

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
12/24/06 (Evening Service)

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. [2] This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] All went to their own towns to be registered. [4] Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. [5] He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. [6] While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

[8] In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. [10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: [11] to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. [12] This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." [13] And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

[14] "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

[15] When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." [16] So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. [17] When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; [18] and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. [19] But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. [20] The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Where do you get your news? It makes a difference you know.

If you watch the Fox network, they tend to cover stories differently from the way they cover them on CNN. And often the network channels vary widely in what major stories they cover and how they cover them. The newspapers are sometimes even more divergent in their viewpoints. Some are unashamedly Democratic or Republican in their slant.

If you want an even more divergent viewpoint, I hear that Al Jazerra TV network is planning to create an English speaking version of itself for an American audience. Their view of fair and balanced reporting is bound to differ from ours. Their assumptions are so different from ours.

The difference between some groups in the Middle East and the West was very apparent this past week when Iran held a conference to discuss the idea that the Holocaust never happened or wasn't as bad as historians have made it out to be. David Duke, the former Ku Klux Klan leader was invited as an expert participant.

What we believe depends upon the source of our news or who controls the news.

In Jesus' day it was apparent who controlled the news and everything else. Caesar was Lord ... or at least he claimed to be. He put people like King Herod in charge, people who were ruthless in their desire to obtain and maintain power. There was no truth but the king's truth in the year that Jesus was born.

And if you think tax time is bad in this country, suppose you had to travel to Atlanta just to register and fill out your form 1040? That's what happened to Jesus' parents. That was the world into which Jesus was born.

People like Caesar and Herod were in charge. They were the newsmakers, and it didn't really matter what anyone else thought. If they said "jump", your only recourse was to ask, "How high?"

If something was going to get done, it would have to come through them. It would have to have their approval. At least that's what they thought. But, God had other ideas.

The news we hear this evening doesn't come from Rome or Jerusalem. Nor does it come from Washington or any other seat of power. It will not be reported "live" on CNN or the Fox news network. Tonight's news is old news but it's still good news because of its source.

Tonight's news comes from heaven, and it's unlike any news you have heard before. Unlike the "if it bleeds it leads" news that dominates the networks, this news is good news, the best news the world has ever heard.

And the source of this news is impeccable. Tonight we have a broadcaster who is even more venerable than Walter Cronkite. God Himself has decided to send His angels and reveal His glory.

The One who is described by most religions as untouchable has decided to reach out and touch the world in the most intimate and amazing way. The Word has become flesh and dwells among us. God Himself is with us.

You see, tonight a new king is born in Bethlehem. A tightly bundled baby lying in an animal's feeding trough is the Messiah. This little child is destined to be Savior and Lord.

You would think that the Caesars and Herods of the world would laugh at such a message. But, they didn't. Crazy King Herod responded in his typically brutal way, trying to kill anyone who got in his way, even if that someone was a child.

There was nothing funny about someone else claiming to be Lord and Savior ... even when they make that claim from a barn and a manger. For the people in power political opponents are always taken seriously, even when the claim seems to be ludicrous.

It turns out that they were right to be worried about the child born on this night. It turns out that the news from heaven was true. Jesus was who the angels said he was ... Messiah ... Lord ... Savior ... the very Son of God.

He was the light who shone in the darkness, and though the world still tries even to extinguish this light, the light that shone on that first Christmas morn

still shines today. The darkness will not have the last word. The Caesars and the Herods of this world will not have the last word.

The glory of God as revealed in Jesus Christ will have the last word.

This is such a season of contrasts. The lights this year are brighter than ever and some lights even dance to computerized music. (Some of you may have received U Tube e-mails that show those light displays.) But, despite the plethora of Christmas carols and well wishers, many people are unable to sing tonight. And the darkness inside some is so great, even the Osborne Family light show at Disney won't cheer them up.

Like the Shepherds long ago, they are tending to business in the darkness of their night, not expecting anything to ever change. They are just blue collar workers working the night shift. But, in their isolated darkness a light shines and there is news proclaimed from heaven.

Now, as was true long ago, when people are used to living in darkness, bright lights can be very disturbing. The bright light of God's glory and salvation is frightening to the shepherds when it comes to them out of the black of the night sky. In fact they are so scared that they want to crawl under the nearest rock.

This is clear in the Greek text. The words could be transliterated "mega" and "phobos" so the literal translation might be a mega phobia or a really, really big fear!

But, the angels do not leave the trembling shepherds in their fearful state. These humble shepherds are the first ones to hear the message that others will hear down through the ages, "Don't be afraid."

This news, this good news that comes from heaven will take away your fear, and this gospel is not just for the shepherds who lived long ago. No, the voice from heaven tells the shepherds,

"This is good news; this is joyful news for all people." All people. All.

This is good news for you and this is good news for me.

The angels first sang their glorious song for the shepherds, but they were singing for our benefit as well.

