The Great Joy Of Christmas

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[0:00] Merry Christmas. What? No reply? Well, should I go Merry Christmas, Uncle Scrooge?

Okay, so I'll admit, as I'm out and about these days, that I have received a similar non-reply from shopkeepers.
Now, maybe it's just a tad too early. But I am struck by how seldom I haven't yet received a response to that Christmas greeting.
So, I'm going to keep on saying in my most joyful voice, Merry Christmas. And maybe perhaps by the end of this week, as we get closer to Christmas, then I'll get a few responses.
But if I had my way, I would change the greeting. I would divide this room in two.
[1:27] I would really like to do this. Okay, so I'm going to have this side. This side would say, the Savior is born.

And then right about here. So, we're going to have this side say, He is born in a manger.
The Savior is born. He is born in a manger. All right, don't rush for the doors. I said I would like to. I didn't say that I'm going to.
But the Christmas season is about the great good news of the coming of our Savior.
Of the event of His birth. And it merits a response. The news, Merry Christmas, or a Savior is born.
[2:32] It merits a response. And we're going to see that this evening. We're going to see the angels bringing the news or revealing.

And then we're going to see the shepherds receiving the good news or responding. Angels revealing and shepherds responding. Are you a joyful person?
Have you found that you compartmentalize worship and joy?
That they're not really. They really should go together like a scone and jam. But have you found that you're very, you know, worship, even this evening, very serious business.
Joy is different. That's laughter and singing and festive spirit. Where do you find joy?
[3:38] What do you take joy in? What is the reason or the fuel for your joy? Do you find joy at Christmas?

Does the birth of Christ, which Christmas points to that event, does it give you a fresh reason for praise?
Joyful worship? Does it make you merry? I want to show you tonight two sets of joyful folk.
And they are joyful folk indeed. First up are the angels. Now the angels are going to reveal two things. First of all, they're going to reveal themselves.
So they reveal themselves. They're the messengers. They're the vehicle, the venue from which God has some great good news.
[4:46] But then secondly, not only do they reveal themselves as messengers, but they reveal the message. So they show up.

That's a revelation. It's a revelation. But then the good news is it has meaning. It's explained. It's applied.
But then the second joyful group are the shepherds. And the shepherds really come off as joyful evangelists.
Because they go. Like, think about the Great Commission, where all disciples of Jesus Christ, all followers of Jesus Christ, are encouraged to now go, having experienced Jesus Christ, and being in relationship with Him.
Now go into all of the world. Go into every relationship. Go into your workplace with that, with Jesus. But they also glorify.
[5:59] They do go to the manger. They do go and they do see, but they don't stay. They return back to their vocation.

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They return back to their families. They return back to their mates and relationships that they know and their neighbors. But they return different.
Having gone and seen, they now leave, we're told, glorifying and praising God. Glorifying, by the way, means to make much of something.
If you want to see me glorify something, start glorifying, make much of something, ask me about sailing or sailboats.
You can ask Ross about coffee, and you'll see him glorifying. You can ask Gordon about the latest movies, and he'll start glorifying. And he'll start glorifying.
[7:09] And that's where we're going tonight, in that, as a follower of Jesus Christ, particularly at Christmas, being made freshly aware of his birth.

Of his birth. And knowing the meaning, the impact of that, the difference that it's made. Do I glorify him? Do I make much of him?
Well, let's now join the shepherds on that hillside in the dark and see what we can learn from what the angels reveal, and then really learn even to imitate the shepherd's response.
Now, first of all, the angels reveal. They're going to reveal themselves as from heaven and from the very presence of God, and they're going to reveal the message behind the event that they announced, the birth of Christ.
But before I get there, just a little, little side road with a question. How did the author of this, it's called the Gospel of Luke.
[8:25] There are four of them. Four Gospels. Gospel of Luke is written by Luke. How did he know? How did he know that this was a real event?

How did he know that this really took place? That the heavens opened, the shepherds are there in the dark, the angels speak, sing.
How did he know? Well, Luke also wrote the book of Acts. And in Acts, we read that he was a traveling companion with the apostle Paul.
And at one point, he spent a little over two years in Jerusalem and Palestine in that area with Paul.
The very Gospel of Luke begins as a report to a Roman nobleman or governor, Theophilus.
And Luke would have had in that two years period, as he says in the beginning of Luke, he would have had an opportunity to interview the shepherds, eyewitnesses.
[9:37] He would have, the very shepherds who beheld the angels, he would have had an opportunity to interview. But now, shepherds are like gypsies, vagrants, and con men all rolled up into one.

