THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Luke 2:1–20

Key Verses: 2:10,11

“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.’”

What do you consider “good news”? It’s different for different people, right? For older people, it might be the news that their grandchildren have gotten into a good school or are growing well, or even that they’re going to have a new grandchild! Or it might be the news that their adult child has gotten a good job or a promotion or is getting married at last. For many younger adults, it’s really good news when they find the right house or when their children get in to a good school. For singles, it’s such good news when they finally find their perfect life partner. But these kinds of “good news” don’t really resonate with younger people who’re just trying to figure out their way in life, or even their identity. These things surely are not very good news to people suffering with much bigger problems in life. Today we hear from the angel that the birth of Jesus is “good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” How is it that the birth of Jesus has this kind of effect on “all the people”? How can we experience this? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

In chapter 1 Luke has been going back and forth between the stories of the births of John and Jesus. But chapter 2 is all about Jesus. It begins with the historical setting. Read verses 1–3. These verses show the power of the Roman Emperor. When he issues a decree, everybody throughout his vast empire has to immediately obey. According to the political propaganda of the time, Caesar was a “savior,” and his rule coming to any territory was “good news” that brought “peace.” But it’s all phony. In reality it’s an oppressive system that terrorizes and crushes people with its army and leaves many others out in the cold.

Read verses 4–5. Luke again emphasizes how Joseph is of the house and line of David (cf. 1:27,32,33). He’s not the physical father of Jesus, but by marrying Mary he’ll become his legal father, and Jesus will have the full rights of this lineage. Despite his noble heritage, Joseph had no way to escape Caesar’s decree. Though it’s most inconvenient and disruptive, he suddenly has to pack up and make about a 90-mile trip on foot to go from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. For a woman late in her pregnancy, this journey would take at least a week, maybe longer. Walking for so many days is not just hard; it’s dangerous. But it may be even more dangerous to leave her alone at such a vulnerable moment, so Joseph takes Mary with him. What stands out in these verses is Bethlehem. According to the prophecy of Micah 5:2, the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (cf. Mt2:4–5). What’s the main idea here? Though Caesar seems to be ruling, God is in control, fulfilling his greater plan, using Caesar’s decree to bring Mary to Bethlehem to deliver her baby there, at just the right time. God’s rule is a key element of the good news. We’re still living in a world where people like Caesar have too much power and ordinary people suffer. But the good news is: God is still in control, and he’s still keeping all his promises.

Read verses 6–7. This is the birth of the Son of God, the Holy One (1:32,35), the most important event in human history, but it’s such a quiet scene, written in understatement. One scholar has estimated that at that time Bethlehem was a little town of only about 300 people. Probably it’s now overcrowded with people who’ve come there to register. Because Joseph and Mary had to travel more slowly, by the time they get there, every available place has been taken. So when Mary goes into labor, she has to go where the animals are. After traveling so long on foot, she has to use a manger, an animal’s feedbox, as a bed for her newborn. She probably has to make those swaddling cloths herself, tearing up fabric with her own hands and carefully wrapping his little arms and legs.

How is such a birth good news to us? Mainly, Jesus was born so humbly so that he could understand us. There’s a famous saying, “Before you judge someone, walk a mile in his shoes.” It may sound cliché, but it’s true. Jesus came to experience the worst of what can happen to a person. Even at his birth he was “despised and rejected…a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (Isa53:3). He understands everyone who’s been left out, humiliated or discarded, the helpless, those grieving some loss or who’ve been permanently stigmatized. To him we’re not invisible: he sees us, he knows us, he gets us, he genuinely cares. In the words of an old hymn: “‘Man of sorrows’—what a name / For the Son of God, who came / Ruined sinners to reclaim. / Hallelujah! What a Savior!”

Look at verses 8–12. This seems as unlikely as the Son of God being born in a manger—an angel appearing to shepherds out in the field, telling them, of all people, of the birth of the Savior of the world? Shepherds are on the bottom of society—nobody’s paying attention to them! But they are faithfully keeping watch over their flock by night. God is ready to exalt such humble people (1:52). The angel wants to replace their “great fear” (9) with “great joy” (10). Look at verse 10. It’s announced to these shepherds, but God also wants this good news to reach “all the people”—all the overlooked, forgotten, hopeless ones, including us.

