

Last night, we listened to Luke's Christmas story and heard the voice of an angel who spoke to the shepherds about great joy. This morning, we return to that story to consider something else the angel said. On the night when our Lord was born, Luke tells us that the heavens were opened. God peeled back the thin veil that separates what is visible from what is invisible and the shepherds saw a sky filled with angels. The angels, however, were not interested in the shepherds looking up into heaven. No, they wanted them to see something down here on earth. Yes, the glory of God filled the night sky and the shepherds were struck by something wonderful. But the angels wanted the shepherds to see the glory of God in the person of Jesus. This was their Wonderful Counselor and His work of salvation would soon fill the earth. And so, one angel first appears on the edge of heaven and says to the shepherds, **"Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all people."** **"A great joy for all people."** God is going to fill this world with joy. A joy that comes from sins forgiven. From death defeated. From life everlasting. And this joy is for **all people**. It comes even **to you, this day**, in this baby, Jesus. In His life, death, and resurrection, God saves you from your sin and gives you a great joy.

Because we have heard this story so often, I think sometimes we can miss out on how strange it really is. We hear that the Christmas angels appeared to shepherds in the field and we immediately say, *"Oh yea, there's the shepherds."* But the question I have for you is why would the angels make this announcement to shepherds? Doesn't it seem odd that it would be shepherds who would be told?

In Palestine at the time of Jesus you have **two kinds of shepherds**. There were **peasant shepherds and nomadic shepherds**. **Peasant shepherds** were those shepherds who lived in villages. In the morning, they would take the flocks out from the shelter in the villages to the surrounding pasture and then they would return to the village at night. This is the type of

shepherd that Jesus speaks about when He says He is like a shepherd who looks for the lost sheep and, when finding it, puts it on His shoulders and brings it back home with Him and calls His friends to rejoice that He has found His lost sheep. On the other hand, you also had **nomadic shepherds**. They were kind of like gypsies. Nomadic shepherds did not have a home. They wandered about from place to place, constantly seeking to find pasture for their flocks. They were a distrusted class of people. Because they didn't have a permanent village, they were considered to be tricksters, liars, con-artists, who could say whatever they wanted and move on. Technically, they were not allowed to testify in court. These are the shepherds who would be out in the fields at night. They had no village to return to. Instead, they stayed out in the fields watching their flocks by night. Now, why is that important?

Well think about it. Luke has just told us that Caesar Augustus was conducting a **census** of the whole inhabited world. Numbering all the people. That is why there was this huge migration of people and Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth to Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. All of the people were being numbered, except the nomadic shepherds. They would not be numbered. They were not numbered among the Roman people and they were not being numbered among the Jewish people. And yet, the angel appears to them and announces to them that a Savior is born for all people. God is paying attention to the very people that fall through the cracks in this world. The people who do not count by our world are the people watched over by God. The joy that God brings is not a joy that only comes to one certain class of people or to a Jewish clan or to the Roman empire, it is a joy that includes and extends to all people . . . even to the people that the rest of the world tends to forget.

Think about what that means for us today. Christmas joy is for all people. Our culture doesn't understand this. Our culture is training us to think about Christmas as a small little holiday celebrated only by Christians, as if the joy of Christmas was only for Christians.

Everyone else can have the joy of the **holiday season**: *holiday lights* and *holiday trees* and *holiday cards* so that you can send Christmas cards to those who are Christian and holiday cards to everyone else. And, of course, there is the *holiday music*, that does nothing to speak of Christ or convey joy to the world. Our culture would like for us to think that Christmas joy is limited to Christians, and yet, as we can see here the joy of Christmas is intended by God for all people.