So Luke would want verification. It is extremely, extremely probable that he would have spoken to Mary.
He would have had many a tea with Mary. She would have been like the matriarch of the early church. And as it says here, Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.
She would have opened up her chest and she would have said, this is something that is a great jewel of a precious value to me.
The angels appearing to the shepherds because the angel Gabriel appeared as well to me. The angel Gabriel appeared to first announce that I would be with child and he would have no human father.
[10:58] And it was the angel Gabriel that said, he shall be called Jesus. What happened to the shepherds was not something that she was unfamiliar with.

She could probably say, Luke, you know, that's the way God works. If we weren't looking for him, he reveals himself to us in the dark.
he comes to us. After 400 years of silence, God shows up and he shows up from heaven and he connects heaven to earth.
The existence of another kingdom is revealed to common, unschooled, poor, manual laborer shepherds.
This last week, Stephen McAlpin wrote about his experience of hearing Nick Cave in concert sing The Hand of God.
[12:24] and he said, in that dark room there was a tear in the fabric of our day and something from above was leaking through.

Theologians talk about feelings of transcendence transcendence and transcendence as a feeling is when you become aware of just how very high and great and expansive and big God is and how

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very small almost to insignificance you are.
Cathedrals were built with all of the height and the loft not for the acoustical effect but to try to achieve in worship transcendence for the worshiper.
That they could sit in a cathedral and worship and think there there is a whole other world.
God is big and I am small and yet at the same time say I'm an individual part of that kingdom.
[14:07] The revelation of the supernatural presence of angels from heaven created a response from the shepherds in the immediate and it says that it was great fear in verse 9 that they were filled with great fear.

That's that's like saying with that adjective this is a fearful fear. this is a big fear unlike anything they've ever experienced in their life and I would dare say shall ever fear again.
They become fearless in their message they're fearless of whoever would respond to their message after this but the angels immediately meet that fear with good news of great joy.
They immediately the angels having been revealed from heaven heaven is now sensed to be so near and so present I'm sure the shepherds were thinking we're toast.
You know as long as I didn't think about that other kingdom I could think that God didn't see me he didn't hear me particularly in the dark but now God is drawn near and I know I'm going to be condemned but immediately the angels having revealed heaven to them reveal the message the message behind the event of God Christ come to earth in a child and they reveal the message with the four names and time doesn't permit me because each of these names is concentrated with the message of Jesus Christ and the good news of Christ and his coming and the life that he would live and the death he would die and the resurrection that he would experience those four names are given here in verse 11 beginning with a savior the word savior means rescuer
[16:50] Colossians 1 verse 13 we read he and this is Jesus the savior has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us into the kingdom of his beloved son in whom we have redemption that's like the purchase price paid for a slave or a servant the forgiveness of sins so the rescuer we have been we are in bondage and darkness in that kingdom savior comes brings us into the kingdom of light and he pays the price to do so and we know that price being his very life Christ aka the Messiah Messiah or Christos means specially anointed and appointed by God because he is

God no little no little child no ordinary child because God is his father in Galatians 4 we read but when the fullness of time had come God sent forth his son born of woman born under the law to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as sons God's son came to earth and by his death we have become sons yes daughters of the heavenly kingdom rescued we have been now redeemed by this Christ God himself
Lord we're told that another name for him that the angel is revealing to them the message is he is the Lord the king now this is the kingly title for the God of Israel himself and it means to these shepherds you know our ordinary lives are not going to be so ordinary anymore because we now are being told of another kingdom we're being told that this child is the king and will be citizens in his kingdom philippians chapter two but Christ emptied himself by taking the form of a servant being born in the likeness of men and being found in human form he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross therefore
God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God and Father he is Lord and one day one day everyone will respond and fall before him and confess he's Lord whether they've received him as their Lord or not he is Lord and we rejoice with the angels that he is our Lord our king our Christ our savior and all of that can be captured in his name
Jesus that was privately given by Gabriel to Mary upon his birth he was to be named that and Joseph eight days later at his brisk was to go public with that name Jesus because he will save his people from their sin so this is the revelation this is the revelation of good news from God from heaven to men on earth how shall we respond how did the shepherds respond well I don't want you to miss the fact that the shepherds were not commanded to go they were not the shepherds were not prompted to guilt or fear you got to go do this it was a natural response it was a natural reaction having had this message revealed to them their eyes are open their ears are filled the joy is starting to grow in their heart when the angel said fear not for behold

