



Temple Baptist Church
Wilmington, North Carolina
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Good News!
Luke 2:1-20

An old “Dennis the Menace” comic strip shows Dennis at his church’s first rehearsal for the children’s Christmas play. He’d been assigned the part of an angel.

The director tells him, “You just have to remember one line, Dennis: ‘I bring you good tidings.’”

Puzzled by the word “tidings,” Dennis asks an older child what it means. The boy tells him, “Tidings means news, Dennis.”

After the rehearsal, Dennis gets in the car with his parents and excitedly tells them, “Guess what! I’m an angel in the Christmas play. And I only have to say one line!” His mother asks him, “What’s the line, dear?”

Dennis thinks for a minute, “It’s ah . . . oh yeah! ‘Boy, have I got news for you!’”

Maybe Dennis’ version really conveys the excitement that accompanied the news of Jesus’ birth. The angel described his message as “good news that will cause great joy for all the people” (2:10).¹

In need of good news . . .

We need some *good news*, don’t we?

It’s been a tough year in a lot of ways.

While the overall economy continues to improve, many families and individuals are still struggling financially. They have to make hard choices about which bills to pay and which ones to let ride for a while.

Many of you have had to deal with sickness or injury over the past year—either your own or that of a loved one. Some of you have had to deal with ongoing illness or with surgery or treatments or both. Some have gotten good results, others haven’t.

Many of you have lost loved ones—some of you several loved ones—over the past year. Your grief has been great, and the holidays bring it back fresh because your loved one won’t be here for your family gathering.

There have been so many disasters over the past year in our country and throughout the world—hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, fires, floods, have taken their toll.

Murders and murder-suicides . . . Multiple or mass shootings in workplaces, churches, malls, and schools . . . Law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty . . . Ongoing strife in the Middle East . . . There’s been a lot of *bad news*, hasn’t there?

We need some *good news*!

And so did the Jews at the time of Jesus’ birth.

Throughout their history, they had misunderstood being God’s chosen people as *privilege* rather than *responsibility*. That attitude often led to their rebellion against the LORD and idolatry.

So being oppressed or under the domination of a foreign power was something they experienced frequently. In fact, from about 600 BC on, there was only about a century when they weren't under the domination of one empire or another.

At the time of Jesus' birth, it was the Roman Empire. In fact, it was a census decreed by the Roman Emperor Augustus that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem in Judea from their hometown of Nazareth in Galilee. They had to return to their ancestral towns to register. Joseph was of the house and family line of David, so he had to go to Bethlehem, the town of David.

Joseph had brought Mary with him because the time was nearing for the birth of her child. They were pledged to be married—more binding than our engagement, so binding in fact that it took a divorce to break it. Yet they were not yet fully married. No doubt there'd been a lot of talk, but Mary and Joseph both had received angelic visits telling them about the birth of this baby.

Gabriel had appeared to Mary and told her she was going to bear the Messiah. Wondering how this would be possible since she was a virgin, he had told her that the child would be conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit—without a human father. She believed, submitting herself to God's will as his servant (Luke 1:26-38).

Joseph was contemplating quietly divorcing Mary after he discovered she was expecting a child. But an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, telling him not to be afraid to take her as his wife, because the child she was carrying was from the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25). So Joseph and Mary waited until Jesus was born to complete their marriage. But Joseph tenderly cared for her and brought her with him to Bethlehem.

The Jews were longing for deliverance from Rome. The prophets had spoken of a coming king, a Messiah. They wanted this promised Messiah to come deliver them from oppression and restore the kingdom of Israel to the glories of David's reign. Their lives were hard and their nation was depressed. They needed some good news!

Good news came . . .

Now we don't know exactly how long Mary and Joseph had been in Bethlehem. But while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.

Luke tells us that **because there was no place for them in the guest room**² or the inn, Mary wrapped her baby in swaddling cloths—as was customary—and laid him in a manger—which was totally out of custom. A manger was a feeding trough, implying that they were *in a stable*.

The stable wasn't a wooden barn, but rather a small cave. In fact, the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem has stood for many centuries over a cave that very ancient tradition points to as the place of Jesus' birth. A beautiful 14-point silver star on the floor marks the spot where it's believed that the Savior came into the world. It was a cool, damp, smelly spot, but secluded for the birth.

In the meantime, God sent his angel to a group of shepherds in the nearby fields **keeping watch over their flock at night**. The angel **appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified**. I love the way Luke expresses it in Greek—a very literal translation would be, **they feared a great fear** (2:9).

The angel announced Christ's birth to them—to *shepherds*, not to King Herod or the priests or the Pharisees or prominent people, but to a band of simple smelly shepherds who were religious outcasts because their work prevented them from keeping all the details of the ceremonial law. The angel proclaimed to them:

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:10-11).

