

Good News of Great Joy

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[0 : 00] The Bad Guys Are Winning. That was the title for the December edition of The Atlantic.

The cover of The Atlantic in December, I don't know if you saw this, but it featured the leaders of five heads of state of five different countries. Venezuela, Belarus, Russia, China, and Turkey. And the author of the cover story, Ann Applebaum, argues in this cover story that if the 20th century was the long, slow story of democracy triumphing over totalitarianism, then the start of the 21st century in some parts of the world has actually seen the reverse.

That there are a growing number of autocratic governments around the world who suppress the media, deny human rights, and make democracy next to impossible. And as I read her article, I couldn't help but not only hear what she was trying to say, but also feel that this can often ring true, not just in foreign politics, but often in our everyday lives.

It can sometimes feel like the bad guys are winning. It can feel like this sometimes in our workplaces, when corrupt ways of doing business go ignored.

[1 : 24] It can feel like the bad guys are winning. In our families, when conflict persists, maybe even and especially during the holidays, it can feel like the bad guys are winning.

Maybe even in our own selves, when challenges with mental health, anxiety, depression persist, it can feel like the bad guys are winning.

As we think about the violence in our city this past year, and just the rate of gun violence that just persists and continues, it can feel like the bad guys are winning.

Right now, it seems like the Omicron variant is the bad guy who seems to be winning. Surely, it doesn't just feel like this for us, but it felt like this for the Jewish people in the first century, those in our story here in Luke chapter 2.

They were a marginalized religious group dispersed throughout the vast empire of the Roman Empire. For centuries, they were subject to foreign powers without a common home, without a common language, and without a common place of worship.

[2 : 30] And now they lived under the Romans who ruled with an iron fist. And I think the question for us this morning is, does Christmas have anything to say to them? Does it have anything to say to us when it feels like the bad guys are winning?

We find an answer here in Luke chapter 2, and the answer is yes. Christmas does have something to say, and it has something to say, because this is precisely the world into which Jesus came.

This is precisely the world into which God came. And this is what the angels tell the shepherds in verse 11. The angel says, there is good news of great joy for all people.

And so this is the joy of Christmas, that even when it seems like the bad guys are winning, we can have good news of great joy for all people. So we're going to take a look at each of those three.

First of all, Christmas is good news.

Christmas is good news. In verses 1 through 3, Luke is careful to document the historical details surrounding the birth of Christ. He tells us it happened during the Roman emperor Caesar Augustus, also known as Octavian, who is the nephew of Julius Caesar.

[3 : 42] And during this time, Octavian issued a census. And a census was how the Roman Empire would assess taxes for the entire empire based on the population of each province.

And so this is why Quirinius is mentioned in verse 2. He was the governor in Syria where the regions of Galilee and Judea were, where the towns of Bethlehem and Nazareth were.

And so Quirinius would have been in charge of reporting the statistics of the population of Syria to Rome so that Rome could levy taxes and raise money for the empire.

And so this forms the historical backdrop for Mary and Joseph traveling to Bethlehem where they went to register for the census. And Luke tells us in verse 6 that while they were there, Mary gave

birth.

Interestingly enough, Luke doesn't tell us that they are frantically on their way to Bethlehem when Mary starts having contractions and they can't find a place to stay and they're knocking on doors. If we imagine the birth of Christ this way, it's more so because of Hollywood and the way that films have portrayed this scene.

[4 : 52] They actually may have been there weeks or months before Mary's due date was. We don't know. Luke just very casually, matter of fact, says, while they were there, she gave birth.

So why do all of these historical details matter? Why do all these historical things matter when it comes to the birth of Jesus? They matter because Christmas is news.

It's news about an event that has happened in world history. Jesus was born into this world. This is important because it's common for people to think that the main thing that the Christian faith has to offer the world is good advice.

Advice about how to live, how to be a moral person, maybe how to engage in your own spirituality. And therefore, Christmas is really just a symbolic story. You don't really need the birth of Christ to have actually happened if all that Christianity has to offer is just good advice.