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[22:37] I bring you good news and then in verse 11 for unto you they believed it we this baby that you speak of being born we're in his family he's in our family it's as if a distant family relation is told you've got a future king in your family line and he's born at the hospital and this is your invitation to go I say light but this is far greater so they've been invited to go but not commanded and this is something that that really becomes them as shepherds you know they weren't commanded to go climb and camp out on

Mount Sinai our Everest of their day but they were doing they were invited to do something that shepherds would find extremely easy go find an animal trough go find a manger and when they would have arrived they would have arrived at a home very much like their own I I just got to tell you that I love it I just love it that as these men and boys are racing and yeah in my mind's eye I see them kind of racing one another competing with one another running down the hill making haste running I adore it that
God did not bend the knee for our Jesus God incarnate to be born in a prince's cradle but that he stooped he became so low he condescended so low that the poor the outcast the homeless the rejected those that are familiar with dark and loneliness and meaningless lives could say he gets us we didn't have to dress up and go into a castle or a palace he gets us and he's not forgotten us and that would ever be the case with
Jesus the people that would really identify and follow and love and get Jesus the most came from very humbling humbling circumstances and so the shepherds go and there they gather around that manger and that's where they first shared the news and that's that's where they would have they would have looked not only into the face of Mary or the face of Joseph and with great excitement I believe share the news and Mary starting to say yeah I'm a humble servant and God has visited us as well we understand this isn't this an amazing grace but they would have looked down and they would have seen the baby of which the angels sang they wouldn't have seen a halo there wouldn't have been this glow emanating from the manger but in seeing him they believed it says in verse 20 that it was at that point that they believed for all they had heard and seen and the two went together what was revealed to them from heaven they now saw or experienced on earth and that's a part of our testimony too we don't believe simply because we have heard and we've processed it logical as it is but there's actually an experience there's an experience and then they make it known that means they left the home that means they left the manger with Jesus now don't miss the motivation to leave and then to tell beat the motivation to stay and behold which is synonymous with worship they were they were the great commission in action they couldn't sit on good news it was just too great as Jack
Miller used to say good news has to go somewhere it's like a song a good song it has to be sung you can't keep it to yourself particularly if you love people and you know now that they're out there in the dark they're alone on a hillside in a dark world just like you were if you love them you can't stay we do worship this is wonderful but if this is all that we are doing and we're never telling it's never flowing out into the relationships that we have then do we really love Jesus and do we really are we really experienced and has good news now I want to say a word about proclaiming
[29:51] Jesus Christianity is not a joyless people with long faces and serious mood and evangelism is not hell fire and brimstone sermons turn or burn messages such that you would hear on Buchanan Street that is not evangelism I don't know what you call it but it's not evangelism that flows from a hard heart evangelism is good news flowing from a burning heart I love the image of the rejoicing shepherd if you continue with Luke's gospel in Luke 15 he talks about a shepherd who has a sizable flock there there's a hundred but one of them is missing and so the shepherd is not happy because the one is missing and so he goes out in search of it and then

Luke says that this shepherd upon finding the lamb picks it up puts it on his shoulder and comes home rejoicing he's got pep in his step I found the lamb I found the lamb he gets home and he rings his neighbor you gotta come you gotta come I found the lamb I found the lamb and all of his neighbors come and they have a festival and what are they celebrating the lamb the lamb that was found now I have to believe that if he was not happy with that one being missing and if he rejoiced when he found him and he shared his rejoicing with all of his neighbors so that they could join him in the rejoicing that he was rejoicing it was rejoicing that took him out to look in other words his joy his joy was like jet fuel propellant to say
I take joy that people will come this Christmas to know Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord they will and then when they do we rejoice and we have expectation that others will as well you know

