

Carol Service: Good News - Sunday 10th December 2023

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Preacher: Matt Wallace

[0 : 00] We've just been thinking about it in that reading and singing about it, that first Christmas story as was told in Luke's Gospel. We've got Mary, Joseph, the angels, shepherds, little eight pounds, six ounce, newborn infant Jesus.

They're all in there in the story with wise men to follow in a little bit, no doubt stopping off at a Boxing Day sale for some cheaper gold, frankincense and myrrh on their way before they arrive in a little while.

It's the story from which so much springs. Tonight we're here because of that story some 2,000 years ago. Indeed, so much of our life springs from that story. It's the year zero from which we still measure our time over 2,000 years later.

It's the story which gives the rhythm to our seasons where midwinter is filled by festivities designed to bring us a bit of Christmas hope, peace, joy and love at this time of year.

And whether the Jesus story as a whole is one which we think about often or whether it's really perhaps just at this time of year that it's in our consciousness. I think one thing is clear from what the angel tells the shepherds and it's this, that the coming of Jesus, his coming to be God with us.

[1 : 14] Well, it's meant to be good news. It's meant to be good news. Indeed, as the angel says to these flock watching fellas, he says, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

Good news. Good news. And yet it's interesting. I think we're used to hearing or watching the news every day. But I guess if we're honest, the rolling coverage we see on our screens rarely seems to be good these days.

And yet I know of all sorts of people who've decided basically to stop watching the news because it's just too depressing or it makes them angry and they don't want to be in that place. I kind of understand that. I'm not sure turning off is always the answer, but I appreciate why people might choose to, particularly at this time of year.

Yeah, yes, you might get some sweet kind of and finally item on the news, whether it's the birth of two new baby pandas or something, you know. But as cute as those two are, and they definitely are cute, even their cuteness at the end of a bulletin or whatever doesn't always negate the bad news that we hear.

You know, the stuff of the climate crisis or the wars and the terror of the corruption and the cuts and the general callousness of so much that seems to characterise what's going on in our government and our politics at the moment.

[2 : 39] I guess good news is out there all the time. But sometimes I think it feels like we're panning for gold in the midst of so much mud.

But if you make it more personal beyond the sort of pandas and the national and international stuff, if you make it personal, I wonder for you, how would you define what good news might mean for you in your life?

Indeed, as we look back perhaps at the past year we've had, I wonder if perhaps there have been some real highlights that you think, yeah, that was a good day. That was good news in my life.

Maybe it was good news of a new job. Maybe a better boss. Maybe a much-needed pay rise.

Maybe your exam results were what you wanted or needed. Maybe there was a new arrival in the family.

Maybe you've made new friends or joined new clubs this year. Equally, there could have been good news on something that you're passionate about, which has got you excited over the past year.

[3 : 42] I know for me, this one springs to mind for me in particular, which was West Ham's European trophy winning performance back in the summer.

The first West Ham trophy in 43 years, no less. So I know miracles happened at Christmas, but miracles happened for West Ham that night as well. A rare trophy.

Don't mention today's result, but that night, that was a good result all round. That was good news for me and my team, West Ham. Then again, though, perhaps as you begin to look ahead to 2024, which is just around the corner, you might be hoping for good news in altogether more important stuff, even more important than football.

Maybe you're hoping for good news in terms of your health, maybe treatment that you're facing. You're hoping that that will go well. Maybe you're looking for love.

Maybe you'd like some relationships that you've got at the moment to be mended and to improve. Maybe you'd like to move on from perhaps some unhealthy relationships. Maybe that would be good news for you in the year ahead.

[4 : 49] Perhaps good news for you would be finding a way to overcome whatever stuff that we carry day by day, whether that's anxiety or stress or depression. Maybe good news for you would be good news for you would be good news for you. Maybe good news for you would mean you're not lying awake every night wondering how you're going to exactly pay the bills.

You see, although good news may mean something pretty different perhaps for each of us depending on our context, what unites us all, I'd say, is that the desire for good news is rooted in this.

It's rooted in hope. Hope that things can change, that things can get better, that another way of life is possible.

And it's this idea of hope which I'd suggest is actually at the heart of the good news which the angel first spoke about. You see, if we put ourselves in Mary and Joseph's sandals for a moment, you know, life for them at the time, it would have been pretty tough for them.

You know, they're living under the brutality of the Roman Empire, an occupying power who at a moment's notice can demand that families have to relocate across the country just to attend a census in person.

[6 : 07] You know, a journey for Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, which would have been maybe 60, 70 miles. Could have been a journey on foot. Maybe if they were lucky, they had a donkey, although that's not guaranteed, since like most people in Nazareth, Mary and Joseph were pretty poor.

But that journey across the desert like this, that would have been difficult and dangerous at the best of times, let alone when you're like Mary and heavily pregnant and perhaps due to drop at any moment.

