

YOU'RE INVITED

SERIES: GOOD NEWS, GREAT JOY



Catalog No. 20211219

Luke 2:8-20

Fourth Message

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December 19, 2021

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My wife and I celebrated our seventh anniversary this year. Every year, I reflect on the season of planning our wedding. My concluding thought is always, “That was fun, but I’m so glad we don’t have to do it again.” Why? Because planning is a nightmare. And I like planning. Just ask anyone who works with the High School ministry. I have spreadsheets for days!

One of the things I particularly disliked about planning our wedding was making the guest list. You start by writing a list of everyone you might want to invite. You begin with the wedding party, family, and then close friends. You also have to think about the relatives you haven’t seen in years—second cousins (also known as strangers you need to hug during the holidays), co-workers, roommates, etc. There seems to be an endless number of people you can invite. You also have to think through who gets a plus-one—is it spouses only, engaged, or dating?

You create a giant list and then pare down from there because maybe your venue or budget doesn’t fit as many people as you want to invite or could invite. So, you have to decide who is invited, and at some point, you have to draw the line—everyone above is going to be invited, and everyone after is not.

Perhaps the idea of making a guest list for a wedding doesn’t resonate with you. Even still, we have probably all received an invitation to an event, whether formally or informally. You have been included on someone’s guest list, and probably for most of us, we’ve also been left off of someone’s list a few times. Perhaps you even expected to receive an invitation, but for whatever reason, it never came.

One of the ideas I’d like to explore this morning is that of invitation: who is included? Who is not? Who makes the cut?

We’re going to find ourselves right in the middle of the Christmas story.

Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem for the census being taken. They have traveled some 70 miles from Nazareth. They look for a place to stay when they arrive, but they cannot find a proper place because the city has swelled with people coming to be registered. They resort to something like a stable or cave, where Mary gives birth to Jesus. Nearby is a group of people who are the unlikely recipients of an announcement and invitation to meet this Jesus. Let’s pick up this story in Luke 2:8.

About the shepherds

Luke 2:8:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

There were shepherds on the outskirts of the town of Bethlehem. We have to understand something about shepherds that is often overlooked: they were not on anyone’s A-list. Shepherds were near or at the bottom of the social ladder of their time. They spent all their time on the outskirts of towns chasing sheep. They were considered a little odd and on the fringe of society. Culturally, shepherds often couldn’t get to the temple for sacrifices and feasts because they couldn’t leave their flock unattended. Nor could they fully observe the Sabbath because sheep require attention seven days a week. So, in Jewish culture, shepherds were thought to be unclean.

If that weren’t enough, shepherds were also thought of as untrustworthy and unreliable to the point that they couldn’t testify in court. They were somewhat the lowest of the low. When you were a child, you did not aspire to grow up and be a shepherd; this is not the job you would’ve wanted.

Luke 2:9:

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.

The shepherds were out in the fields when suddenly, an angel appeared. It was dark, but now they were surrounded by light. Shepherds aren't accustomed to visitors, so anyone arriving would frighten them. It's an angel that appears, so they are especially startled.

Luke 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. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The angel says, don't be scared. "I bring you good news." People love to receive good news. You don't usually run into anyone who says, "I'm having a tough time this week because I've been getting so much good news." Usually, good news brightens your day, puts you in a good mood, and causes you to want to tell other people, "Guess what I found out today?"

On the flip side, the bad news is news you don't want to hear—you put off knowing about it. News is like the mail: you've got good mail and bad mail. The cable bill, utility bill, the purple envelope from the county (property taxes), etc.—I'll open those later. But good mail is an invitation, a Christmas card, a check, an Amazon package, etc. We want to open these things right away because they bring good news.

This angel is bringing the shepherds good news. Not only is this news good, but it's going to bring great joy. Often, when we hear the word joy, we think of happiness.

Maybe, in our culture, we talk more about happiness than we do about joy. But happiness and the joy being spoken of here are different.

