
LET HEAVEN AND NATURE SING

CHRISTMAS DAY

Luke 2:8-20

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.” And 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.

This morning we look at the shepherds, the chosen recipients to hear the gospel for the very first time, to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, that there is great joy found in Jesus Christ. There is the forgiveness of sin, the cancelling of our debt, our judgment is now secure before God. When we stand before him, we stand before him forgiven, cleansed, our debt paid because of what Jesus Christ has done for us. It’s a message of grace. It’s a message that tells us salvation is free. You cannot earn it. We do not deserve it. And God gives to us this wonderful gift.

And that message of great joy is given to the shepherds. Now, the shepherds are chosen by God. They are a wonderful example for us because their occupation required them to be out in the fields all of the time. They were not able to go to worship, to be a part of the worship days or the Sabbaths or the feast days. They were not ceremonially clean. They weren’t able to purify themselves, so they were considered unclean and not really regarded as at a very high level in society. They were lowly, humble shepherds, considered ceremonially unclean.

That's a picture of the freedom of the gospel. The gospel is given without cost to all who will receive. It's just liberating. You know, in some ways that really captures for us the spirit of Christmas. It just feels different, right? It's a day, it's a time that feels completely different.

This morning, at 9 o'clock in the morning, I had ice cream. Yeah, that's right. I know. And I didn't tell my wife. So, she gave me pancakes before I left early, and I thought, "Well, today I'm just going to be a hobbit and have a second breakfast." Someone had sent the staff these amazing little quarts of ice cream that is over the top good. And I thought, "It's Christmas!" I know that's silly, but I'm going to encourage you today to live a little, to just break the rules a little bit -- not go out and sin -- because in a very strange way it just helps remind us that grace is free and makes us free. It liberates us. Jesus liberates us.

So, if we see the shepherds responding and we think, "Shepherds -- who wants to be associated with shepherds?" That is generally an indication we are not ready for the gospel because we don't see our own need. We don't understand that we really don't deserve salvation. We don't deserve forgiveness. We do deserve judgment. And though that may be an unpopular message, the truth positions us for the freedom and the joy and the eternal life that is available in Jesus Christ.

Of course, if we do understand our need, if the Holy Spirit comes in and begins to give us this understanding that we have been made by a holy Creator, our Father God, and we will stand before him, and there will be a final judgment, and in that final judgment we will not have the option of saying, "Well, I did some good things that somehow counterbalance and outweigh bad things that I might have done," but that we will actually be required before God for the penalty of our sin -- when the Holy Spirit gives us that understanding and conviction comes, then we, like the shepherds, are amazed that God has chosen us. It's astounding! And we can't wait to behold Christ and to receive the joy of Christmas.

No doubt, there would be some individuals here this morning who have never initially responded to that message in faith. My hope for you today is that you will trust in Jesus Christ. Scripture tells us that if we believe in our heart and confess with our mouth Jesus is Lord we will be saved, that there is forgiveness of sin through faith in Jesus Christ. God tells us to repent, to turn from our sin, and to turn to God and to trust in Christ. I hope if you're here today and that has not happened in your life that you will trust in Christ.

But I'm also aware that there are a number of you who have trusted in Christ. And yet, you carry a burden of sin and guilt and shame and are in some ways still trying to earn your way into God's acceptance. Now, I don't for a moment diminish the fact that we need to live a holy life before God. That's God's desire, God's will, God's plan for our lives. But we cannot do that unless we know God's grace, unless we know his acceptance, his forgiveness, and the power that comes through Christ and Christ alone.

There is a wonderful passage that sets us up to examine this and I want to share it as we prepare our hearts for the Lord's Supper. It's Titus, Chapter 3, verses 1 through 8. I think it's one of those marvelous Christmas texts that you don't think of as a Christmas text. It begins with Paul telling Titus as he's leading the church: "Remind them to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, to be gentle, and to show perfect courtesy toward all people."

As you begin reading this text, it sounds like Paul is just telling us how to live, right? He's just saying, "Okay, I want you to get your lives ready to help other people, and you can't do that if you're quarreling and fighting. I want you to be gentle. I want you to show perfect courtesy to all people. He is really telling us to be good examples, good witnesses, and to be out there helping people who are in need.

But verse 3 takes us deeper into Paul's logic. "For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another." That's kind of a forward description, isn't it? Paul just puts it out there. "This is who we were without Christ." You might emphasize one aspect of that more than another, but Paul is painting a picture that we were not walking with God before Christ. Then here's our Christmas text, verse 4:

But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior...

There we were, lowly shepherds, easy to overlook, with sin in our lives, unclean, unprepared to come before God, and God in his mercy washes us and gives us life and the presence of the Holy Spirit. Verse 7: "... so that being justified..." That word means that our legal standing before God has been changed. We are no longer guilty before God, but we are now standing right with God because of what Jesus has done,

...justified by his grace, a gift, that we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to instruct on these things, to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works. These things are excellent and profitable for people.

It's interesting that verse 8 circles back to where he started, and this is what he's saying. When you understand your need, when you see yourself in that position of the shepherd needing God, you are just shocked. The heavens are open, choirs of angels are singing, announcing to you this message of salvation. You are like, "Me?" And when you receive the grace of God, there is such a transformation of turning from darkness and turning to light.

Listen very carefully: When that happens, you begin to restructure your entire life so that you can go out and help other people. You want to live a life of worship to God, exalting him, showing people, “Look at God’s grace! Look at God’s mercy! Look at when God has done in my life!” That grace and mercy just flow from you, so much so that you say, “You know what? I’ve got to get my financial act together. I’ve got to spend my time wisely. I’ve got to get this right and that right, and this relationship. There’s this thing way back in my past that’s hanging as a loose end and I need to go back and wrap that up, because Paul told us we want to be ready for every good work.” That’s how Christmas transforms us, and that transformation just goes deeper and deeper and deeper.

So that brings us to this moment where on Christmas Day 2016, we get to come to the Lord’s table and commune with him, to confess our sin, to receive forgiveness, and to ask him to fill us once again as we worship him.