What's more, it seems because of the way God planned things, Mary and Joseph would have had to live with the scandal at the time of being unmarried parents with all the rumours and the gossip and the shame that would have come with that in that particular time.

And Mary's what, probably 14, 15 tops? That's a lot for a teenager to carry. Now, we're not quite sure in the story where Mary ends up giving birth.

All we know is there was a manger, a feeding trough that was there as a makeshift cot. And so whether it is a skanky stable, as we see sometimes, whether it is the basement of a house where animals would have been kept, whatever it was, it wasn't a kind of posh maternity unit, certainly no gas and air, no tea and toast on tap for Mary when she does eventually give birth.

[7 : 32] I mean, I like the video version of the story that we watched earlier. But I also like this painting here, which I came across the other day. It's a painting in the 19th century by an artist called Gary Melchers.

And it's not exactly a kind of glossy Christmas card scene here. Yeah, there's a little lantern, which is perhaps lighting the head of baby Jesus there. But you can see from Mary and Joseph here, it kind of focuses on the reality that they were a pretty knackered couple at this stage.

You know, an exhausted mum in Mary falling asleep there on the ground. And dad in Joseph, he's got that kind of middle distance stare going on that new dads tend to have.

It's like, what has just happened here? You know, it's that kind of flipping, I've got to get my head around this one. And yet into that setting, that reality of tiredness and exhaustion and bewilderment perhaps, into that setting come this bunch of bouncing, excited, albeit perhaps smelly shepherds.

You know, shepherds who have just been visited by a great company of angels proclaiming that this birth, this miracle child is good news that will cause great joy for all people.

[8 : 52] So how can this little baby be such good news? What I want to suggest, that is precisely because Jesus is born into such a tough, messy, oppressive, exhausting situation.

That's the thing, I'd say, which gives the shepherds, which gives Mary and Joseph, and which can give us hope because through Jesus, God is well and truly with us.

God is well and truly with us. You see, God doesn't arrive in luxury or comfort. He doesn't arrive behind palace doors or in a private hospital. God doesn't make a beeline for the powerful or the privileged, the fancy or the famous.

Now instead, God, you know, God is born in a barn, in a tiny town to a poor teenage mum. God in Jesus is born in an occupied territory, occupied to such a degree that the family will soon need to escape as refugees, probably going through modern day Gaza to the southern border to Egypt, where they're going to need to rely on the kindness of strangers because they're no longer safe in the place they would long to call home.

That's a reality, perhaps, which sounds sadly familiar to our times. And yet again, I'd say that is exactly why Jesus' arrival is good news, because it means that whatever hardship we might go through, whatever individual or international challenges we face, whatever tough times we encounter, because God is one of us, we know that God gets it, that God understands, that God identifies with us because God is one of us.

[10 : 52] You know, that's the brutal, brilliant beauty of the Christmas story, in that through Jesus and all that he would grow up to be, God comes to be with us, alongside us, arriving at the bottom of the pile, because he wants us to know that when we are at our lowest, Jesus has already been there and therefore knows how to lift us up.

That's the God I believe in. That's why I do what I do. That's the God who I'd say speaks to us through the small but significant acts of individual and community kindness that we see in abundance at this time of year.

You know, small acts which are indeed, I'd say, the gold in the mud. Small acts which warm our hearts and take us beyond ourselves, that give us hope, in the same way that perhaps holding a tiny, small, sleeping baby does.

You know, because something in us knows that God is in even the smallest of things. Now that's why the angel can declare that Jesus is good news that will cause great joy for all the people, because we're all invited to realise that not only is God with us, but that we each in turn have a small, yeah, but a hugely significant part to play in living out this good news of hope, of peace, of joy and of love with the way we treat those who we live alongside in the world.

That's the good news of Christmas, that through Jesus, God is with us and he calls us to be with each other as we follow his lead and we're guided by his spirit in the world.

[12 : 57] Indeed, let me close with some words that are written by a writer called Nick Page, words which he wrote in response to being asked the question, what is the good news?

What is the good news? And here's what he had to say, he said this, there is a God and God is good and God loves you.

Because God is good and because God loves you, you don't have to be afraid, you don't have to suffer alone, you don't have to worry about riches or status or pretending to be someone you're not. You don't have to feel insignificant, unnoticed or unloved. You don't have to be trapped in guilt or shame. You don't have to be scared of death because death is not the end.

You don't have to walk through this world alone. The world is beautiful and the world is terrible. No one knows why, but we do know that it's not as God wants it and that we can change it a little by changing ourselves.

[14 : 15] That's why God invites us to a different life, a life of freedom, kindness, hope, courage, honesty and forgiveness. We can live this life by copying Jesus who shows us what God is like and by asking God's spirit to work with us because we can't do it on our own.

So here's the thing, he says. You are not your wounds. You are not your fears or your failures. You are not your possessions or your career.

You are not what has been done to you or what you have done to others. You are not what others say about you or even what you say about yourself.

You are a child of God, a God who is good and a God who loves you. Amen.

Amen.