What is this “good news”? Read verse 11. The good news is the birth of Jesus our Savior. In his song Zechariah called him “a horn of salvation” (1:69). Jesus saves us from all our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us (1:71). Jesus gives us “knowledge of salvation…in the forgiveness of [our] sins” (1:77). There are many so-called “saviors” in this world, saviors like Caesar. If we give them our loyalty and commitment, they promise us financial salvation, social salvation, or some other kind of self-salvation. They’re usually so appealing. But mostly these worldly saviors can’t deliver on their promises. They only deceive us with false hopes. Jesus is our true Savior because only he can save us from what’s really the problem—our sins. He doesn’t save us just from other people’s bad deeds, or from our own bad deeds—Jesus saves us from having a broken relationship with God. He gives us God’s mercy and forgiveness. He shows us that, though the world sees us as insignificant, we matter so much to God. His birth shows us that, no matter who we are, God is inviting us to be close to him. His grace of forgiveness saves us from feeling hopeless in our sin. His grace of forgiveness saves us from any grudge and enables us to truly forgive.

Jesus our Savior also saves us from darkness and from the shadow of death (1:79), which make our lives fearful and empty. He replaces our perishing hopes in this world with a living hope in God’s kingdom (1Pe1:3,4). We become kingdom people with kingdom values and a kingdom focus in our life and ministry (1:33; 4:43; 6:20; 7:28; 8:1,10; 9:2,11,27,60,62; 10:9,11; 11:2,20; 12:31–32; 13:18,20,28–29; 16:16; 17:20–21; 18:16–17,24–25,29–30; 21:31; 22:16,18,29–30; 23:42–43,51). The hope of his kingdom becomes our source of “great joy” (cf. Mt13:44–46). People are eagerly pursuing joys in this world. It might be success or possessions or travel or great experiences. The problem is, all these joys are fleeting—they don’t last. And they can never really satisfy our souls. But when we come to know Jesus as our Savior, he gives us spiritual joy, a joy that both satisfies us now, and, assures us of eternal glory. This great joy remains within us even when we’re suffering (Ac5:41; 16:22–25; Ro5:3; 8:17,18; 2Co6:10). Though sometimes we feel like we’re wasting away, this great joy, rooted in eternal glory, renews us day by day (2Co4:16,17). It’s still happening right now. 1 Peter 1:8–9 says, “Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls.” So after all the activities of the holiday season, is this really our experience? May God fill us with great joy that Jesus was born to be our Savior, our Christ, our Lord, to bring us to his kingdom.

To help their faith, in verse 12 the angel gives these shepherds a sign: they would find a baby in a manger. It’s a sign because it’s so weird. Then something spectacular happens. Read verses 13–14. This great angel chorus adds more to what the birth of Jesus means to us. First, his birth is “glory to God in the highest.” God is great for many reasons—he’s so holy, so just, so wise, so awesome, so faithful. But the greatest thing about God is how much he loves sinful people. The Bible says it’s a love that surpasses knowledge (Eph3:19). Though so many people remain blind and hardened, the angels in heaven are still singing God’s praises for his great love revealed in the birth of Jesus.

Second, the birth of Jesus means peace on earth. This “peace” is not just the absence of war between nations and peoples. It’s the absence of hostility and conflict of all kinds, even in the most intimate relationships. This peace begins with peace with God, a peace rooted in the grace of God’s forgiveness. When we learn to live in this grace of God, we cannot but extend the peace he gives us to the people closest to us. Because of God’s grace to us in Jesus, we can forgive even when people hurt us deeply. Because of his grace we can keep on forgiving. And it’s not enabling; we forgive in a way that brings real healing.

Finally, in verse 14 we see one more thing about the birth of Jesus. The blessings of his birth are not just for special people. In verse 10 it says they’re “for all the people.” It says in verse 14: for all “those with whom [God] is pleased.” Who are these people? The Bible says that God is pleased with anyone who has faith in Jesus (Heb11:6; cf. Ro3:26,30; 4:5). We may write some people off, because of various things we don’t like about them. But God is pleased with anyone who has genuine faith in Jesus.

In verses 15–20 we see how the shepherds go from fear to joy. In a nutshell, they move from being passive spectators to active participants. Based on the angel’s words, they go and investigate for themselves (15). When they do, they find Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger, of all places (16)! This unusual scene convinces them that everything the angel said about the baby is true: he’s our promised Messiah, our Savior, our Lord. Then, these shepherds cannot *but* tell anyone they meet about what the angels had told them (17–18). They’re probably telling the story over and over again. In the end, they are glorifying and praising God (20). It’s so beautiful. Luke also highlights the response of Mary. People are “wondering” whereas Mary is “pondering.” It suggests that people are reacting emotionally but Mary is reflecting on what it all means. She’s treasuring these words about her son in her heart (19). It shows we all need to keep thinking about what these words about Jesus mean to us.

Read verses 10–11 again. Praise God who’s still ruling all things in this dark and cruel world. Praise God who sent his Son so humbly so that he can understand us in every way. May God move our hearts with this good news: Jesus was born to be our Savior, to bring us to his kingdom. May he renew this wonderful grace and peace that only he can give in each one of us, through faith in him. May he fill us with this “great joy,” especially as we learn like the shepherds to actively share our faith in Jesus.