Not only that, but even the church can begin to limit Christmas joy. I don't know if you remember, but back in 2005, when Christmas happened on a Sunday, several mega-churches across the country did not have services that morning. Willow Creek Church up in Chicago, Mars Hill Bible Church in Grand Rapids, First Baptist Church in Atlanta, Fellowship Church in Dallas. These mega-churches decided not to have worship on Christmas and the reporters had a field day with it because it looked like even churches cancelled Christmas. But, the senior pastor of Willow Creek, Bill Hybels, explained it this way in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*. He said, "We don't see it as not having church on Christmas. We see it as decentralizing the church on Christmas, hundreds of thousands of experiences going on around Christmas trees. The best way to honor the birth of Jesus is for families to have *a more personal experience* on that day."²

It's happened again this year - today. Some of the Big Box Churches are not holding worship today so families can spend some quality time together and observe their own Christmas morning family traditions. Pastor Bob Oliver of Grace Vineyard Church in Arlington, Texas, said that his church held Advent services for four weeks prior to Christmas culminating in Christmas Eve worship. "He said, "[For] people who are not used to having these traditions, they've already got their traditions," "Church is a bit of an imposition." So the church sent home "Christmas in a Box" kits containing Scripture readings, a star for children to hang on the tree, and a CD of Christmas music."³

Let me interpret this for you. Sometimes we must read between the lines when it comes to the news. Is Christmas joy and celebration only for people who are in families? What about those who are single, or divorced, or widowed, or for whom religion and family did not mix together well? Can these people not celebrate Christmas too? These churches make the mistake of equating the kingdom of God with the American nuclear family and their hopes of families having "a more personal Christmas experience" only makes matters worse! What about the people who cannot celebrate Christmas with their families this year, soldiers who cannot come home to be with families, or people who have no families? For them, according to these big churches and their hopes of a more personal Christmas, **with no Church family to worship with**, Christmas is actually taken away.

Sometimes we can do that to ourselves, with or without the help of the church. Our unrealistic hopes of a wonderful Christmas can steal away the joy of Christmas. Christmas has a way of bringing back memories. **Memories** of what it was like as a child. And Christmas has a way of creating **hope**. Hope of a better future. We can imagine what we want for our loved ones, our parents, our brothers and sisters, our children, our dearest friends, even ourselves. And yet all of our desires and all of our dreams cannot erase the presence of sin.

Sin, here, in this world -in our families - in our lives. **Sin has a way of tearing us apart**, of **starting arguments** that never end, except in an icy silence that makes dinner awkward, of **ending relationships** that we wish would continue, and we wonder what it would be like this Christmas if the **cancer** or war never came. And so, we come to church on Christmas, we gather with all of these people, and yet deep down we wonder if we really fit in, if we really count.

That is why it is such a blessing to listen to this Christmas story and hear this voice of an angel, a voice from the edge. When God sent His angels to proclaim the good news of the Savior, to whom did God send them? The Roman world was gathering its people. They were

all being counted. But there were some who were missing. Some who didn't matter. Some who would be lost in the count. But they were not lost to God. They were not forgotten or overlooked. To God, every single human being matters. To God, you matter. For this reason, He sent His Son to take upon Himself human flesh, to bear all human suffering, die under all divine judgment, and rise to bring new life to all. There is no sin He for which He did not suffer and die. There is no suffering He has not fought and overcome. To every person, in every situation, this Jesus brings a word of forgiveness and hope. The joy God brings is for all people. And this morning it is for you. The birth of Jesus and its announcement to shepherds tells you that you count. And that is why the family of God, the church, gathers to celebrate the Savior's birth today.⁴ Amen.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/decemberweb-only/31.O.html>, accessed October 10, 2011.

² http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2005-12-06/news/0512060228_1_christmas-eve-mars-hill-biblechurch-evangelical-churches, accessed October 10, 2011.

³ <http://dfw.cbslocal.com/2011/12/23/some-north-texas-churches-closed-on-christmas-day/> accessed December 25, 2011.

⁴ David R. Schmitt, *Voices from the Edge: Advent Encounters Along the Way*. "The Voice of An Angel and Great Joy for All People, (St. Louis: Concordia Seminary Press, 2011), pp.39-44.