A common phrase with the word "happiness" is "the pursuit of happiness." There is a movie title with that phrase. "Happiness" is in our constitution. "The pursuit of happiness" communicates that happiness is constantly moving, and we have to continue to try and get there.

If I asked you right now what would make you most happy, you might say a new phone or a car, or maybe you just want to be done with this year.

But if I asked you the same question next week or next month, you might say something different. And you would definitely say something different if you received whatever you mentioned first because happiness is the

pursuit of this constantly moving target. There are so many things that promise happiness.

Cybiko

When I was 12 years old, I wanted a Cybiko for Christmas. Cybiko was a Russian handheld computer marketed toward teens. For whatever reason, I thought I needed this. I thought I would have so much fun with it and be so happy. Cybiko included games. You could wirelessly communicate with people (though I later found out that it was only under 300 feet, and no one in my neighborhood had another one, so I sat in many empty chat rooms). It even had an attachment that would allow it to play mp3 files.

I was one of the lucky few who got Cybiko for Christmas! I was so excited. I ripped it out of its packaging, powered it on, and started to explore its digital interface. However, after a few days, I discovered that this device was lame. The games were basic and left a lot to be desired, there was never anyone in range to communicate with, and the mp3 player required an extra memory card priced around \$50 for a 32MB card that could fit about nine songs. It doesn't matter what nine songs you pick; they get old pretty fast. What I thought would bring me happiness and enjoyment didn't last very long—probably only about nine songs long.

In most ways, Cybiko was a letdown, and it ended up in the drawer with the rest of the obsolete tech—the drawer in which you keep all your old cell phones.

How many things in our lives have we had this same experience with? Not with devices, but some of the bigger things we hope for: promotions, bigger salaries, recognition for something, accomplishments, or an acceptance or offer letter. We may think, "If I just got that, then I would be happy," only to find out that a few days, weeks, or months later that it doesn't fix or fill what we thought we were missing. So we move on to the next thing, then the next thing, and the next thing because none of them can bring us lasting fulfillment.

The great joy this angel is announcing is unlike that. This joy doesn't have to do with temporary fading things or temporary discomfort. The joy being spoken of is true contentment—it's a state, perspective, and assurance of hope, peace, and love. This good news will not only be for now but also for tomorrow and all eternity. This joy will not fade; this joy will not be fleeting. This joy will not fall short of its promise to sustain.

For whom is this good news of great joy intended? For the shepherds? For a select few? For the people that make the cut line on a guest list?

No, the angel says that this news of great joy will be for all the people.

This is for everybody! And the angel is proving that by telling these shepherds *first*. If someone in town had wanted to spread news, they wouldn't think to themselves, "I have to go and tell the shepherds!" They were, at best, an afterthought. But the angel comes to them, and this is unexpected. They are unexpected receivers of the good news.

This good news is: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

In this announcement, the angel says, "you." Earlier, he said, "I bring *you* good news," and now a Savior is born "unto *you*." This is a personal announcement to the shepherds. In our understanding of how the rest of Jesus' life and the New Testament unfolds, we know this is also an announcement to us. This is good news for you and me because a Saviour is born for us.

God is not a distant, impersonal God who tries to keep his distance from people. He is a personal God who communicates love and hope to people, and that love and hope are realized in the person of Jesus, who is the Savior born for us. Jesus is a savior not only from the constant pursuit and chase of the next biggest and greatest thing but a savior who reconciles us to God and to an eternity that our hearts truly desire.

We don't need a new iPhone, a new car, more money, or even a Cybiko; what we need is a savior—someone to save us from our sins and our attempts to make up for or cover them on our own; someone to restore peace in our hearts and peace with God. This is what is being announced to the shepherds.

An invitation extended

The angel doesn't stop at simply announcing the good news. He extends an invitation to meet the object of the announcement: Jesus.

Luke 2: 12-14:

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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,

and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

The angel describes how to find this newborn savior, and then there's heavenly praise. The night started as usual for the shepherds, but by the will of God, they went through an amazing experience—they have heard the good news, they have seen angels, and now there is this open invitation to meet the Savior. This is miraculous and *unexpected* because shepherds don't get invited. But this angel is sent by God and communicates the good news to them and tells them how to find the Savior.