But notice that the angel doesn't say, I have some good advice for you. He says, I have good news for you. There's a big difference between good news and good advice.

[6 : 07] Good news says, save your money. I'm sorry. Good advice says, save your money. Good news says, \$20,000 has just been deposited into your bank account.

This is an illustration, by the way. This is not real. Good advice says, eat healthy, exercise. Good news says, hey, we just got your blood work results back and your cholesterol levels look great. That's good news. Good advice is about something that you must do. But good news is about something that's been done. And Christmas is about something that has been done for you that changes everything.

And this is why the birth of Christ can't just be a sentimental, symbolic story. It really happened. And because it really happened, it changes everything. And that's the second part of the angel's message that Christmas is good news.

It's good news of great joy. Of great joy. You know, joy, I think, is one of those words that can be over-spiritualized. And so I think it's helpful to clarify what it is and what it's not.

[7 : 15] There's a scene in The Lord of the Rings in the last book, Return of the King. There's a moment for the wizard Gandalf when, for him, it sure seems like the bad guys are winning.

It sure seems like Sauron is about to win. And the circumstances look bleak. And Gandalf seems to be just crushed and overwhelmed with sorrow and darkness.

And then in the middle of feeling like he's being crushed amid the weight of the world, he bursts out laughing. He laughs. And Gandalf says that underneath all the sorrow, there is a great joy, a fountain of mirth, enough to set a kingdom laughing were it to gush forth.

Joy is a lot like that. It's not a momentary feeling that depends on our changing circumstances. It's more like an underground fountain. It's like an aquifer. It's a layer of water underground that if you drill down into it, a fountain will come forth.

Joy is the solid assurance deep down in the bedrock of our soul of God's love and presence no matter what. And sometimes we have to drill down deep into it, but when we do, a fountain will come forth.

[8 : 34] Where can you find an aquifer of joy like that? Where do you find that? The angel tells us in verse 11, he says, A Savior has been born who is Christ the Lord.

This is the news of Christmas. So let's take a look at each of these three names, these three titles that the angel gives to Jesus. He's the Savior who is Christ the Lord.

First, Jesus is the Savior. In the Old Testament, Savior often refers to moments when people are rescued from their enemies, either by God or by kings.

And even in the Roman world, in the first century, it was common for people to refer to military rulers and Caesars as saviors. And so what this means is that in Jesus, we have a Savior greater than any king of Israel, greater than any Caesar, because he has come to rescue us from our greatest enemies.

I don't know what feels like for you like the enemy this morning. I don't know what feels like for you like who feels like the bad guy or what feels like the bad guy for you this morning.

[9 : 43] Maybe there's one that looms large, maybe there's not. But amidst all this, the good news of Christmas is that Jesus was born as a Savior to rescue us, to rescue you from your greatest enemies.

Your greatest enemies, sin and death. He brought about the forgiveness of sins through his own suffering and death on the cross. And he overcame death through his resurrection. The salvation from our greatest enemies has already been done by Christ.

And the way that Christianity works is that if you have faith that he saved you from that, if you have faith that he saved you from your greatest enemies, then you can trust him.

You can trust him with everything else. So Jesus is the Savior, and he is the Christ. He's the Christ. Christ isn't Jesus' last name, as some might think.

Christ means the anointed one. It means the Messiah. The Messiah is the one who the prophet said would fulfill all the Old Testament promises and usher in a new age of peace for humanity.

[10 : 46] We can think about the fulfillment of these promises in terms of three offices. Anytime you hear the word Messiah, you should think about these three offices. Prophet, priest, and king.

Prophet, priest, and king. Jesus is the true prophet who reveals the truth of who God is to the world. He is the true priest who restores the presence of God and makes sacrifice for the sins of all people.

And he is the true king in the line of David, the Davidic king who brings a kingdom of love and justice to the nations. So Jesus is the Savior. He's the Christ, the Messiah, and he is the Lord.

All throughout the Old Testament, the word Lord is a term of divine sovereignty and power reserved only for God.

