

CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2015

Luke 2:1-20

"Good News for All People - No Exceptions"

Pastor Saul Stensvaag

In my many years of ministry, I've preached over 25 Christmas Eve sermons, and they've all been based on the Christmas story from Luke, chapter 2. So I've wrestled with Luke's Christmas story many times, trying to come up with something new to say.

We pastors put a lot of pressure on ourselves when we prepare to preach on a festival like Christmas. I mean, we know that there will be people here who don't attend church very often, so there's a temptation to think, "If only I can preach the perfect sermon, maybe some of these folks will decide to start attending church more often."

But the crazy thing is, I've been preaching perfect Christmas sermons for 15 years, and it hasn't appeared to make much of a dent.

So I've decided to just leave that part up to the Holy Spirit, and proclaim the message I feel led to share on this special night.

And I've come to realize it's not important to say something "new" on Christmas Eve. For over 2000 years, this wonderful story has been told again and again and it hasn't had to change.

Maybe that's one reason people love Christmas Eve – they know the good news they're about to hear. And they're hungry to hear it again!

But the focus of the sermon does change a little each year. And this year, as I read and re-read the text, I was struck by the fact that the first humans to be told the good news of great joy for all people were shepherds.

Now, let's think about that.

Why was it that the shepherds were allowed to be living in the fields? Weren't all the citizens under orders of the Roman government to go to their hometowns in order to be registered for the census? How could the shepherds ignore this order?

It's because, in that day, shepherds were marginalized and ignored by the rest of society. As one writer says,

"Here we have people who are truly in a different category. While 'all the world' is rushing around to comply with Augustus and Quirinius, the shepherds are 'living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.' Like migrant workers or the newly homeless family who live in their car, they move from place to place largely unnoticed by the bureaucracies. They are, quite literally, not worth counting.

Martin Luther also knew that in 1st Century Palestine, shepherds were considered almost sub-human by the rest of society. Here's what he says:

*"That was a mean job, watching flocks by night. Common sense calls it **low-down work, and the men who do it were regarded as trash.** And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them.*

The field was flooded with light – brilliant, dazzling. Not the town, but the field was lighted up. Why didn't the angel go to Jerusalem?" Luther asks. *"That's where the princes of the people and the rulers of the Church were. But the angel didn't go to them. He went to Bethlehem, a dung heap compared with Jerusalem. And he didn't go to the town of Bethlehem, but to the shepherds."*

So why am I talking tonight to 21st Century Americans about shepherds – people who were outcasts, nobodies in their world?

How can the good news the angels told **to them** be good news **for me**?

I'm not a nobody, and neither are you, right? But the fact that the angels went first to the shepherds tells us that **this good news is truly for every single person on earth.**

- It's good news **not only** for people who **seem to somehow deserve God's love.**
- It's good news **not only** for people who are **seen by society as successful and happy.**
- It's good news **not only** for folks who are **feeling good about themselves and their lives.**

No, the good news the angels bring is **good news for absolutely everyone.**

It **doesn't matter what your mood is tonight.**

It doesn't matter **how you're feeling about yourself, or about your life.**

It doesn't matter if you're **feeling on top of the world and optimistic about your future,** or if you're **in a dark place where you are uncertain and worried about what the new year may bring.**

None of that matters. The shepherds certainly didn't "deserve" the good news of great joy. They hadn't done anything special that would make them worthy of hearing these words, *"to you is born this day ... a Savior."* But **that's what they heard: to you.**

As Luther says,

*"This joy isn't just for Peter and Paul, but for all people. God doesn't say just to apostles, prophets, and martyrs, 'come and see the baby Jesus'. He says it **to you.** The angel announces a Savior who will free us from fear. **Not a word is said about our merits and works, but only of the gift we are to receive.**"*

The angels went first to the shepherds and told them the good news. The heavenly hosts said to them, *"to you is born a savior"* – not: **"to those with pure hearts** or to those who have **cleaned up their acts** or to those who **feel close to God."**

No, they said to **those lowly, unimportant sheep-herders: "To you is born a savior."**

And that's why we can know beyond any doubt, that THESE WORDS ARE SAID TO US, AS WELL.

The Christmas story is good news; not just for all people, in a sort of generic sense.

It is truly good news for me, Saul Stensvaag.

And it's good news for you... and you...

AND YOU.

This is the lesson we can learn from the lowly shepherds: that the good news of the baby Jesus is for all people, and most especially for you and me.

And these shepherds have **another important lesson to teach us tonight.**

After they hear the good news from the angel, they **go with haste to see the Christ-child.**

But it's important to see what they do **after** they encounter the savior. "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God*" we read.

First of all, note that they returned to their daily lives. That's the proper response after we have encountered the savior: to return to our daily lives.

But we return TRANSFORMED, so that NOW WE ARE GLORIFYING AND PRAISING GOD.

When we encounter the Christ-child on Christmas IT CHANGES US.

We are to live each day shining with the joy and wonder of this night.

So, friends, **let the joy of Christmas live in your heart every day in the coming year.**

The words of the Carol, based on Marty Haugen's Holden Evening Prayer say it so well:

*God of daybreak, God of shadows,
come and light our hearts anew.*

*You who made the heaven's splendor,
ev'ry dancing star of night*

Make us shine with gentle justice,

Let us each reflect your light.

Mighty God of all creation,

Gentle Christ who lights our way.

Loving Spirit of salvation,

Lead us on to endless day.

Amen.