

**“Rejoice!”**  
*December 13, 2020*  
Luke 2:8-20

**I. Introduction:**

In the midst of this pandemic, the unrest about the recent election and acceptable and unacceptable ballots, questions about the safety of the vaccines for the corona virus, concerns about the increase in violence and calls at the same time to defund the police, it’s good to remind ourselves that God is still in control and has a long-range plan—a plan for eternity. A plan set in motion at creation which reached its peak that first Christmas day. That’s the purpose of the Christmas story. That’s what we see in these familiar verses about the shepherds, the angels, and the Baby, “**who was lying in a manger.**”

We see shepherds portrayed in Christmas programs every year. Shepherds are part of every crèche scene and every live Nativity scene. This morning, as we consider these very familiar verses, I would challenge you to put yourself in this story: what would it have been like if you were one of the shepherds there on the hills of Judea on that dark night?

*As a shepherd, you’ve learned to read the signs and since it is winter and since there aren’t any clouds, you know it’s going to be a cold, cold night. Being an older, experienced shepherd, you check to make sure that the younger shepherds have brought in enough wood to keep a warm fire going throughout the night—there have to be some perks for being a senior shepherd. And since it is winter, you also know that the wolves and feral dogs, as well as other predators, will be hungry, so you check to make sure your rod and staff and sling are ready—ready to scare off, or even kill, any predator that wants to make a meal of **your** sheep.*

*Because of the cool weather, the sheep have been rather fidgety, but you and the other shepherds have finally gotten the sheep all bedded down for the night. It’s getting close to time for you and the other shepherds to bed down too, so you’re letting the cooking fires die down a little. Those on the 1<sup>st</sup> watch for the night are getting ready to go out and protect the sheep from wild animals and from thieves. Things are*

as calm and collected as possible—you might even say everything was as “smooth as the back of a newly shorn sheep.”

Suddenly, without warning, the sky seems to catch fire and in the middle of the bright light, there’s an angel. Things are no longer “peachy keen”; in fact, they are downright frightening. As a shepherd, you aren’t afraid of anything—bears, lions, wolves, even robbers—but you’re terrified of the unknown—this light and the angel! And then the angel says, “**Do not be afraid.**” **Right!** That’s easier said than done! But the angel goes on to say that “**Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**” Then things get worse; before you or the other shepherds can even think about what you’ve just heard, suddenly there isn’t just one angel, there is a huge choir—a plethora of angels all praising God. And then...then they’re gone!

After the angels leave, you and the other shepherds talk about what you have just seen and heard. You decide that you’re not all crazy or hallucinating from eating some bad food, so you hurry to Bethlehem where you find the Baby just as the angel had said. After you’ve had time to see the Baby and His mother and father, you and the other shepherds return to your flocks. On the way back, you tell everyone you meet about what happened to you and what you’ve just seen. Finally, you get to your flocks where you and the rest of the shepherds continue to glorify and praise God because of the good news of great joy that you have heard and seen.

Thinking back, that must have been quite the night. So, what is the good news of great joy that the angel was talking about and what should be done about it? We can answer some basic questions about this good news by looking at Galatians 4--**turn to Galatians 4:4-5.**

## II. The Angel’s Good News

**A. When** First, we see the “when”—“**When the time had fully come.**” Just like everything God does, the timing of the birth of Jesus Christ was perfect or right in many ways.

*1. The timing was right religiously.* Ever since they had returned from the Babylonian captivity, some 500 years before the birth of Christ, Israel hadn't had much to do with idols. Since their return, most Jews had continued to worship Jehovah. By the time the angels appeared, various God-ordained writings and prophecies had been compiled to make the Old Testament which had been translated from Hebrew into Greek by 200 B.C. At the time of Jesus' birth, many people could read the Bible. Many of them had read and knew the prophecies concerning the Messiah and many were looking for His coming.

*2. The timing was right culturally.* Greek was the common language throughout the known world; almost everyone could speak it to some degree. At this particular time, language would not be a barrier to going into "all the world" and telling others about Jesus the Christ.

*3. The timing was right politically.* The peace of Rome, Pax Roma, was maintained throughout the Roman Empire—there were armies and garrisons spread throughout the empire to do just that. As the Empire grew, the Roman government had built a system of roads to link one end of the empire to the other. Both of these things—the peace and the roads—would allow missionaries, like the Apostle Paul and Barnabas, to move freely and with relative safety throughout the Empire.

**B. Who** Next, we see the "who"—**God sent His Son**. Jesus willingly submitted Himself to the Father and came and lived on earth in His human body; **turn to Philippians 2:5-8**. But, at the same time, Jesus was and is God. **Turn to John 1:1-4, 14**. **Hebrews 1:3** puts it this way, "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word." All this is to say that Jesus was and is God and has all the attributes of God: He's eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, just to name a few. But, as we read in Philippians, in order to experience humanity and to pay the penalty of sin, Jesus had to become human. He had to lay aside His attributes of the Godhood. In His humanity, Jesus took on the role and function of Son—He was obedient to the Father and His will. Jesus was God Incarnate, i.e., He was God in human form.