We talked this morning about how Christmas is a season based upon song. There's a reason for that. When the news is this good and this unexpected, there's nothing to do but sing and dance and cheer. I guess there is a reason to have all those Christmas parties after all. If we really hear the good news we will want to celebrate!

We thought we were alone. We thought that the dark night of the soul would never end. But, we were wrong. Out of pure grace God sent His Son into the world so that we might know the truth that sets us free.

God loves us; God forgives us; God saves us.

Who would have thought such a message would have come from heaven in the middle of the night to shepherds? What kind of way is this to broadcast such important news?

It turns out that it's God's way. God has a history of choosing unusual places and unusual people to be his prophets. As the apostle Paul once put it, God does that to show that the power comes not from us but from above. The news of salvation always comes from heaven to earth and not the other way round.

And so, in a dusty little insignificant town called Bethlehem and in an isolated field in the middle of the night, the message of hope is proclaimed to all people. When you get your news from heaven, word travels fast, and the words are effective. After all it was through the Word of God that the universe was created.

When God speaks things change; God's words change things forever. And those words can still change you even tonight.

Maybe God first came into the world in this humble way to let us know that there's no place where He is not present. There's no place too remote and there's no person too weak to be a recipient of the Good News.

He's present even in the lives of those people whom we sometimes pity and even ridicule. He's present here and now for us all.

Ken Davis is a Christian speaker who uses humor to make his message more effective. But, he tells of a time when, as a high school student, he used his humor to hurt someone who was weaker than him.

He said that when you don't understand that God loves you and accepts you just as you are, you spend your life trying to prove your worth. And one way that you do that, especially when you're in high school is by making fun of someone else, stepping on someone else in order to lift yourself higher.

That's what he did one year at summer camp. There was a young boy at camp that year that had physical and mental challenges. He walked in an unusual way and talked in an unusual way. So Ken decided to imitate this boy, and he was good at it.

He could walk in the same strange way that the little boy walked, and he could imitate his speech impediment. The kids loved it. They laughed and laughed, and Ken felt better about himself at this young man's expense.

Ken said that the real reason he was so cruel to this boy was that he had been teased himself, and now he was trying to lift himself up higher through teasing this boy. And so he did it all week long. Unmercifully he teased the little boy.

Finally, the time arrived for the kids to go home. They were all lined up with their sleeping bags and clothes waiting for the bus to arrive. And about that time he heard this little boy shouting as he ran toward the camp. Ken was ready to imitate the hapless child once again. This would be one more chance to gain favor in the eyes of the group at his expense.

And so Ken strained to hear what Bernie had to say so that he might imitate it. And as Bernie drew near he heard him shout, "Good news. Good news." What on earth was this all about? And the shouting grew louder as he breathlessly made his way into camp. "Good news. Good news."

And Ken said that with fire in his eyes Bernie looked at everyone and said, “Good news. Good news. Jesus loves me.”

And then Bernie was off to tell the rest of the camp. He could hear his voice as he made his way from place to place, “Good news. Good news. Jesus loves me.”

Ken didn't make fun of the boy that day. Ken said that for the first time he really understood the good news because of an evangelist named Bernie. Bernie knew that God loved him, just as he was and that made him excited and happy. He didn't have to prove anything to anyone. Jesus loved him. And that filled him with unspeakable joy.

And now Ken knew. He didn't have to make fun of other people. He didn't have to try and gain power by stepping over others. God loved Ken, just as he was ... even when he didn't act like God wanted him to act.

Good news. Good news. I bring you a message that will take away your fear, fill your heart with joy and change you forever. God has sent his Son into the world not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

Good news. Jesus loves you.

God loves Bernie, and God loves Ken and God loves you and me. You don't have to prove anything to anyone. God in Christ has already done His saving work.

One commentator said that the Christmas message begins with:

- Parents who are poor
- A mother in labor with no place to go
- A newborn child with no crib for a bed
- Visitors who come to see the child who have no influence

She concludes, “So you see, there is no reason for fear. There is no barrier to overcome. No person is too poor, or too uneducated, or too insignificant to come to the Christ child. He is sent by the God who is vulnerable. Such a wonderful truth can only be contained in an open, receiving adoring heart.”

Garrison Keillor, in one of his reports on life in Lake Wobegon, was describing the activity that occurs in the mythical Minnesota town about this time of year. Keillor admits that many of the pageants and special services are a bit silly.

Why would these ordinary people, who have no acting training and not much musical ability, join in these Yuletide productions? He said, “Because it’s a great story, and we just want to be a part of it.”

Garrison had it right. It is a great story, and we are a part of it.

The news from heaven is news for Lake Wobegon, and Kissimmee and St. Cloud and even little Holopaw. It’s a great story, and we are a part of it.

By the grace of God, we can say with a trembling voice, “Jesus loves me.”

And the only thing left for us to do is (as the hymn puts it) “come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn king.”

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN