

“Song of the Angels” Luke 2:8-18 Dec. 15, 2013

How many of you have found yourself watching the Charlie Brown Christmas Special at some time during this season? We watched it so often when my kids were young that Stephen could recite Luke 2:8-14 word for word when he was just three years old, because he heard Linus recite it so often in the special! This morning we’re looking at that well-known passage which features the song of the angels. Listen for what it tells us about Jesus’ coming, and for the difference it can make in our lives today.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Angels again. They’ve been all over the place in these stories surrounding the birth of Jesus. An angel appeared to Zechariah, John the Baptist’s father. An angel appeared to Mary (and also to Joseph). What’s

up with that? Angels usually appear in the Bible at crucial junctures in God's work. They are messengers for God, making sure the main players in the story understand fully what God is up to!

Now I need to say a few words about angels here. In popular culture, angels are cute and make us say, "Awwww!" Or the Victoria's Secret angels may make us say something else! I wouldn't know. We're not allowed to watch those specials at our home... But angels in the Bible are different. Biblical angels are terrifyingly powerful creatures, who reflect the glory and grandeur of God. In fact, the first thing they usually say when they encounter a human being is, "Fear not!" because of the frightening effect of their dazzling appearance. And another thing. Good people don't turn into angels after they die. Sorry, but they don't. Biblically, angels are another order of creation in addition to animals and human beings. They are an entirely different kind of being from us, created by God for different purposes. They don't become human. We don't become angels.

OK, now that I've got that off my chest, let's go back to the story, where the angels transform an ordinary evening in the life of some poor shepherds into something extraordinary (and terrifying!). After the obligatory "Do not be afraid," the angel gives them a specific reason to not fear. *"I am bringing good news of great joy for all the people."* Joy. Those shepherds could certainly have used a little joy. Most people in the

ancient world lived in grinding poverty, but especially shepherds. In addition, everyone living in Bethlehem lived under harsh Roman occupation, which they hated. Uprisings and revolts were common and were brutally suppressed. So there was not much cause for joy in Israel in their everyday lives.

How about you? Is there much cause for joy in your life, or are you just going through the motions, living like some kind of drone? The angels told the shepherds that there was cause for joy in spite of their circumstances. And in spite of your circumstances.

“To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Births are always special occasions. As a pastor I enjoy going to the hospital when there is a new birth. There’s a lot of excitement and relief and anticipation of what this new life will bring. The birth the angel is talking about was even more special. This baby would be a Savior. He was also the Messiah. What does that mean?

God’s people, Israel, had long lived under oppression. God had promised to send a deliverer, an anointed one, the Messiah, who would deliver God’s people from spiritual and physical bondage and free them to be the people God intended them to be. The longing for a Savior is reflected in the songs of Mary and of Zechariah which we talked about the last two Sundays. The Old Testament prophets gave a few details about

the Savior's coming. He would be a descendant of King David, as was this baby. And he would be born in Bethlehem. The prophet Micah wrote, "*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.*" After hundreds of years of waiting, the Messiah had finally arrived! There could be no better news for a Jewish person living in that day.

And this baby is also the Lord. Now that was a dangerous thing to say. Because those living in that part of the world already had a Lord; His name was Caesar! That's right. Caesar claimed to be the Lord of all the people, to be their ruler, their sovereign, the one to whom they owed their ultimate loyalty. So it was dangerous to say that Jesus was Lord. And, in fact, that's what got lots of Jesus' followers in trouble with the authorities later on. They refused to pledge ultimate allegiance to Caesar. They wouldn't burn incense to his image as required by law.

This baby, the angel said, is the Lord- Lord of our individual and personal lives, and Lord of all the nations. He demands our ultimate, undivided allegiance. As Bob Dylan wrote, "You gotta serve somebody. It may be the devil, or it may be the Lord, but you're gonna serve somebody." I wonder if Jesus is your Lord. Does he get your ultimate allegiance, or does your ultimate allegiance belong elsewhere- to your job, to success, to

money, to your family, to your quest for security, to your country? Who or what is your Lord? It doesn't get much more basic than that, does it?

The angel continues by giving the shepherds a sign. The child would be wrapped in bands of cloth or swaddling clothes, which was the common way of wrapping a baby in those days. But this swaddled child would be lying in a manger, the feeding trough of an animal. Now that would be unusual!

Then all heaven breaks loose! *“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’”* (Luke 2:13,14) It's as if the skies open and the shepherds catch a glimpse of the heavenly dimension, with angelic beings praising God for the awesome events of that first Christmas evening. Our opening hymn this morning puts it like this. “Rank on rank the host of heaven spread its vanguard on the way. As the Lord of light descendeth from the realm of endless day. That the powers of hell may vanish as the darkness slips away.”

And a blessing is given to all humanity, the gift of peace. First century Palestine was a cauldron of seething resentment against the occupying Romans. Uprisings and revolts were common. By announcing peace, the angels were promising an end to all of that. This was part of

what the Messiah was supposed to do. Listen to these words from Isa. 9, written 800 years before Jesus was born: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.”* (Isa. 9:6,7)

Jesus is bringing peace for us, too- for our families, for our communities, in our workplaces, in our inner cities, and among the nations. And when Jesus became a man he made it clear that his followers are to be peace-makers! That lets us know that the coming of peace will not happen magically with the wave of a wand. It happens with a great deal of work and effort on our part. One relationship at a time. One family at a time. One community at a time. One nation at a time. As followers of Jesus Christ, we are called to the extraordinarily difficult work of peace-making. When diplomats are hard at work in Syria, Iran, Palestine & Israel, and in Central Africa, they are doing God’s work of peace-making. We’re called to that same work, wherever we are.

The angels tell the shepherds that a baby is being born who is the Messiah, the Lord. And he will bring peace. Then they go back to heaven. What did the shepherds do? ¹⁵*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to*

Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (Luke 2:15-18) The shepherds go to see and then tell others the Good News that they had heard from the angels. They are the first evangelists!

If you have experienced Jesus Christ, if he is your Lord and Savior, you too have the privilege of sharing the good news of the gospel with others. Most of us know we should be doing this, but it absolutely terrifies us- like those shepherds with the angels! “Fear not!” There are lots of ways to share your faith. You can simply tell others what God has done for you when the opportunity arises. You can invite others to programs here at church where they can meet other believers and hear the Good News. You can offer to pray for someone when they are in some kind of distress. You can witness to your faith in any Christmas cards or letters you send. You can talk to others about the things you love about your church and other Christian activities. There are lots of ways to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others. And we’re all called to go and tell, just like the shepherds were.

When Charles Shultz created the Charlie Brown Christmas Special,

the network executives pressured him to leave out the part where Linus recites the Christmas story from Luke's gospel. Shultz refused, believing it was an opportunity to be a witness to his faith in Jesus. I wonder how many have been affected by that decision! This morning I swiped this ornament from our Christmas tree so you can hear Linus tell the Good News. (PLAY IT)

That's what Christmas is all about, church-goers. Let's be sure everyone knows!