Why was it *good news*?

This child was *a Savior*. He was coming to *save* them. Most Jews would have thought he was coming to save them from Rome. And it’s no accident that God was challenging the rule of the Caesars who claimed “Savior” as one of their titles. But that wasn’t why he came. He was not the Savior they were looking for, but he was the Savior they really needed, because he was coming **to save his people from their sins** (Matthew 1:21).

He was *the Christ*, Greek for the Hebrew **Messiah**. He was the one they were looking and longing for. He was the promised descendant of David who would rule on David’s throne in righteousness and justice and would one day set all things as God intends them to be.

And he was *the Lord*. This title both challenged the Caesars and affirmed his divinity. As the Jews read the Law and Prophets and Writings (our Old Testament), they had come to reverence God’s personal name “Yahweh” to the point that they would *not* pronounce it for fear of desecrating it. So whenever that name appeared in the text, the reader would substitute the Hebrew title *adonai*, which means *Lord*. Most English Bibles have continued that tradition, translating the name as LORD, with small capitals. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures produced in the third century BC, used the Greek word that Luke uses here in our text—*kurios*, “Lord.” So the angel calls this baby **the Lord**, identifying him with the God of the Hebrew Bible! The challenge to the Caesars was that they also claimed this title and required subjects to confess, “Caesar is Lord.” Later on, many followers of Jesus Christ would die for refusing to make that confession, since to confess that “Caesar is Lord” is to deny that “Jesus is Lord.”

The angel said that this good news was **for all the people**. Indeed it was! *It was good news for the Jews*. Through this one born in Bethlehem they could find peace with God and salvation from their sins.

Later Jesus would make it clear to his disciples that *this was good news for all the peoples!* He had come to save people from every tribe, tongue, and nation. After his crucifixion and resurrection he commanded his people to make disciples of all the nations (Matthew 28:16-20)!

Too good to believe . . . ?

This news might sound to some like it’s too good to be true, too incredible to believe. Preaching about the birth of Jesus, the great reformer Martin Luther said:

I wouldn’t have believed. If I’d been God and wanted to save the world, I wouldn’t have done it that way. I would have just called in the devil and twisted his nose and said, “Let my people go!”

But God is amazing. He sends a little baby, as weak as an earthworm, lying in the feedbox of a donkey, and that little baby crunches the devil’s back and overcomes all the power of Hell, and sin, and death.³

And friends, that’s *good news*!

Jo Ann and I like Christmas movies. One of our favorites is the 1983 movie “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever.” It’s based on a children’s book by the same name that was written by Barbara Robinson.

When the woman who usually directs the children’s Christmas pageant at the church breaks her leg just before rehearsals start, Grace Bradley is asked to take over. The problem is that the Herdman children—all six of them—show up at the first practice because they’ve heard they could get refreshments there. Their father deserted the family years earlier, so their mother is working two shifts at the shoe factory to support them all. With very little supervision at home, the Herdman kids run wild, bullying one another and others to make their way in the world.

Imogene volunteers herself to play Mary and one of her brothers to play Joseph. And her little sister Gladys is chosen to play the angel of the Lord. She wants to play the role in the vein of the comic book character the Mighty Marvel—you know, “Shazzam!”—but Grace convinces her that her line is, “Unto you a child is born!”

During the pageant, when it’s time for her to appear, Gladys is nowhere to be found. The shepherds kneel as the narrator reads, then repeats the line for her cue, but no Gladys. Suddenly, she comes running in from the back, shouting, “Hey! Hey! Hey! Unto you a child is born! It’s Jesus, and he’s in the barn! Go on! Go on!” And she pushes the shepherds forward to go see the baby Jesus. After the congregation sings “Silent Night,” it’s over.

But not for Gladys.

The Herdman children go out playing on the streets downtown. They run and climb across the platform a lighted Christmas tree is standing on. Gladys is the last one across—but all of a sudden she stops in front of the tree. She climbs up another step to get higher and raises the big star she still has from the pageant in her right hand, and shouts, “Hey! Hey! Unto you a child is born!”

Doesn’t that childlike exuberance capture something of what the angel’s message that night must have been like to the shepherds?

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord” (2:10-11).

And that, my brothers and sisters, is *good news*—good news worth telling to a hurting, lost, dying world! *Just as the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds, we must tell his good news to all the world!*

Because the baby who was in the manger is the Savior of the world!

†MEG

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version® (2011 edition).

² A literal translation of the Greek phrase.

³ <https://shawnthomas.com/2011/12/19/martin-luthers-christmas-sermon-compiled/> (accessed 12/20/2017).