

Good Tidings of Great Joy

Luke 2

Merry Christmas! On this Christmas Sunday morning, 2022, we sing about good tidings of great joy. How does the Christmas story impart meaningful joy to us?

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this *shall be* a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.’” (Luke 2:8-13)

On that first Christmas, the angels described their news as “.. **good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people...**” God had promised Abraham that all nations would be blessed through one of his descendants.ⁱ The angels announced that God was fulfilling this promise! How did the Lord do this? Let’s begin with verse 1 of Luke chapter 2 to find the answer:

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.” (Luke 2:1-3)

For His own glory, God works through human government to fulfill His prophecies and His promises to His people.

The Roman emperor, Octavius, was chosen by Julius Caesar as his successor. In a power-sharing agreement, Octavius ruled over the empire with Marc Antony and another ruler. But Octavius was a skillful politician and military leader who ultimately defeated Marc Antony (and Cleopatra of Egypt). The Roman senate granted him the title “Augustus” meaning “noble” or “venerated one.”

As Caesar Augustus, he controlled the world’s population all the way from Britain to India; he also brought much of northern Africa under Roman control. By use of the census, and collecting taxes, he expanded the system of Roman roads. These roads were used by the military to maintain the *Pax Romana* (“Roman peace”).ⁱⁱ When Emperor Octavius, Caesar Augustus, died, the Roman senate declared him to be a god who should be worshiped! But all along, Octavius was just a servant to the Most High God who rules in the kingdoms of men.ⁱⁱⁱ Even today – or we might say especially today – it’s important to remember that God is still working through human government. He will fulfill His prophecies and make good on all His promises.

Do you remember the story of “The Emperor’s New Clothes,” written by Hans Christian Andersen? While all the stylish adults had smugly agreed to see the emperor’s invisible clothes, a small child pointed out the truth: he was naked. In the same way, even as the Roman senate venerated Octavius as “Caesar Augustus” (eventually declaring him to be a god), humble Jesus came to tell us

the truth: humanity is naked of any righteousness and desperately needs to be clothed in Christ's righteousness.

“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:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. 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 2:4-7)

What can we learn from these modest people who obeyed God?

For His own glory, God works through humble people in humble circumstances to fulfill His prophecies and His promises to His people.

Joseph and Mary came out of Nazareth, a rough place with rougher people. As Nathaniel later asked, **“Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?”**^{iv} To obey the government, Joseph and Mary walked (or rode a donkey) about 100 miles south to Bethlehem. (Ladies, if you were expecting to deliver a baby, how would you feel about walking or riding a donkey down to Troy, Ohio from Findlay?!) These humble people were used by the Lord to reveal His highest and greatest glory: good tidings of great joy. Even if this world looks upon you as an “also ran” – not really the upper crust type in society: not wealthy, not “a winner,” you could be used by the Lord. For everyone else, you may just be a mark on a census taker’s list, but you can be great in God’s eyes by obeying Him and serving Him humbly. God is fulfilling His purposes through people like this just as surely as He is ruling over human governments.

The Most High God also used their humble circumstances to reveal His highest and greatest glory. Mary brought forth the Christ child in a place occupied by animals. She wrapped the Child in strips of cloth – and the fact that she did it indicates that she did not have a midwife. She laid him in a manger made of rock – the feed trough for the animals. The word “inn” translates the Greek word [kataluma]. In Jewish households, they routinely reserved an honored place for visiting guests. But no honored place was offered to Joseph by any of his relatives. This likely means that Joseph and Mary were viewed with disdain, as if they had been immoral. Their reputation was smeared, and it is likely that Jesus lived under the shadow of this tainted reputation for His whole life.^v In the wisdom of God, He chose to send His humble Son through lowly circumstances.

And to whom did the Lord reveal these good tidings of great joy? Was it to the royalty of Jerusalem? Who were the first ambassadors of the newborn Jesus? They were humble shepherds. The shepherds of the time were viewed as robbers since they allowed their animals to graze on crops. They were looked down upon by farmers and noblemen. Yet it was to those humble shepherds that God revealed His highest and greatest glory: the Messiah. And those humble shepherds were the first ambassadors of the newborn King. Visited by angels, these shepherds rushed to nearby Bethlehem (the city of David) to see **“a Savior, which is Christ the Lord”** (Luke 2:11). For all their lives, they had been told about the Messiah; now the angels were telling them to go look upon Him in Bethlehem! Just imagine the thrill when they heard thousands of angels proclaim, **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, good will toward men”** (Luke 2:13).

*Out in the fields in the darkness of evening, shepherds abiding with sheep of their fold
Suddenly heard the Lord's angel announcing wonderful news from the promise of old
Glory to God in the highest of heavens! Peace and good will through the grace that He gives
This is good news sent for all of the nations; God sent His Son so that each man could live.
Angels were shouting this glorious story; fear not, they bring us good tidings of joy!
Born in the city of David, a Savior: Come to the manger, discover this Boy
Let us go over to Bethlehem's stable; come with the shepherds to see this great sight
Join them, embracing God's great Revelation! People in darkness have seen the great light!*

How could we use this story from Luke 2?

- When you are disappointed or even disgusted with pompous governmental leaders, remember that God is in control. He is accomplishing His will; He is still fulfilling His purpose.
- Don't disdain humble circumstances. God uses impoverished peasants who are treated as outcasts. God can glorify His name through people who are treated with disdain.
- God is working through humble people – that very few people even know about. He delights in using the most humble messengers to spread His heavenly message.
- Remember the reason for great joy: it's the good tidings!

So, what do these **"...good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people..."** mean to us today? (After all, aren't we part of "all people?") Paul connected that promise made to Abraham with Jesus, the seed (or descendant) of Abraham: **"And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham."** (Galatians 3:8-9) Through the finished work of Jesus Christ – His dying on the cross for our sins, as our substitute, and rising again from the dead – people are justified. In other words, through the work of Jesus, men are made righteous in the sight of God! On this Christmas Day, 2022, it's important to remember that this is the greatest gift you will ever receive. As Paul wrote to the congregation at Corinth: **"Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!"** (2 Corinthians 9:15). Is it any wonder that the angels described their announcement as **"good tidings of great joy!"**?

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ⁱ Genesis 22:18, see also Genesis 26:4 and Galatians 3:8-9

ⁱⁱ More than a century later, Emperor Hadrian would use the Roman roads to persecute the people of Israel. One of these roads was discovered recently. See "Highway of ancient world': Part of an 1,800-year-old Roman road found in Galilee" <https://www.timesofisrael.com/archeologists-uncover-new-section-of-1800-year-old-roman-road-in-galilee/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Daniel 5:21

^{iv} John 1:46

^v See John 8:41, where His critics said, "We were not born of fornication..." implying that Jesus had been.