



## CELEBRATING THE INCREDIBLE

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After having seen all the kids act out the Christmas story, it seems a little tame to just read part of it for you now. So I'm going to change things up a little bit and read the same section from The Message translation – a version of the Bible that is equally the Bible but put in very contemporary language so it sounds different when you hear it.

### **Luke 2:8-20**

*There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger."*

*At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:*

*Glory to God in the heavenly heights,  
Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.*

*As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.*

*Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!*

I like all the different parts of the Christmas story, but these 13 short verses are my very favorite. I did some reflecting this week on why that is. What makes this part so great? Why after 38 Christmases do I still feel the anticipation and energy that flow from this passage?

I'm sure it's a combination of things. Luke's good writing, memories of Christmas pageants from when I was a kid, etc. But there's something deeper to it, something pretty amazing. There's nothing quite like it in the whole Bible.

We went to the movies this week, and while we were there, we saw this elaborate display in the shape of a wooden armoire, with a door halfway open, and you could see this magical world inside. It was announcing the Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe movie, which is set for release NEXT December. Can you believe they start promoting movies that far in advance now? My whole family is looking forward to that one with great anticipation.

The last three Sundays, we've been watching "previews" for the arrival of Jesus. We learned what the angel taught Zechariah about belief and being prepared. We saw in the visit to Mary what it means to be called. And Joseph taught us more about who God the Father is, and that he'll stick with us.

Those were the trailers, the previews of what was to come. This morning, the curtain's going up, because now we're getting to the feature show.

Up to this point, it's always been a single angel making the announcement. But here, what starts out as one angel ends up being a whole sky full.

**What stands out first and foremost about this story is that it is joyful.**

The first thing the angel tells the shepherds is that this is good news of great joy, or a great and joyful event, as it says in the version we read. As with the other people who encountered the angel, the shepherds were afraid for their lives. But the angel tells them "No – don't worry. This is a GOOD thing."

For some reason, when it comes to hearing from God, we tend to anticipate bad news. Maybe it's because we're so aware of our own failures. "Uh oh...he's going to be mad at me."

Maybe we think it's bad news because we instantly jump to all the things we're going to have to give up and say goodbye to, whether it's a bad habit or relationship. I remember when I was a kid being afraid that if I made any kind of commitment to God, he was going to send me across the world as far away from my family as possible to be a missionary somewhere, because following God would necessarily equal doing the hardest thing I could think of, as if God doesn't want us to be happy.

It's good to remember that at the heart of Christianity is the story of a baby being born. A healthy birth is one of the most joyful events humans experience. It is good news that makes you want to stand up and sing. Yes, God calls us to change and sacrifice, but those pieces are secondary.

It's good news of great joy because God found a way to solve the sin problem. It's good news of great joy because we don't have to be afraid anymore. It's good news of great joy because my future doesn't depend on me getting everything perfectly right. God is taking care of everything, and it's no longer just a plan – it's a reality.

But it pushes back even further, because it isn't just about *our* joy here. It's about *God's* joy.

Luke makes a comment you could almost miss, about the glory of the Lord shining all around the shepherds. In the middle of the night, the whole field was lit up by God. The prophet Isaiah had predicted something like this would happen when the Messiah came:

**Isaiah 40:5**

*And the glory of the LORD will be revealed,  
and all mankind together will see it.  
For the mouth of the LORD has spoken.*

It's as if God is beaming for joy at the birth of his Son. This makes his heart glad. When you think of all those angels filling the sky, it's almost as if heaven became so full of excitement that the bottom burst out and all the angels spilled to earth.

When you think about God, do you think of him as being joyful? He is the source of joy. It's in his nature. And he is never more joyful than at the prospect of a restored relationship with his people.

**Isaiah 62:5**

*As a bridegroom rejoices over his bride,  
so will your God rejoice over you.*

**Luke 15:7**

*Count on it — there's more joy in heaven over one sinner's rescued life than over ninety-nine good people in no need of rescue.*

When you read the story of the prodigal son returning, the thing that strikes you most is the joy of the father when he returns. God is delighted at what's going on.

When I was brand new at being a dad, I very distinctly remember one time going into Isaac's room to get him out of his crib, and he saw me come in and his face lit up. It was the first time that he showed so clearly that he recognized who I was and was happy about it. And that made me feel so good I couldn't believe it. And it made me realize that God also is moved when his children recognize him. Do you realize how happy God is when you and I make our way back to him? It thrills his father heart.

That's what gives the story of the shepherds such power. It is an awesome display of God's own joy – the joy he took in creating a way for us to find our way home. Our Christmas joy is a borrowed joy, riding on the coattails of God's own rejoicing.

Because it was God's own joy and it stemmed from his own actions, it was about him, and it didn't really matter who had the privilege of experiencing it that night. He could

have chosen anyone. Luke tells us, “Well there were some shepherds close by, and they were already awake, so...”