And so in the first century, when Jews heard the word Lord, what they heard in their minds was Yahweh. They heard Yahweh, the Lord.

[11 : 46] And so in calling Jesus Lord, the angel is announcing to the shepherds that Jesus is the sovereign God who rules and reigns over all things. Jesus is the Savior who rescues his people.

He is the Messiah who fulfills God's promises. And he is the sovereign Lord who rules and reigns over all things. And this is a fountain. This is an aquifer of joy that brings about the assurance of God's love and presence no matter what.

Even in the midst of hard circumstances while we live in the already but not yet. In between the first coming of Jesus, which we celebrate at Christmas, and the second coming of Jesus, which we await for the final consummation and renewal of all things.

And we live in the middle, right? We live in the middle between Christ's first coming and his second coming. And in the middle, sometimes it can appear, sometimes it can feel like the bad guys are winning in our lives.

But the joy of Christmas is that because Christ was born and because he is Christ the Lord, the birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for the bad guys.

[13 : 02] The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for all that's wrong, for all the brokenness in the world. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end of poverty and injustice.

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for cancer and sickness. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for anxiety and depression, loneliness and alienation.

The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for sin and death. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the end for sin and death. The message of Christmas is not good advice. It is good news that Jesus reigns, that he reigns, that in him we have the assurance that the reign of God has broken into this world in a way that can never be thwarted, defeated or overturned.

and it can break into our lives right now through the power of the Holy Spirit in an ordinary place like this, with ordinary people like you and me.

This is where joy comes from. This is where the fountain of mirth comes from, and it is this reality that inspired Isaac Watts to compose one of the most famous Christmas hymns of all time, Joy to the World.

[14 : 16] He penned these words, Joy to the World, the Lord is come. Let earth receive her king. No more let sins and sorrows grow, nor thorns infest the ground.

He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. Today, for you, even if it feels like the bad guys are winning, you can have an aquifer of joy because the Savior who is Christ, the Lord, has come into the world.

And you can be assured that God is with you, that he loves you, that he's for you. And it's only a matter of time before he comes again to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found. So Christmas is good news. It's good news of great joy. And it's good news of great joy for all people. For all people.

In Luke 14, Luke tells us that the shepherds are still standing out there in the fields when an angelic host cries out, glory to God in the highest.

[15 : 24] And on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased. Peace among those with whom he is pleased. Christmas is the good news that because Jesus is Christ, the Lord, that we can have access to God's peace and his pleasure.

And that this is for all people. This is for everyone, regardless of your background, regardless of your socioeconomic status, regardless of what you've done or who you are. Everyone can have access to God's peace and his pleasure.

And the scandal of Christmas is that this news wasn't just announced to the powerful and wealthy. It was announced to shepherds. Shepherds in the first century were not people that you think that the birth of a king or of a savior would be announced to.

They were not the up and in of society. They didn't have much power or wealth or privilege. They were just blue collar ordinary people living paycheck to paycheck, trying to make ends meet.

They're people just like you and me. And in order to get this, you have to understand something first, that the peace and the pleasure of God don't just come automatically.

[16 : 36] That like the shepherds, it has to be received and responded to with faith. And what we have to get to respond to this good news with faith is we have to get and understand that the bad guys aren't just out there somewhere.

The bad guys aren't just five heads of state on the cover of the Atlantic. No, the bad guys are right here in this room. It's me.

It's you. We're the bad guys too. Because of our sin, we're at war with God. We're in rebellion against him. And Christmas is the news, the good news that Jesus was born.

He came to rescue the bad guys. He came to rescue the bad guys by exchanging himself for us, by living the life we should have lived, by dying the death we should have died.

And believing this brings us peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins. If you're a Christian, you have peace with God. Do you realize that? But not only do you have peace with God, you have his pleasure.

[17 : 41] You have his pleasure. I think that a lot of us in this room, and I would put myself in this category, we understand the first part. Like we understand that Christ's death on the cross brings us forgiveness of sins, that we have peace with God.

