumstances reveal his true humanity. The manger displays His state of humiliation that will culminate in His rejection and death; it portends the fulfillment of the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.

The sign of the Baby in the feedbox also shows us the way to Christ today. In the world we look for the truly important things to be big things. We are impressed by what is grand in the eyes of the world. And if we are provided with earthly goods and comforts in the bargain, so much the better. Ask the world for the answer to man's need and it gives us Santa Claus and an orgy of consumerism. Ask God, and He gives us a Baby lying in a manger. If we seek Christ in what the world esteems as great and important, we will not find Him. The wise men didn't find Christ in Herod's palace, or in the Temple, or in Jerusalem. Christ is found in a stable in the small village of Bethlehem, lying in a feedbox, ignored by all the world save for a few. All the great leaders, priests, and parties were unaware of it. In Bethlehem itself, people slept, woke and worked as though nothing had happened. And yet there in that time and place God became man to save us from sin, death and hell. Therefore, we should not seek Christ where we think He should be, or where the world thinks He should be. We should seek Him where He is and has promised to be found: in His Word. Luther said, "The Bible is the manger in which Christ is laid." Christ is found where His Word is, and where His Word is, there is His Church gathered by the Spirit. So here, tonight, where Christian people are gathered around the manger of God's Word, Christ is present offering and giving His gifts of forgiveness, life and salvation to all who will receive them by faith. There are many other places tonight where important people are doing important things, but really, nothing is more important than what Christ is doing wherever His Word is preached: saving sinners.

Once the angel of the Lord finished giving the message He was sent to deliver, a choir of angels burst into songs of praise. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest..." in the light of the wonder of the Incarnation of the the Son of God for the salvation of the human race. What is despised and ignored on earth is highly esteemed and praised in heaven. Nothing brings more glory to God than what Christ has done for sinners, even though it was done in great humility and suffering. The angels knew the value of the Baby in the manger and it filled them with praise to the Lord. The Lord open our eyes so that we understand the wonder of Christ's birth, and then open our lips so that we sing praise with true faith in our hearts.

Then the angels sang, "...and on earth peace, goodwill toward men." Jesus Christ was God's gift of peace and goodwill to sinners. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." Through the gospel of Christ God assures us that He has a goodwill toward us, that peace has been established through the cross of Christ. The baby wrapped

in swaddling clothes lying in a feedbox the sign of peace and goodwill from God for sinners. There is no better way to celebrate these glad tidings than to receive Christ by faith and add our voices to the angels' song.