

Isaiah 9:2-7 Luke 2:1-20 Titus 2:11-14

INTRODUCTION TO ISAIAH 9: 2-7

Israel had not learned its lesson in the wilderness. Israel continued to leave the ways of the Lord in favor of the ways of the other religions of the world. So they were punished by God through the agency of Babylon. Their temple was destroyed. Their cities were sacked. They were carted off into exile. From exile they cried out to the Lord. Through Isaiah, God promised one day to answer their cries. Hear the word of the Lord from Isaiah 9:2-7

INTRODUCTION TO LUKE 2:1-20

We gather tonight to on the Eve before the day the church around the world celebrates in honor of the birth of the child who was born to become King of kings, Lord of lords, and Lord of us. .. a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Hear the Word of the Lord from Luke 2:1-20.

Let us pray.

Lord, once again speak to us through your word as we hear the story of entry into our world and condition to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. Amen.

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One of my favorite Christmas stories is about the young boy who was given a very important role in the church Christmas play. He was to be the angel and announce the birth of Jesus. For weeks he rehearsed the line that had been given to him, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy."

The grandparents got in on it and any time the family was together and the boy was there, they would dress him up in his costume and he would rehearse his part for them, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." They were certain that when he grew up, he would be another Tom Hanks.

The great night came for the Christmas pageant and everybody was in place. All the grandparents and extended family were there. Visitors had come in and all the children were in costumes, complete with bathrobes for the three kings and fake wings and halos for the angels.

As the pageant started, the excitement was electric around the room. The spotlight hit this young boy and as he stood center stage in the middle of all this excitement, he had a brain freeze. Every grandparent, aunt, uncle and neighbor came to the edge of their seats, wanting to say it for him. You could see them in unison, mouthing, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy."

Still, his brain was frozen; he couldn't say it. He tried it, but it just wouldn't come. So,

finally, in a heroic moment he filled his lungs with breath and blurted out the words, "Have I got news for you!" 1

Tonight I have good news for us. Tonight we are here to celebrate Christmas as a church family. We have some good news and... some good news.

Sometimes good news comes after bad news. Our family had some good news recently. The bad news that came first was Anne's sister's husband, Sam Tune, was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The good news is that they caught it early and he had a successful surgery at M.D. Anderson and has gone home to Austin. Sam had what is called "the Whipple Procedure" where the surgeon removed his pancreas, cut off the cancer and places his pancreas back in his body. We have been praying for Sam and his wife Patty along with their church Faith Presbyterian in Austin. We are grateful for your prayers and for this outcome.

I read about a preacher who told about the time that a woman, her arms filled with Christmas presents, came out of a department store and bumped right into him. It was a good, solid bump, and all of her parcels dropped on the sidewalk. As he bent down to help her pick them up, she said, more to herself than anyone else, "Oh, I hate Christmas. It turns everything upside down." 2

Bad news turns lives upside down. It focuses our attention like a laser beam. Test results are in. Hurricane's coming. Fires are spreading. Sometimes good news turns lives upside down.

The familiar story we have heard from Luke's gospel tonight is itself one of those events which threatens to overwhelm us by its scope and yet at the same time underwhelm us because of its familiarity. We've heard it before. Been there....heard that.

This morning we read about one angel named Gabriel who came to Mary to announce that she would bear a son and name him Jesus. Tonight we read of an unnamed angel who is subsequently joined by a flash mob of angels appearing to shepherds.

Shepherds were at the bottom of the corporate ladder. If there had been a contest for the worst job of the year shepherding would have won. It was a boring job. What are we told to do if we can't sleep? Count sheep!

Not only was a shepherd's job boring it was a dirty job. Their job made them ceremonially unclean. Shepherds were not respected, nor were they considered to be trustworthy. In fact, a shepherd's testimony was inadmissible in a Jewish court of law. How ironic that the very night that Jesus was born that God chose to announce Jesus' birth to Jewish shepherds who couldn't even be taken at their word in a court of law!

What was the message they received? "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord."

In this good news are three titles. The title "Savior," was a Hebrew word meaning rescuer. The second title "Christ," was a Greek word meaning "anointed one." The third title "Lord," was one used by Greek-speaking Hebrews to refer to God.

I have long puzzled about Jesus statement to his disciples in John 10:16 "I have other sheep, which are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will hear my voice; and they will become one flock with one shepherd." In the past I read that statement and wondered who those other sheep were. Then I realized that Jesus was talking to 12 Jewish men. He was talking about bringing not only Hebrews that were looking for a Messiah, but Greeks who were looking for a Christ and secular Greek speaking Jews who were looking for a Lord. He was including people like us--Gentiles who would come to believe in him and follow him.

The shepherds searched until they indeed found the baby in the manger. The good news of the birth of that baby turned their world upside down.

Bret Harte, in his classic short story "The Luck of Roaring Camp," tells of the birth of a baby on the American frontier a baby that turned the world of rough and-tumble mining camp upside down. The only woman in the camp, Cherokee Sal, a disreputable woman at best, died in childbirth, leaving a healthy young baby boy to be raised by the now all-male camp.

These rough, hard men made a decision that would reflect changes that would come later. They considered hiring a woman nurse to care for the baby but eventually decided not to. Their logic was this: a nice nurse wouldn't come to their camp, and they didn't want any more women who weren't nice hanging around their baby. And so the work of regeneration began in Roaring Camp.