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Jesus is like that and if you've experienced Jesus's joy in finding you as his little lamb that joy will take residence and that news that story of how you were found never gets old it never gets stale and it certainly is not dreadful and you'll share it well they left and in the streets afterwards we're told that they returned and glorifying and praising
God we're told in verse 18 that all who heard it wondered the shepherds would have gotten a number of responses they would have had people that would have heard their news their story and they would have said I want that I want some of that I want to go see him where is he there would have been others that say we don't believe you there would have been one of the worst that would have said I believe the event but I don't care that was me as a young man I grew up believing that Jesus was born in a manger I even believed that angels appeared and heaven opened I believed I could sing the songs but it didn't make any difference to me and then a non response might have been
I'm not going to have I'm just not going to have a response maybe next Christmas no response at all but the shepherds I believe would not have been put off by a little rejection or maybe mocking because they were transformed by joy it really had become the great good news of Christmas to them the story is told of a ten year old girl who annually went with her family to a live nativity scene and while she was at the live nativity scene with her family she leaned in and she was peering at the baby Jesus lying in the manger her grandmother comes beside her and she says lovely isn't he and she said oh yes granny he's quite lovely but I was just wondering you know we come year after year and there's just there's just one thing that bothers me grandmother he never seems to grow any he's the same size as last year well as we would look and learn how to respond to [36:46] Jesus our response is going to look a little bit different than the shepherds because Jesus didn't stay a baby in the manger he grew and he led an obedient life in our place and he died a cruel death as our sacrifice winning us into his kingdom and he rose again from the grave showing that he conquered the grave and we shall too and he now reigns in a kingdom that is promised to us our responses we can run to him spiritually through our prayers we can't run to him physically but we can run to him even quicker through our prayers how the prayer life must have been transformed for those first shepherds heaven was so close and we never knew it if

God could see us and come to us from heaven then our words to Jesus to God are near to him in heaven we don't wait for angels in our life to reveal the good news we have the Bible imagine the Bible not simply as a encyclopedia of theology or a history book but love letters revealing God's rich love unchangeable eternal for me and how I can respond to him in love if you don't have a practice a Bible reading it's a great one to begin as we think about even now the new year ahead and maybe you've never read the
Bible maybe you are still one that saying I'm not sure that I believe that God even speaks still then may I encourage you to read even again tonight again with Luke chapter one and begin with this prayer Lord if you're real and I don't know if you're real but I'm going to sincerely I'm going to read and if you're revealed reveal yourself in these words to me and in such a voice that like to those shepherds I know your voice and that you're real God has promised that any woman man or child that will seek him shall find him he's not playing hide and seek in such a way that he will not be found another way that we like the shepherd can resemble the shepherds but it looks a little bit different is we can relay the good news and that without fear
Bethlehem stood for house of bread bread and these shepherds went and having had their fill with Jesus went out like beggars who found the source of bread telling other beggars where they could find bread we can do the same share out of our fullness and then lastly it says that they went forth glorifying and praising God I'll end with this story it's a true story there was growing up there was an artist who had a TV program and he'd always start with just an empty panel on his easel and he had this really wild hair and he had his palette and he would be talking and he would say things like let's just put a little tree here we'll just put this tree here but you know this tree is a little sad so we're going to make a winter scene here and it's twilight it's dark and we're going to put another tree we don't want this tree to be alone and he would start telling a story and this particular one he's telling this story and you've got this house that he draws in the middle of this winter scene in the forest and it's dreary
I mean it's dark and you can almost feel the coldness as you look into this painting painting and then he says we're not done here and then he takes his brush and he gets some of the yellow oil paint and in each of the dark windows of the house he puts a swipe of yellow showing light within

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and it takes a cold painting and makes it warm it takes a depressing scene and makes it inviting because in that winter darkness there's now a light and where there is a light there is life these shepherds their lives are transformed and they'll never be the same because the light has come and they have found life in him may it be that way with us as well even this [43:31] Christmas a savior is born he lies in the manger let's pray heavenly father I thank you I thank you for the the story of your goodness in the gospel but it's more than a story in this real event may we see that you have revealed yourself not simply to shepherds but to us may we respond by living lives so filled with the joy that is now ours for you have come that it shows forth in our bringing you great glory by living praise filled lives now and even forever as we pray in

Christ's name amen

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