

Advent 4

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Date: 23 December 2018

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

We're going to read the story of the first people who got to go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ was born. It's the familiar Christmas story in Luke 2. But as I read it, I want you to imagine that you got a special invitation to some huge event. The royal wedding, the national championship game, I don't know, something that would be a really big deal to you.

And you'd really want to be there and you weren't even looking for an invite yet. You didn't know it was happening. You're just minding your own business. And you're the only one to get a special personal invitation to the big event. That's what happens to these shepherds. The only people other than the baby's parents to get an angelic invitation to the birth of the Messiah. As far as we know, the only people other than Mary and Joseph actually at the manger. I want us to consider their story, what the birth of Jesus means to them, and also consider through that what the birth of Jesus means to each of us, ordinary people like them. Let's read this glorious account in Luke 2, beginning at verse 8. This is the very Word of God.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased.

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child, and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told them.

[3 : 01] Let us fire God's holy word. Let's pray together. Father, thank you for your word. Would you by your spirit teach it to our hearts? Would you by your spirit mold our hearts this morning, change us, that we would not merely celebrate a season with warm and good feelings, but that we would celebrate a Savior with hope and joy?

Would you do that work in our hearts? Would you speak to us by your word? In Jesus' name, amen. Amen. Most of us aren't experts on shepherds, so let me give you a little window into their world to help us appreciate how the birth of Jesus would have impacted them. Shepherds in this culture were in some ways ordinary blue-collar folk. They were certainly not the upper crust of society or particularly influential in the town. In fact, they were the black sheep of Jewish society, pardon the pun. Often despised in the community, thought of as thieves, so mistrusted, in fact, that they weren't even allowed to be legal witnesses. That's who shepherds were. Perhaps the ones who looked down on them the most and made them feel the most like outsiders were the religious types. The religious churchy people made sure the shepherds felt unworthy because they weren't in worship very often. You didn't find them at the temple much. With their crazy work schedules, long distances they had to cover, the fact they were at times ceremonially unclean from the animals or dead things they came in contact with. They were usually absent from worship. We may think of them as as sweet characters around the manger, but but nobody else thought of them that way.

Everyone, themselves included, I suspect, would have been surprised, shocked to hear or read that the local shepherds were by the end of this story leading the community in glorifying God, announcing the good news of the Messiah coming to save God's people. But that's exactly what happens, isn't it?

God often has the most special plans for the most unsuspecting people as we already saw with Rae. So the shepherds will show us this morning a special view of Christmas. Will show us Christmas means good news that must be celebrated and must be shared. Let's start with the first part of that.

What's the good news that is worth celebrating? Something causes these shepherds who are out with their flocks by night to get really excited. But first, it scares them. An angel shows up and verse 9 says, they are filled with great fear. They were sore afraid, another translation says. Now likely, these shepherds would have known enough to know that when an angel shows up, it's either really good or really bad.

And these shepherds certainly knew enough to know that if an angel was showing up to them, it was really bad, right? No chance was an angel showing up to them anything good. And so they're reasonably terrified. Well, what's going on? What's happening? But by the end of the story, verse 20 says, they're not terrified anymore. They're glorifying and praising God. They're excited.

[7:10] They're thrilled. They praise God. What happened? What did he tell them? He says to these fearful shepherds, fear not. I understand why you're afraid. Don't be afraid. I've got good news. It's of great joy.

It's something worth celebrating. What's the content of the good news that they celebrate? What could an angel bring to these shepherds that would tell them they should celebrate? Look at verse 10.

Good news of great joy that will be for all the people unto you is born this day in the city of David David. A savior who is Christ the Lord, a savior. Christ the Lord, the Messiah. Look, even the shepherds knew who that was, right? This is the one we've all been waiting for, the promised one, the anointed one.

We've waited centuries and now he's here. Are you serious? That's the first angle the shepherds get on the good news. A savior. In other words, God is making rebels his children. Now that's good news for rebels. And if you don't think of yourself as a rebel, maybe that's not really the personality type you have or how you usually think of yourself.

Remember last week we saw that every time we sin, we're picking up our swords and waging war against the king. We think we'd do better on his throne. Rebels, consider your own heart and life for just a minute. Do you wake up every day thinking, I wonder what God wants me to do today?

