

Christmas Eve Services
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
24 December 2024

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

I was ordained a priest in the Episcopal Church, seventeen years ago, on December 15th, 2007. One of the honors of an ordained life is the privilege to preach the word of God to God's people. I have preached on Luke 2:1-14 at least a dozen times. This is the passage for Christmas I. The other five times I have preached on Isaiah 9:2-7 or on Titus 2:11-14. As you can imagine, it is hard to find something new to say about a passage that has consumed so much of your time for almost two decades. Yet, I believe I have never preached on the difference between good news and bad news. The angel who appears to the shepherds says, "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."

We live in a world saturated by news. Not only do we still have a number of decent print-media sources of news, but we also have hundreds of social media channels and cable news outlets. These, of course, do not include the hundreds of thousands of blogs, podcasts, chat rooms, social media channels, local publications, and opinion radio programs which are constantly giving us the news. The one thing all of these sources of news have in common is that all of them claim to be beacons of truth, yet, we are often surrounded by exaggerations, lies, facts taken out of context, weaponized commentary, and fake news sold for profit. Everyone is constantly giving us the news, but not all news can be trusted.

I am wondering today what makes the news given by the angels to the shepherds "good news." According to Theologian Abraham Smith from Perkins School of Theology, the good news proclaimed by the mysterious angel has three important elements. "First, good news is relevant news (news we can use "today," right now) ... Second, good news is also reliable news (verifiable, trustworthy news) ... Finally, good news is also retellable news (news worth retelling to others)."¹ Following these three criteria, we see the Angel's news as incredibly good news, not just for First Century Palestine, but for us who live in the twenty first century. And God knows we need some Good News.

Now, to be fair, bad news can also be relevant, verifiable, and worthy of retelling. Imagine the announcement of a landslide or a volcano eruption. This is relevant information for those who may be on the path of disaster, this can be

¹ <https://www.workingpreacher.org>

verifiable for anyone who wants to see the disaster up close, and this is worthy of re-telling, especially if your goal is to take people to safer ground. Now, what makes bad news so popular is not that it is relevant and useful information, but rather that it sells newspapers, creates new viewers or users, and often leads to new consumers. We are surrounded by bad news, both real and fictitious, because bad news sells. All of us know the expression, "If it bleeds, it leads." Let me give you an example from the New York Times front page today. We see, "Death Sentences Commuted, Matt Gaetz Paid for Sex, Overdosed Deaths while in Treatment Centers, Organized looting in Gaza, Canceled Vote in Romania is good news for Putin, Sex abuses in Ireland Catholic schools, Mangione pleads 'Not Guilty', etc." An entire front page dedicated almost exclusively to bad news.

We need some good news, and for those we go to the Gospel of Luke. The Angel says, "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." This is extremely relevant information for everyone in First Century Palestine. After five hundred years of prophetic announcements, God has finally sent the Messiah promised to Israel, on this day. The expression "Today" is repeated frequently in Luke and Acts of the Apostles to highlight the arrival of the Kingdom of God. God's Good News in his son, Jesus, means that the gulf of separation between God and humanity has finally been bridged, God has heard humanity's cry, God now dwells among humans, and we are no longer orphaned and alone, God fights on our side, and rescues us from within. All of this is possible because to us a child has been born on this very day.

The announcement is also verifiable. Using the information given by the Angel, the shepherds leave in search of the baby, and after they find him, they pay him homage. The Angel's information was verifiable and trustworthy and now the shepherds become the first witnesses of the greatest miracle in creation history. God has chosen to become human for the sake of humanity. The inbreaking of Good into human existence is good news for the entire human race, past, present, and future. The angel says as much, "News of great joy for all people." This good news is not just for us the followers of Christ. This is good news for all the people of the earth. Sadly, many have not heard of this good news. Many remain as lost and as desperate as the people of Israel before the arrival of Messiah.

Now, we get to the third element of the Angel's proclamation. This good news is worthy of re-telling. In fact, the story narrated in Luke became a major part of the proclamation of the Jesus story in the Second Century and beyond. The story of a God who becomes human in fulfillment of the Jewish Scriptures, and for the

sake of humanity, became a fascinating story to tell non-believers and believers alike. Crucial to the telling of this story are the words of the Angel, which are in direct opposition to known words ascribed to the birth of Augustus Caesar, “The famous Priene inscription (ca. 9 BC) ... speaks of Augustus’s birth as of the birth of a ‘god’ and as the gift of divine providence, who sent him as a ‘savior,’ to bring peace (an end of war). His birthday was ‘the beginning of good news for the world that came because of him.’ Augustus was called ‘Son of God’ in inscriptions and papyri. Yet the angel in our story will declare that the good news ... is the birth of the Messiah, the Son of God (1:32). This Messiah will bring ultimate salvation: the forgiveness of sins for all people and deliverance from eternal death.”²

Today. We are here to listen to the birth announcement of the true and only Son of God. Listening to this story reconnects us to the central core of our Christian Gospel. God’s in-breaking into our human world brings salvation and forgiveness to all. This is truly Good News. This is a story worth retelling. There are many outside those doors who have only heard an overly commercialized version of this story that has to do more with the fictitious Santa Clause than it has to do with the Son of God. It is our job to tell the real story. What we are celebrating here is the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, our Savior and Redeemer. And this birth makes all the difference for our world today.

May the Christ Child continue to bless you. Amen!

² www.workingpreacher.org