**C. How** Paul next tells us “how” He came—**born of a woman, born under law**. Like all other Jewish men, Jesus was born of a woman under the constraints of the Mosaic Law. He was fully man—he got hungry and tired, He had to keep the Laws of the Old Testament; yet at the same time He was fully God. He had to be fully man in order to represent humanity and to take the penalty of sin on Himself in our place. But He had to be fully God so that His sacrifice would be of infinite value so that through His death, He could redeem all mankind. As one commentator put it, *“He had to be God to have the power of Savior and He had to be man to have the position of Substitute.”*

**D. Why** Finally, we see “why” He came—**to redeem those under law**. **Romans 6:23** put it this way, **“The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Jesus came to give mankind the opportunity to be freed from the penalty—the wages—of sin. He came to redeem mankind. Jesus paid the price of your sin. Since He lived a sinless life, He was able to redeem you by dying in your place. Peter wrote in **1 Peter 3:18**, **“For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God.”**

“Redeem” is a Greek word; it means to “*buy back*.” In the time of Christ, a man could purchase or redeem a slave in any Roman city. He could then either keep him as a slave for himself or free him. Jesus came to redeem us—to buy us back from the wages of sin—and then set us free. As we saw a couple of weeks ago, He did more than just free us, He made us sons and daughters of God with all the privileges that come with that adoption.

This then is the good news that the angel brought to the shepherds: *at just the right time, God sent His Son into the world in human form, to redeem man from the curse of sin and to make him a joint heir with Jesus Christ.*

### **III. The Shepherd’s Response**

After they heard the angel’s Good News, we see the shepherds’ response. First, they went to Bethlehem to find the Baby. They didn’t procrastinate—who could sleep after what they had seen anyway?

They didn't blame something they had eaten for what they saw; they didn't worry about what others might think—they dropped everything and hurried to Bethlehem.

There, after some searching, they found the Baby just as the angel had said. The Bible doesn't tell us what the shepherds did when they found the baby “wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger,” but I suspect that they were full of wonder and joy as they perhaps held Him in their arms and worshipped this Gift from God—the Messiah—their Savior.

But they didn't keep the birth of their Savior a secret, they went out and told others what they had seen. Originally, the angels were God's messengers; now the shepherds became God's messengers. “They spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.” Finally, they returned to their work, but they were changed men. They were never going to be the same—they had seen angels, they had seen a miracle, they had seen God in human form—as Luke wrote in [verse 20](#), they “returned, glorifying and praising God.” They were full of joy; they were rejoicing, just as the angel had said they would be.

#### **IV. Your Response**

Now, let's fast forward to December 2020, what about you—what is your response to this good news? Every person here has heard about the birth of Jesus Christ—we all have celebrated Christmas in the past; some of us many, many times. But the birth of Jesus was only the beginning—you know the rest of the story: you know how Jesus grew up and after some 30 years He was crucified by those He came to save; you know how 3 days later He rose from the dead and during the next 40 days was seen by over 500 people – [turn to 1 Corinthians 15:1-8](#). As we've read in Romans and Galatians and Philippians, He did all of this to redeem the world from the wages of sin. As the Apostle John wrote in [1 John 5:12](#), “He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” So, what have you done with God's Christmas gift to you—what have you done with Jesus?

If you have asked Jesus to be your Lord and Savior, then you, like the shepherds, can be full of joy; you can glorify and praise God—even in the midst of all the turmoil around us. You have been redeemed.

Your sins have been forgiven. When it comes time to leave this earth, whether through death or through Christ's return, you are guaranteed of a place in heaven as a son or daughter of the Almighty Creator God (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17).

You can be joyful right now; you don't have to wait until you get to heaven. In [Philippians 4:4](#), Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always." In [James 1:2](#) we read, "Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds." Neither Paul nor James expect us to be laughing and celebrating when things get tough or seem to be impossible. Only a person not in his or her right mind would celebrate in those kinds of situations. But you can have joy and peace in your heart as you go through difficult times—as you deal with the pandemic, concerns of the election, trepidation about the increasing violence. You aren't alone, Jesus said in [Matthew 28:20](#), "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." As a Christian you can rest on God's promises, verses like [Romans 8:28](#) which says, "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."

Joy in difficult circumstances doesn't come naturally, it is possible only as a fruit of the Holy Spirit. That's what we see in the verses Karen and Alden read from [Galatians 5:22-23](#): "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

So, what kind of joy do you have? Is it a feeling that you get when everything is going well? There is nothing wrong with that kind of joy—Christians need to be able to rejoice and celebrate when good things happen. But what about when seemingly bad things happen, when you are being crushed or beaten down, do you still have joy, an inner peace, because you know that, no matter what, God is in control? This kind of joy can only come from the Holy Spirit and trust in God. This is the kind of joy that only a Christian can have.

This Advent season as we consider all we have as children of God, ask God to fill you with His Spirit and to fill you with His hope and His peace and His joy. And, then like the shepherds, let's tell others about the birth of the Savior of the world and what it means to you and to them. This celebration and proclamation

shouldn't just happen on Christmas, we need to be ready to tell others every day, we need to celebrate every day—we have hope—confidence in eternity, we are loved by God, we can be filled with joy.