

Luke2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, '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 the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

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.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Good Tidings of Great Joy

So many wonderful works of art and music have been composed around the theme of Christmas that pastors don't have a whole lot they can add to what has already been written and shared through the ages. The passage that Julian recited and Jason read is the original piece of art composed in honor of Christ's birth, and the story so embedded in our minds thanks to people like Linus van Pelt, who recites this scripture passage at the emotional climax of "A Charlie Brown Christmas." You can find a huge assortment of nativity scenes depicting all the characters in a variety of ways. And regardless of how many times we read this passage or see a nativity scene or hear a Christmas hymn, we never really get tired of them, do we? The story and the music and artwork touch our hearts in ways that bring us comfort and joy (comfort and joy).

And there can be no substitute for the original message of Christmas, the message that Luke presents us – the message of good tidings of great joy. Yet we have substituted a different message for the original. We live at a time and in the midst of a culture where Santa Claus and his eight tiny reindeer and his band of elves have replaced Jesus in the hearts and minds of many young children as the person most associated with the holiday, and even the legend of Santa Claus (the legend of a Saint who saved several young girls from being sold into slavery providing their father with the gold he needed to pay a debt) even that legend has been diminished to the point that Santa is simply an old man with supernatural abilities who has been bringing “things” to everyone whose behavior he deems to be “nice” for countless generations. Now I recognize how useful this message is to parents in keeping their young children from bickering and squabbling for a month or two, but we know that the Christmas message has nothing to do with our being rewarded for good behavior. God did not send us his Son because we were nice; in fact, quite the opposite is true. God sent us Jesus because we were naughty.

But Luke doesn't mention our naughtiness in his story of Jesus' birth; that doesn't really interest him. Luke is more interested in sharing with us the nature of this amazing God who comes to dwell among us. This is a God who loves and cares about those who, in this world, are so often the least loved and the least cared about. God's messenger appears to a poor peasant girl with these glad tidings that she would be the mother of the Savior of her nation, the Son of the most high. Later an angel appears to shepherds. Shepherds! Shepherds were usually unmarried men – unmarried because they didn't make enough money to support a family, and even if they did, their work kept them away from home most of the time. Shepherds were looked down upon by religious folks because their work schedule kept them away from church. But God chose shepherds to be the first to hear the great news and to witness the glory of a heavenly host praising God and singing “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those whom God favors,” and clearly these low-life shepherds were among those who God favors.

And if it wasn't bad enough that God chooses a peasant girl to be the mother of his child and that he chooses shepherds to be the first to receive the most important news that could ever be broadcast, God's child is born in a barn, because one thing that Luke certainly wants us to appreciate is that God is a God of the poor and the marginalized and the downtrodden

who don't have the means to be born in a decent room in a hotel. Luke makes the point that God makes his human entrance into our world in the form of the most vulnerable, most fragile of all beings – a poor child born to dwell among the poor.

And a message that is so often overlooked in Luke's narrative is how Jesus' very survival depends upon others. God does not create some magic force field around Mary and Joseph to ensure that his Son is safe and sound; God could have picked a more convenient time for Mary to deliver Jesus, a time either before or after this census is conducted so Mary and Joseph don't have to be on the road when the birth takes place. And then God doesn't even spring for a hotel room! God makes Jesus utterly dependent upon other human beings, upon Mom and Dad, in order to survive. And it is God's desire for us to be part of his plan for the future of this world; there is no way that this poor child is going to survive without the love and the care of his parents, who also depend upon others for their survival. God is not coming to take charge of all the messes we've created; God is coming in the midst of those messes and calls us to act, to act like a parent of a fragile, vulnerable child, to do all in our means to ensure the health and safety of each other.

And this is the way that God has chosen to dwell among us, not in the comfort of some palace but in the ghettos, in the projects, in the commonplace existence of common people. That is itself a powerful message; that God is down here in the trenches with us...with YOU and with ME. And if we can wrap our heads around THAT message, then we can really celebrate Christmas regardless of whether Santa Claus deems us naughty or nice, whether we get the present we were hoping for or a cheaper facsimile thereof. If Christmas becomes all about the presents and the assumption that we earn what we receive by our niceness or naughtiness we are indeed in a perilous place; what if a child HAS been very nice but the parents cannot afford the present that the child has asked for? I remember the story that my Aunt Rose told me about a Christmas, during the Great Depression, when their father returned home on Christmas Eve empty-handed with tears in his eyes – those tears were the only gift he could give his seven children. Praise God that those children grew up to know that it was not their naughtiness that caused them to get no presents that year. Praise God that Grandpa Schaeffer was able to support seven children even though they didn't get any Christmas presents.

And praise God that he sent Jesus as a gift...not to reward us for being “nice” but to show us that he loves us whether we are naughty or nice, to show us that his salvation is as much for the rich as it is for the poor and the downtrodden, to show us that we depend upon one another for our mere survival, and that we can show our love for God by showing our love for one another and particularly for the most vulnerable among us, for those who are like baby Jesus.