[9:08] Do you ever consider your own needs ahead of others? Do you ever struggle to love even the people you picked to love? Do you ever do something just to look good to others, just to impress someone else, to avoid getting caught and punished? See, even the even the rule followers among us have hearts that rebel against the king.

When we're honest about our hearts, we feel the same way the shepherds would have about being in the presence of God. Not me. I don't deserve to be there.

The Bible's right, isn't it, when it says we are sinful from birth. There is no one righteous. By nature, we are all hostile to God. We are bent towards ourselves and what we want and away from God and what He's designed us for. We desperately need a Savior.

And that's exactly what God sends. A Savior. While we were yet sinners, the Messiah came to die for us.

At just the right time, God sent His Son so that rebels might become His sons. It's the good news of Christmas that causes these shepherds to do backflips.

[10:40] I mean, I made that detail up, but they're praising God. They're really excited. They're celebrating His goodness and grace. A Savior. God makes rebels His children.

Chai Sun knew what it meant to be a rebel. He was part of a communist rebel militia group in Korea after World War II. He hated Christians. In 1948, he killed two sons of a local pastor in an uprising. But soon afterwards, the communist uprising was put down and troops from the National Army came in to execute justice, to mete out punishments on these rebels. Chai Sun rightfully expected he was facing death. Until Pastor Sun, the father of the two boys he had killed, stepped in. He pleaded with the military court to forgive Chai Sun. The court at first refused, but finally, the court consented when Pastor Sun offered to adopt the rebel in the place of his two murdered sons.

When Pastor Sun finally saw Chai Sun, he said to him, Don't worry, I have already forgiven you, and God is longing to forgive you too.

It wasn't long before Chai Sun experienced forgiveness of sins and adoption as a son from his heavenly father. He became a Christian like his new father.

From rebel to son, twice. That's such good news. But then the one angel is actually joined by something that I think would be a lot scarier than just one brilliant messenger of light.

[12:46] There's a whole host of them, an army of angels. To add more to the message, verse 14, Glory to God in the highest, they're singing. And on earth, peace among those with whom he is pleased.

They've got a message. There's glory in heaven and there's news for earth. I wonder what it will be. The armies of heaven, of the glorious God, declare not war, but peace.

An announcement, not that God has found some men of goodwill on earth who deserve for God to make peace with them, but rather that God has declared peace toward men currently hostile and warring against him.

My enemies will be my friends, God says. Hey, that's us, right? The shepherds knew it. He's talking to us.

What a glorious reality. Do you know that? That's you and me? And the holy God of the universe, at the point of his highest and greatest glory, does not wait for us to earn our way back up to him.

[14:02] That's not what he does. Instead, he brings us back to himself. It's the same message of grace from another angle for restless, fearful, peace-lacking people.

People who scramble around trying to have a good enough life, to have a good enough family, to have a good enough Christmas this year, frantically trying to be good enough just to keep God appeased, keep him from doing anything bad to me, to make me not have to think about him.

And God shows up to those people and says, Enough! Peace! And God sends hosts of angels to announce it to shepherds who would never have believed it otherwise.

Listen, shepherds. A Savior has been born to you I don't want you to miss it.

I want you to know beyond a shadow of a doubt that God is speaking good news to you. This will be a sign to you. How many people was the baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger a sign for?

[15:33] As far as we know, just for a few shepherds, it was a sign to them. A sign just for them from their God who wanted to make sure the outcast, rebel, undeserving shepherds knew they were welcomed in His family.

That's the personal part of Christmas that I'm so glad I get to share with you this morning. If you've never heard it that way before, Jesus is born for you.

Specifically, to save you. Especially, to rescue you. Can you even comprehend that? Can you imagine the God of the universe thinking that way about you?

I read the story recently of a young Filipino man named Timothy. Timothy grew up in deep poverty without much at all, but he had received letters and gifts and prayers from a man he had never met and knew only as George Walker.

It wasn't until Timothy was 17 that he learned the man who had been sending him all of these things so regularly was actually named George Herbert Walker Bush.

