



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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Good News!
Luke 2:1-20

I don't remember what year it was, but it was at least 21 years ago. A Sunday edition of the "Dennis the Menace" comic strip leading up to Christmas showed Dennis at the first rehearsal for the Christmas play. He had been assigned the part of the angel.

The director tells him, "You just have to remember one line, Dennis: 'I bring you good tidings.'"

Puzzled by the word "tidings," Dennis asks an older child what the word meant. The child tells him, "Tidings means news, Dennis."

After the rehearsal, Dennis gets in the car with his parents and says with excitement, "Guess what! I'm an angel in the Christmas play. And I only have to say one line!" His mother asks him, "What's the line, dear?"

Dennis thinks for a minute, "It's ah . . . oh yeah! 'Boy, have I got news for you!'"

Maybe Dennis' version really conveys the excitement that accompanied the news of Jesus' birth. The angel described his message as "good news of great joy" (2:10).¹

In need of good news . . .

We need some good news, don't we?

It's been a tough year.

The economy has hit people hard. Families and individuals are really hurting financially. People are having to make hard choices about which bills to pay and which ones to let ride for a while.

Many of you have lost loved ones—some of you several loved ones—over the past year. Your grief has been real, and the holidays bring it back fresh because your loved one won't be here for your family gathering.

There have been so many disasters and tragedies over the past year. Thankfully natural disasters in our area have been limited this year, but throughout the rest of our country and around the world, it's been tough.

Murders and murder-suicides, a huge jump in the number of police officers killed, setbacks in the war in Afghanistan—there's been a lot of bad news, hasn't there?

We need some good news!

And so did the Jews at the time of Jesus' birth.

Throughout their history, they had misunderstood being God's chosen people as privilege rather than responsibility. At times, that attitude led to their rebellion against the Lord and

idolatry. So being in bondage or oppressed or under the domination of some foreign power was something they experienced frequently. In fact, from about 600 B.C. on, the Jews knew only about a century when they weren't under the domination of one empire or another.

At the time of Jesus' birth, it was the Roman Empire. In fact, it was a census decreed by the Roman Emperor Augustus that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in Judea from their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. They had to return to their ancestral towns to register, and Joseph was of the house and lineage of David. And Bethlehem was the city of David.

Joseph had brought Mary with him because the time was nearing for the birth of her child. They were betrothed—more binding than our culture's engagement, so binding in fact that it took a divorce to break it. Yet they were not yet fully married. No doubt there had been a lot of talk, but Mary and Joseph both had received angelic visits to tell them about the birth of this baby.

Gabriel had appeared to Mary and told her that she was going to bear the Messiah. Wondering how this would be possible since she was a virgin, Gabriel told her that the child would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit without a human father. Mary believed, and submitted herself to God's will as his servant (Luke 1:26-38).

Joseph was contemplating quietly divorcing Mary when he discovered that she was expecting a child. But as he thought about this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child she was carrying was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25). So Joseph and Mary waited until Jesus was born to complete their marriage. But Joseph tenderly cared for Mary and brought her with him to Bethlehem.

The Jews were longing for deliverance from Rome. The prophets had spoken of a coming king, a Messiah. They wanted this promised Messiah to come deliver them from their oppression and restore the kingdom of Israel to the glories of David's reign. Their lives were hard and their nation was depressed.

They needed some good news!

Good news came . . .

We don't know exactly how long Mary and Joseph had been in Bethlehem. But while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Luke tells us that because there was no place for them in the inn, Mary wrapped her newborn baby in swaddling cloths—as was customary—and laid him in a manger—which was totally out of custom. A manger was a feeding trough, implying that they were in a stable.

The stable wasn't a wooden barn, but rather a small cave. In fact, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has stood for centuries and centuries over a grotto (a cave) that very ancient tradition points to as the place of Jesus' birth. A beautiful silver star marks the spot where it's believed that the Savior came into the world. So it was a cool, damp, and probably smelly spot, but somewhat secluded for the birth.

In the meantime, God sent his angel to a group of shepherds who were out in the nearby fields keeping watch over their flock by night. The angel appeared to them suddenly and the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were filled with fear. I love the way Luke expresses it in the Greek—a literal translation would be, "they feared a great fear" (2:9).

The angel announced Christ's birth to them—to shepherds, not to King Herod or the priests or the Pharisees or some other prominent people, but to a band of simple smelly shepherds whose work prevented them from keeping all the details of the ceremonial law. The angel proclaimed to them:

“Behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (2:10-11).

Why was it good news?