Like we, most of us get atonement for the most part. But what we don't often get as often is union with Christ.

This reality that by faith we have the pleasure of God because we are united to Jesus, that we are clothed in his righteousness, that in him we have all of the delight that God the Father has in God the Son through God the Holy Spirit.

That what it means to be a Christian is that we are caught up in this Trinitarian dance of God's delight and pleasure. I wonder if you, how many of you, if you were honest this morning, if you would say that you really believed that God is pleased with you right now.

That he delights in you, that he smiles at you. If I'm honest, I'm most tempted to believe about God that he loves me, but that he puts up with me.

[18 : 55] That he is vaguely disappointed with me most of the time. But that he loves me because he has to. But that's not what the angelic hosts say to the shepherds, and that is not what the scriptures teach.

The good news of Christmas is that wherever Jesus goes, the peace and the pleasure of God goes too. And so in Luke 2, when Jesus is born, Jesus is born and the angelic hosts sing out God's peace and pleasure.

That's where it is. Jesus is here, so God's peace and his pleasure are here. And if you have Jesus, you have the peace and the pleasure of God too. The scandal of Christmas is that God's peace and pleasure is for all people, including the bad guys.

It's for the moral failures, the addicts, the prideful, the ashamed, the workaholics, the control freaks, the liars, the thieves, those with jealousy problems, those with anger issues, those people who don't

have self-control, the people who just can't seem to get it together.

Jesus came for them. He came for you. Later on in his ministry, he would say, I came to seek and to save the lost.

[20 : 16] I came not to call the righteous, but sinners. Why? All for love. All for love. Dorothy Sayers was a British author and novelist, and she was most known for her series of crime, detective novels, the Lord Peter Wimsey series.

She created this character named Lord Peter Wimsey, who was a detective. And midway through the series, Dorothy Sayers introduces this character named Harriet Vane, who meets Lord Wimsey and helps him solve crimes and mysteries.

And what a lot of the literary critics point out is that there's a lot of similarities between Harriet Vane and Dorothy Sayers. Harriet Vane was educated at Oxford.

So was Dorothy Sayers. Harriet Vane was tall and had dark hair. So did Dorothy Sayers. Harriet Vane wrote detective novels. So did Dorothy Sayers.

And what we see throughout the story, the progression of the story, is that eventually Lord Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane, they fall in love. And what the literary critics have noticed, that it's quite obvious what Dorothy Sayers was doing, that she was writing herself into the story.

[21 : 31] That she had created this character in Lord Peter Wimsey, and she had fallen in love with him. And she was attracted to his virtues, and he was a great detective, but she also knew his flaws.

And so she knew he was lonely. And so she wrote herself into the story to fall in love with him, to rescue him from his loneliness. In Jesus Christ, that is what God did.

He wrote himself into our story out of love. Christmas is not just good advice for how the bad guys can become better. It's good news about the God who has come to rescue the bad guys out of love. Reflecting on the love of Christ, revealed at Christmas, Anglican missionary and Bishop Frank Houghton penned these words. Thou who is rich beyond all splendor, all for love's sake became poor.

Thrones for a manger did surrender. Sapphire paved courts for stable floor. Friends, this is Christmas.

[22 : 35] This is the gospel, that we have good news of great joy, that we have a Savior who is Christ the Lord. He is the end. He is the beginning of the end for all the brokenness in the world.

And anyone can get in on this. Anyone can get in on this joy. The only requirement is that you come like the shepherds, responding in faith, empty-handed and hungry, and in need of rescue.

Let's pray. Lord Jesus, thank you that you exchanged your throne for a manger.

You exchanged your life with ours. You left the glory of heaven to seek and to save the lost. Help us to be like the shepherds who come empty-handed and leave with joy.

Help us be like Mary who pondered all of these things and treasured them in her heart. And as we ponder and as we treasure, give us the deep assurance, give us the deep joy that you reign and that you come to make your blessings flow far as the curse is found.

[23 : 52] Amen. Thank you. Bye. Bye.

Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye. Bye.

Bye. Bye. Bye.