[17:04] Then the former President of the United States. The Compassion International staffer who had connected them and finally told Timothy who it was, said Timothy was dumbfounded, speechless.

Timothy said, well, I knew he was a kind and encouraging, wonderful man, but I had no idea. And they write, to a child in poverty, it's amazing enough that anyone would care about them, but it was beyond his wildest imagination and even his ability to comprehend that the President of the United States knew his name.

Dear friends, new friends, new friends that I've never met before. The God of the universe knows your name.

And more than that, he cares for you. He has been caring for you since you were young.

Can you believe that? you who have run from him, you who have pretended to know him but failed him so many times, you who have felt fearful even this morning at the idea of coming to a place like this, that if there even is a God, he certainly has no kind feelings towards me.

[18 : 41] He's certainly out to get me rather than out to help me. I know that's what I would deserve if he's even there. And the good news is he is and he cares for you.

He knows your name and it's not something that should make you run away. He's welcoming you in. He sent his son so that he can welcome you home.

He cares so much that he sent his son to save you, to make you his friend, even to adopt you as his son. Peace.

Will you embrace him in that peace? Rejoice. Good news. Great joy. Trust Jesus.

Rest. Finally. Praise God for good news of great joy for you. Can you imagine Timothy keeping the news of the President of the United States being his friend to himself?

[19 : 57] No way, right? This is something I gotta tell my friends. I gotta tell everybody. It was too marvelous to contain, I'm sure. The shepherds had an even more marvelous story to tell.

The angels depart. The shepherds run to Bethlehem, find the baby, and immediately what do they do? They start talking. Apparently, to any and everyone who will listen to him.

Verse 17, when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child, and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

All who heard it, apparently no small number of people that they found, all of them were amazed, marveled. It's what it means, wondered. At what?

What did they say? What did the shepherds share with them? The saying that had been told them about the child. What was that? That the baby was the Messiah, the Savior.

[21 : 02] Wow! Wow! Angels announce it to them, and now they announce it to everyone else.

Have you ever thought before how odd that is? How strange it is that God puts shepherds, rather than Bible teachers, in this position to make this announcement.

Put yourself in the shoes of the people hearing from them, maybe good faithful Jews waiting for the Messiah, hundreds of years waiting, and now I'm hearing about this good news from them?

I don't know. That doesn't seem likely. Do you realize apparently it's not a negative thing to God that those announcing the good news of the Messiah's birth are scoundrels?

People that others look down on and don't see as great success stories, paragons of virtue? In fact, His choice of the shepherds first seems to underscore that this is good news of great joy for all people.

[22 : 19] Maybe God knew that the shepherds would joyfully share the good news of the birth of the Savior because they knew how desperately they needed one. That would fit with what God often seems to do in sending out needy people to tell others of how God has met their needs.

Needy messengers from cover to cover in this book. If you haven't read it, that describes all of them. So if you feel you're not good enough to represent Jesus to others, welcome to the club.

He puts the best news ever in jars of clay. Weak, broken vessels like you and me.

Young kids that somewhat overlook. Elderly people leaning on walkers.

Sinful, unimpressive pastors. church. And God wants us to share this news so that it will be very clear who the Savior is.

[23 : 36] Right? Not you, not me. Who the glorious one is, who the strong one is. These outcast shepherds realize the marvelous, critical truth that the message of Christmas is a message that must be spread.

In that regard, I feel like they may be ahead of us many days. This is really where God has convicted me this week. I love celebrating the good news of Christmas.

But the Spirit has been saying to my heart, you celebrate Christmas like it's worth sharing. But you share about Christmas like it's not worth celebrating.

Is that ever true for you? Do you celebrate Christmas like it's worth sharing but share about Christmas like it's not worth celebrating? Would your unbelieving family member be fair in assuming the birth of Jesus is really not that big a deal?

If you went the tenth straight Christmas together without mentioning Jesus at all? No. Does it really make sense to come to special services to shop and buy all these presents and wear yourself out celebrating for an entire month something that you won't walk across the driveway or the hallway to talk to your neighbor about the other eleven months?

[25 : 14] It doesn't make sense though. Is it really good news or not? Shepherds didn't have to think twice did they?