We all need to hear and know that Jesus invites everyone. Everyone is invited to meet Jesus: rich, poor, young, old, popular, unpopular, all colors, all backgrounds, employed or unemployed, housed or unhoused. He invites all of us into his presence. There is no prerequisite to coming to Jesus other than recognizing your need and realizing his sufficiency to meet it. Your life doesn't have to look a certain way before you come to Jesus. You don't need to "fix" anything before coming to him. You don't need to dress a certain way or sound a certain way. All we need to do is recognize our need and realize his sufficiency. Everyone is invited to meet Jesus.

A picture of the good news

Luke 2:15:

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."

The shepherds' night started in a usual way, but now they've seen angels, they've heard good news, and they have received an invitation. They believe the angel and decide to travel to Bethlehem.

Luke 2:16:

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them

in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The shepherds go quickly and find Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus just as they had been told. The text doesn't give us details, but I expect there was quite the conversation that unfolded when the shepherds arrived. They told Mary and Joseph all they had experienced and all that the angel had told them. This would have been amazing for them to hear and certainly was part of what Mary "treasured... in her heart."

The shepherds heard the good news, accepted the invitation to meet Jesus, and found him as they were told. What is their response? They make known all that had been said to them concerning this savior. The shepherds talk about Jesus and share about who he is.

Our account of the shepherds ends with them returning to their flock. They go back to their work, their sheep, and their lives. What is different is they are now glorifying and praising God—they have joy. Before this night, they may have had little to acknowledge or praise God for. They could have very well been angry or bitter about their lives. They may have wished that things would have worked out differently for themselves. But that's all changed! They still are shepherds, and people's view of them has probably not changed, but has their attitude towards life and hope changed? Absolutely! They now have a new hope, a new perspective, and a new eternity because they met the Savior.

What does this mean for us?

Maybe you are here this morning or watching online, and you've been working day after day, and this idea of good news seems foreign. You are doing your best to provide for those you care for and yourself. You're pursuing happiness and trying to fill this desire to be whole or content. Even with all the effort, your heart is longing for more. There is good news for you—a savior is born for you. He didn't come to add to your burden or add responsibility to your plate. He came to give you a peace, perspective, and hope beyond the things, the work, and the pursuit.

Jesus says, "... my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:30). The burden of the world is heavy;

the yoke of the pursuit is heavy and always pulls you back, but the yoke of Jesus is light. He humbly comes into this world as a savior for you and me. If you have not met Jesus, I invite you to experience the love of God by accepting his invitation. God so loved you that he sent his Son. When we place our faith in him, he gives us life and takes residence inside of us.

If you have never placed your faith in Jesus or if the idea of having a personal relationship with him is foreign to you, I invite you to speak to me or one of the other pastors about what that means.

If you're here this morning and you've experienced the good news, you've experienced the joy of having a savior. Make known the love of God by sharing about Jesus. Speak of his goodness in your life and of how he's healed you. Share of the joy you have because of him. Invite people to experience his body at your home, a retreat, or here at PBC.

I've shared before that I did not grow up in the church. I didn't come to faith until high school. But as I look back at my own faith journey, I see faithful people that showed the love of God to me. I think of the family that lived across the street whose son was one of my friends. They invited me into their home and modeled faith and prayer to me. The family invited me to vacations and retreats. Though I didn't respond to the Lord then, they planted seeds of faith in my life.

I think of Nick, a fringe friend I had in high school who told me about a youth group he had been experiencing. Ultimately, he invited me to a retreat where I finally responded to an invitation to meet Jesus. I think of the leaders that included me (even though I looked different from them and the other students).

The amazing thing is that the God of the universe wants to reconcile people to himself and uses you and me as a catalyst of invitation for that to happen. The exciting thing is we have the opportunity to play a role in someone's life and eternity changing. Experience the love of God by accepting his invitation. If you already have, make known his love to those around you.