**The second thing that stands out about this story is that it’s for everyone.**

I believe there is some intentional randomness in the choice of the shepherds. God could pick whoever he wanted, and so he picked people with no connections, average working class guys. They weren’t especially spiritual types or rich or powerful. At the same time they weren’t hardened criminals sitting in a dungeon. Nothing at all stands out about them except they were out there in the fields at night, sitting in the dark. And then God lit up their world. They make me think of another line Isaiah wrote:

**Isaiah 9:2**

*The people who walk in darkness  
Will see a great light.*

The angel makes the point that this story was for all people, and God chose to share that message first with a handful of people who represented that truth, people who could stand in for the common folk.

God’s message of joy and good news is for everybody. There are no qualifiers on the angel’s statement. No matter what your history is, no matter where you’re from, God extends this announcement to you. And if you are experiencing the dark night of the soul right now, God wants to shine a beam of his grace in your direction. This is for you – not just for other people who have tried harder or done better.

What Christ did in coming to earth and dying like an ordinary human was to transfer the consequences of our sin to himself, even though he didn’t deserve it. The good news in that is by doing that, he took the power death holds over us and says “Since I died and didn’t deserve it, I have the right to offer life to those who don’t deserve it.” And he makes that offer to anyone who wants it. That’s good news for all people.

Jesus would later say these words:

**Revelation 3:20**

*Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.*

It’s an open invitation.

**There’s one other thing that stands out to me in this story, and that is that it’s a sign.**

The good news the angel shared was this:

*A Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master.*

Luke gives Jesus three titles here: Savior, or Rescuer, Messiah, or Christ and Master, or Lord. Those are loaded terms, and Luke never uses this exact combination anywhere else. They were three names that all drove home the point that this was God's saving moment in history. This was the event that Israel had been looking forward to for centuries. It had moved from an idea into fact. Salvation had come.

But then the angel said this.

*This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.*

That doesn't sound like salvation. A helpless little infant that couldn't talk or walk was the sign the shepherds were to look for to know that God was remembering his people and doing something on their behalf.

And you know what? That was enough for the shepherds. The fact that they found the details to be exactly the way the angel had said they would be – a baby lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem – was enough for them to believe that the rest was true as well. They had evidence that in their minds gave the story credibility and that told them someday they would see the whole reality worked out.

That is an encouraging picture of what faith is all about. We read the great promises of God in the Bible that say he offers us eternal life, that he forgives us through Jesus, that his Spirit gives us power to be transformed into the people we were meant to be. But in daily life, what we have to go on are the baby signs – small glimpses of God's work in us that point to the future and say someday, we'll see the rest of the reality.

The disciples looked at that little baby and were awe struck. They couldn't take it all in. They couldn't get over it. And they couldn't quit talking about it. Luke says they told everyone about this child, and they must have done a good job, because we're told that everyone who heard them was amazed at their story.

Look again at the way the story ends:

*The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!*

What grabbed them the most was the fact that God was true to his word. It wasn't the angel choir's performance. It wasn't the bright lights. It was discovering the truth. They heard what the angel had to say, they checked it out, and sure enough, strange as it was, there was the baby in the manger.

Who knows what their previous experience had been with religion. Maybe they didn't really believe in the old stories. Maybe they were tired of all the rules the priests had added on to the requirements for being a good Jew. Who knows. All that was forgotten in light of this profound revelation that God was real and trustworthy.

I know there are people in our group this morning who have had bad church experiences. I've heard a lot of the stories. They're terrible. I've lived through a few of my own. As Christians, we rarely seem to live up to our own expectations of others.

I was talking with somebody recently about how amazing it is that anyone even still is interested in church, given all the negative stories people share. And this friend observed that it goes to show how strong our inner hunger for God really is, and that we keep giving it a chance because we need to pursue the truth about God, no matter how often we've been hurt.

God is not the church, and God is always true to his word. And when God speaks to you, like he did to the shepherds, you can count on it being true. And when you pursue what he tells you to, you'll find a cause to let loose and praise him.

When Karin and I first felt God was telling us to plant a church, something held me back. We had to fill out some paperwork to get the process started, and I sat on it for over a year, afraid to pursue it, not trusting the baby signs he had given. But finally it became overwhelmingly clear what God was saying to us, and I had to get up and act on it. That was our biggest jump yet into the unknown, and we've never had so many examples of God being true to his word than I have seen in starting this church. When you pursue what God tells you, you will find him to be exactly what he says.

As we head into this Christmas week, I'll leave you with just a few thoughts:

First, could you use some good news? Are you sitting in the dark with those shepherds? God's message is for you. You're part of the "everybody" the angel talked about. And it brings God joy when you want a restored relationship with him.

Second, what baby signs do you see in your life? We can get discouraged and lose heart when God's promises aren't readily apparent. But he has given us signs that something is happening. What can you point to in your own experience as a reminder that God is at work?

Finally, is there a message God has been speaking to you? The shepherds had to get up and go to Bethlehem to check out the angel's words. What are you needing to do to confirm God's truth? Whatever that step of faith is, I'd encourage you to take it. He won't let you down.