It just made sense. Good news like this must be shared. Sometimes I think we forget how much we need it and we need to slow down and experience God's grace again for ourselves so that we celebrate it as we should.

Sometimes we forget how much others need it and we need to express God's grace to them so that they can celebrate with us. We talk about experience and express grace around here a lot.

It's our mission. Experience and express grace. But do we talk about that with each other more than we talk about the grace, the Savior himself with others?

It must be both. love. The message of Christmas we've been talking about is one that we ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors in this world desperately need.

[26 : 26] I've shared with you before about the disease that I made up. It's called Irish Dalmatian rhinitis. It's where your nose swells up and is covered with green spots.

Irish Dalmatian rhinitis. If you saw that a cure for that disease were discovered, it wouldn't make you jump up or run for joy to tell someone about it, would it?

Because neither you nor anyone you love suffers from this disease and needs this cure. I know because I made it up. It's not good news of great joy to you.

But we absolutely share with others something that is celebratory good news, don't we? We never miss a chance it seems. When Clemson wins the national championship this year, sorry, if, I should still say if, Clemson wins, I will celebrate with others who are also excited.

All the Clemson and Auburn fans that I know will celebrate together. We do that naturally. Imagine you're scrolling through Facebook and you see a recipe, a video, a news story or something that you like and you click like.

[27 : 41] You do that a lot. But then sometimes you see something you know many of your friends will enjoy or benefit from it. It tasted so good and they love chocolate.

It encouraged you so much and you know others who are hurting. And you click share because everyone else needs to know too, right?

Christmas is that kind of good news. In case you forgot. It's that kind of story. One that must be shared.

It is, after all, the angel says, good news of great joy for whom? All people. Celebratory good news for everyone.

See, Christmas is universal because the need for a Savior, for peace with God, for good news of great joy is universal. Christmas is very personal.

[28 : 43] But as we consider people personally, consider your friends and neighbors for just a minute as we close. Our disease is no joke.

is eternally serious. And living in a nice neighborhood in Huntsville does not cure it.

It just masks it sometimes. We live in a world full of people desperately searching for peace.

Is there anyone this time of year not feeling at least some of the stress and strain of this life?

Perhaps they're searching for it in other people, professional success in a controlled life, but not finding what they're ultimately searching for there.

And God has given to us good news of great joy, the way of peace, the child of peace, the prince of peace.

[29 : 52] We must share that. We live in a world wracked by fears, grief, anxiety, depression.

It's overwhelming often. We're increasingly unable to manage the pains and difficulties of life. You have neighbors overwhelmed by a sense of loneliness, a fear of failure.

It's masked by workaholism, materialism, suburban isolation, any number of things, but God has given to us good news of great joy.

He has been born in our world. Emmanuel, God with us in our lowest points, in our darkest places, God has come in.

We must share that. God has been perhaps most importantly, we live in a world full of people tormented by guilt, not having lived up to their own standards, even if they're unaware of God's.

[31 : 06] Many sitting in pews like these and worrying they've failed God, not done enough, been pretending to be okay so long they're exhausted.

Maybe you know that feeling. And according to God's word, everyone not feeling that is ignoring the reality of their guilt before a holy God, seeking to be enough on their own, pretending there's no eternal problem, and in fact there is.

And God has given us good news of great joy, of Savior, Savior for people just like you and me and them.

Jesus, who removes our guilt and restores us to our Father. Good news of great joy for all people. We must share that. that. If you've ever really celebrated Christmas, really found your heart overwhelmed with the joy of a Savior being born to you, then know for certain that everyone you know needs that same Savior and can taste that same joy.

[32 : 28] And what a joy to share with them what has brought you such great joy. Let's pray. Jesus, your coming is indeed good news of great joy.

And I pray first that we would see it for ourselves in a fresh way. We forget in the busyness what great news your love and your birth and your death and your resurrection are for us.

And then might you not be able to contain us. Might the joy of our salvation, the relief of a Savior who has rescued me and given me rest be something we're so eager to share with others.

We're weak and needy like the shepherds. we won't be able to impress them with stories of our goodness but we can tell them about you, about a Savior, Christ the Lord.

Give us joy in that even today and this Christmas we ask in his name. Amen. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.