The cabin assigned to little "Tommy Luck," as they called him, was kept scrupulously clean and white-washed. The beautiful rosewood cradle that they purchased for the baby made the rest of the cabin look wretched, so they had to fix up the rest of the furniture in the room. Then quarantine was imposed on those who wanted to hold little Tommy Luck, so they had to clean up for that privilege.

Each act of cleanliness exposed that much more dirt and filth in the vicinity, so that new measures were taken to keep an ever-wider expanse of the camp clean. Since the baby needed rest, the camp became quieter and more dignified, less noisy and boisterous, no longer the "Roaring Camp" of the story's title. The story of the baby of Roaring Camp is the story of the regeneration of a people. A baby changed the whole atmosphere of the Roaring Camp. So it was two thousand years ago in Bethlehem. A baby changed the atmosphere for all who have come to know him. **3**

The shepherds went away glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard. What have you seen and heard this Christmas season?

What have you seen this Christmas Season? When you watched the 6:00 news did you see chaos and carnage? Did you see people coming together to help one another? When you went out to do your shopping did you see only hordes of people in the stores or did you notice the worried expressions on some of their faces--people who were worried because they are facing this Christmas without employment and they don't know how they are going to make ends meet? Have you so soon forgotten the sight of the piles at the curbs of those who are still not back in their homes from the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, or those who are still without electricity and needed supplies like in Puerto Rico?

What have you heard this Christmas? Did you hear only the blasts of music and carols, or did you hear the silent sighs of the lonely and the bereaved who may be dreading Christmas because it is the first one without a loved one, or the first one at a strange table because of floods and fires? In the midst of the sounds of honking horns and people arguing over parking places, will you listen for the sound of laughter coming from children opening gifts?

Michael Hendrix tells about a dinner party he once attended during the Christmas season. The house was properly decorated, including an electric train set up around the base of the tree. One of the children was running the train too fast and it derailed. She was bent over the train trying to put it back on the track. The host noticed what she was doing and went over to help. He said to her, "You can't do that from above; you have to get down beside it." Then he lay down on the floor beside the train where he could see to place the train back on the track.

"What a wonderful way to think about the incarnation," Hendrix says. "The human race had derailed and needed to be put back on the track. It couldn't be done from above; God had to come down beside us in order to put us on track. That's what God did in Jesus Christ. God came and lived among us in the person of His Son Jesus to show us His love and to put us back on track." 2

That's what God did for us. When we could not reach up to God, God came down to eat our food, wear our clothes, live level with us. We call that Incarnation God took on human flesh in the manger of Bethlehem.

God gave us the best of 5 E's. If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us an engineer. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer. But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us Emmanuel- "God-with-us" a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Once again, we have heard the story. How many are there in our world who have not yet heard the good news of great joy? How can we reach the many who are looking for a way in to a fellowship that celebrates the birth of the Savior who is Christ the Lord? By following the advice of a heavenly host, by going and seeing for ourselves, and by following the example of those first shepherds by going and telling what we have seen

and heard—the good news of great joy because... we've got some good news, ... and we've got some ... good news! To take every opportunity we have to say to the world, 'Have I got good news for you!

Let's pray. O Lord, giver of every good and perfect gift, we come rejoicing at the birth of your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. We give you thanks that your light shines forth in the world. You illuminate our darkness, drive away the clouds of gloom and despair; you send for rays of hope to cheer us and warm us with the radiance of your redeeming love.

The carols we sing tell of your glory, how angels sang and shepherds watched as glory shone round the place where Jesus lay. We give thanks for the amazement and wonder of your revelation, the many ways you surprise us, and visit us and cause us to feel your presence.

The gifts we give to others are signs of your benevolence to us, how you came to earth and dwelt among us. The heavens are glad because of your presence, the earth rejoiced with the peace you promise.

The joy we feel reflects our blessed hope: the appearance in glory of our Savior Jesus Christ. We give thanks that he calls us to follow him and gives us the ministry of reconciliation to fulfill in his name. Hear our prayers for those on our hearts this night.

INTRODUCTION TO SILENT NIGHT

The date was December 24, 1818, in the little village of Oberndorf in the Alpine section of Austria. All of the people would soon be gathering for Christmas Eve services at St. Nicholas Church. It was very cold, yet there would be many who would be in attendance at this most holy of celebrations. When Father Joseph Mohr, the young assistant priest of the congregation, arrived he discovered that the organ would not function. It could not be used for the services!

Since music had always been such an important part of worship, he decided to write a special composition to be sung with the guitar. He asked the organist, Franz Gruber, to hurriedly prepare the tune. The resultant work was later sung with two voices and the guitar in their services. Today it is one of the most loved of all the Christmas carols, "Silent Night, Holy Night." As we begin singing this carol we will be accompanied by one guitar, like it was that night. Betty and I will light our candles from the Christ candle and we will in turn light the candles of the ushers. They will then bring their candles to you to light yours and share the light across the room. When we get to the last verse we will just have voices and guitar and raise our candles high.

1 Have I Got News for You!, by William L. Self

2 ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., ChristianGlobe Illustrations, by King Duncan