This child was *a Savior*. He was coming to save them. Most of the Jews would of course have thought he was coming to save them from Rome. And it’s no accident that God was challenging the rule of the Caesars who claimed “Savior” as one of their titles. But that wasn’t why he came. He was not the Savior they were looking for, but he was the Savior they really needed, because he was coming to “save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

He was *the Christ*. “Christ” is the Greek word for the Hebrew “Messiah.” He was the one they were looking and longing for. He was the promised descendant of David who would rule on David’s throne in righteousness and justice and would one day set all things as God intends them to be.

And he was *the Lord*. This title both challenged the Caesars and affirmed his divinity. As the Jews read the Law and Prophets and Writings (our Old Testament), they had come to reverence God’s personal name “Yahweh” to the point that they would not pronounce it for fear of desecrating it. So whenever that name appeared in the text, the reader would substitute the Hebrew title *adonai*, which means *Lord*. Our English Bibles have continued that tradition by translating the name as LORD, with small capitals. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that was produced in Alexandria, Egypt about two centuries before Christ’s birth, used the Greek word that Luke uses here in our text—*kurios*, “Lord.” So the angel identifies this baby as “the Lord,” identifying him with the God of the Hebrew Bible! The challenge to the Caesars was that they also claimed this title and required subjects to confess, “Caesar is Lord.” Later on, many followers of Jesus Christ would die because they would refuse to make this confession, since to confess “Caesar is Lord” is to deny that “Jesus is Lord.”

The angel said that this good news was for *all* the people. Indeed it was! *It was good news for the Jews*. Through this one born in Bethlehem they could find peace with God and salvation from their sins.

Later Jesus would make it clear to his disciples that *this was good news for all the peoples!* He had come to save people from every tribe and tongue and nation. And after his crucifixion and resurrection he commanded his followers to make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:16-20)!

Too good to believe . . . ?

This news might sound to some like it’s too good to believe. Preaching about the birth of Jesus, the great reformer Martin Luther said:

I wouldn’t have believed. If I’d been God and wanted to save the world, I wouldn’t have done it that way. I would have just called in the devil and twisted his nose and said, “Let my people go!”

But God is amazing. He sends a little baby, as weak as an earthworm, lying in the feedbox of a donkey, and that little baby crunches the devil’s back and overcomes all the power of Hell, and sin, and death.²

And friends, that's *good news!*

Earlier this week at our house, we watched the 1983 Christmas television movie "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever." It's based on a children's book by the same name written by Barbara Robinson.

When the woman who usually directs the children's Christmas pageant at the church breaks her leg just before the rehearsals start, Grace Bradley is asked to take over. The problem is that the Herdman children—all six of them—show up at the first practice because they've heard that they could get refreshments there. Their father deserted the family years earlier, so their mother is working two shifts at the shoe factory to support them all. With little supervision, the Herdman kids run wild, bullying and abusing one another and others to make their way in the world.

Imogene volunteers herself to play Mary and one of her brothers to play Joseph. And her little sister Gladys is chosen to play the angel of the Lord. She wants to play the role as the comic book character the Mighty Marvel—you know, "Shazzam!"—but Grace convinces her that her line is, "Unto you a child is born!"

During the pageant, when it's time for her to appear, Gladys is nowhere to be seen. The shepherds are there kneeling as the narrator reads, then repeats the line for her cue, but no Gladys. All of sudden, she comes running in from the back, shouting, "Hey! Hey! Hey! Unto you a child is born! It's Jesus, and he's in the barn! Go on! Go on!" And she pushes the shepherds forward to go see the baby Jesus.

And then after the congregation sings "Silent Night," it's over. But not for Gladys.

The Herdman children go out playing on the streets downtown. They run and climb across the platform that a lighted Christmas tree is standing on. Gladys is the last one across—but all of a sudden she stops in front of the tree. She climbs up another step to get higher and raises the big star she still has from the pageant in her right hand, and shouts, "Hey! Hey! Unto you a child is born!"

Doesn't that childlike exuberance capture something of what the angel's message that night must have been like to the shepherds?

"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that
will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city
of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (2:10-11).

And that, my brothers and sisters, is *good news*—good news that's worth telling to a hurting, lost, dying world! *Just as the angel announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, we must tell his good news to all the world!*

Because the baby who was in the manger, this "sweet little Jesus boy," is the Savior of the world!

†MEG

¹ Scripture quotations are from the *English Standard Version*.

² Mark D. and Nadine E. Ridley, "Martin Luther's Christmas Sermon": A Sermon Compiled from the Works of Martin Luther; http://www.ctkmedia.biz/group_55/S3BZUX6MFP2VGZER4QRBBVQNQYK2PS79/07-12-30.ser.pdf.