

“Good News for All People”

Luke 2: 8-15

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Text: Luke 2:8-15 (NIV) ⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to 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. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” Isn't this interesting to contemplate? The Angel said he had good news “for all the people.” And what was that “Good News?” That a Savior...*the* Savior...had been born. But what if the people...many of them...most of them...did not even know they needed a Savior? A friend told me that he went in for a routine physical feeling just great. At one point, the doctor said “Well...you’ll be relieved to know that we can do bypass surgery and save your heart!” Up until that moment, the man had no idea that his heart even needed to be saved! What do you think? If most people had overheard the angel say to the shepherds “Good news...the Savior has been born...” would they respond with “Savior? Who needs a Savior?” Think of it this way: what do most of your neighbors think that Christmas is all about? And just as importantly... why was it good news for **ALL PEOPLE?** Before proceeding, let us pray.

If people groups on Planet Earth have had one thing in common since the entrance of sin in the Garden of Eden, it is this: tension between them with each thinking somehow...they are better than the others. When we first came to Michigan we met some folks from Holland, and we heard that boorish expression “If you ain’t Dutch, you ain’t much!” Everyone laughs. Except some Dutch people mean it. But don’t we all? It was not just that the Nazis thought the Jews were sub-human. Jews have often thought non-Jews were sub-human. Calling them dogs. We all know that many Arabs think the Jews should be exterminated and some Americans think the Arabs are hopeless low-lives whom they want to avoid. We’ve all walked into settings either rich or poor or black or white and felt we simply did not belong. That these were not “our kind of

people.” But...even if their behaviors were raucous and rude....were they worthless human beings?

Racism in America was so pervasive during the Civil War that when Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, some of his Generals told him “Fine. But don’t bring those Africans into our Army.” Eighty years later, when World War Two came around Japanese-American soldiers had to train in segregated units as did African-American soldiers. Racism and group hatred was and is in every area of life. When Jackie Robinson broke into baseball with the old Brooklyn Dodgers he could not stay in the hotel with the white players. When I was in seminary, I took a class called “Christianity and the Problem of Racism.” I remember thinking “Well, I’m not a racist but since many other people are maybe I’ll learn something in this class.” But I learned something alright. I learned about myself. One day the Lord brought to mind an incident when I was about six. Out shopping with my mother...walking down the street...a black lady with her little boy was walking towards us and my mother said quietly... “Don’t look at them honey. Just keep walking.” They were black and poor and lived in a crummy neighborhood and we were white and rich and had a swimming pool so...we were better people...I guess.

When an Italian-American kid named Joe Bellino won the Heisman Trophy in 1960 playing football for the Naval Academy, some men were surprised because he was not a WASP. When a Pema Indian named Ira Hayes helped raise the flag at Iwo Jima he was a hero...until that Indian Marine was sent on tour and some places would not let him in *because* he was an Indian. The list goes on and on. Whole communities in every part of the world isolate themselves from other groups because they think they are better or more refined. Yes, people share many important cultural things with people of their own group...so it is natural for Indian people to live in communities with others from India...and the Polish and Germans do the same. But when we do that...when we coalesce with others we inevitably think that our way is not only the best way but that others might somehow be inferior.

We are nicer people. More valuable people. We have it here. We’ve had it in the church at times. I’ve heard the “N” used from people who claim to be Christians and I’ve heard gays called “Queers” with a chuckle. So we isolate and think “Well, God loves those others and he can have them!” Just ride around and look at the gated communities in Brighton and the starter mansions and see how important it is to keep away from unwanted people. I’m the worst. I can’t stand playing golf on some cheap courses where the unwashed masses come out and drink beer and shout while they are playing. They are often rude. They are rude; there’s no sense denying it. And I am free to play elsewhere. But here is the question: in the sight of God, even if they are rude and crude...are they worthless human beings?

Doesn’t sound like a very cheerful opening for Christmas Day but I think it might be what Christmas is all about. The child born that day so long ago became a man living without sin.

And there is great irony in that. Because the child born that day was a Jew whose sinless life and Crucifixion and Resurrection has undoubtedly provided eternal life for millions of people...including anti-Semites who love him as Savior but would not want him for a neighbor! And as a Jew, Jesus saw racism and bigotry first hand. So much so that one day he told his disciples:

Matthew 5:22 (NIV) ²² “But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

Interesting. When we will not release anger we are showing our pride at being offended. But when we say to someone “Raca” we are in danger of being charged by the spiritual authorities. “Raca” is a word that meant “empty” ... worthless. So, Jesus said if I am so filled up with myself that I think I can label another human being “Raca” I would be saying to that person “You are a worthless human being!” And if I call the other person a “fool” ...the word for “moron” I will be guilty enough in my pride to go to Hell itself! Jesus was totally and completely dismissing the human barriers and saying that every single person from every single race is an image-bearer of God! The only time Jesus ever seemed to share such racism was one day when he tested a Gentile woman to draw out her faith. We find that passage in the Gospel of Matthew. It’s a great passage totally congruent with the Angel’s word that the Savior was for all people. The woman was from Canaan! Actually, it was a way of saying she was a non-Jew but in the Old Testament the Canaanites were a people who had all kinds of false Gods and who sacrificed children and virgins in the fire to appease capricious and vicious imaginary “gods!” No Jew would bring a Canaanite home for dinner under any circumstances. But this woman approaches Jesus and uses the moment to teach his disciples that God their Father actually loves these people. So, he draws her out:

Matthew 15:21-28 (NIV) ²¹ Leaving that place, Jesus withdrew to the region of Tyre and Sidon. ²² A Canaanite woman from that vicinity came to him, crying out, ‘Lord, Son of David, have mercy on me! My daughter is suffering terribly from demon-possession.’ ²³ Jesus did not answer a word. So his disciples came to him and urged him, ‘Send her away, for she keeps crying out after us.’ ²⁴ He answered, ‘I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel.’ ²⁵ The woman came and knelt before him. ‘Lord, help me!’ she said. ²⁶ He replied, ‘It is not right to take the children’s bread and toss it to their dogs.’

That was exactly...EXACTLY... the response that the disciples of Jesus were expecting from him to the woman. Inside they are saying “Yes!! Get rid of her!” But let’s listen in...

²⁷ "Yes, Lord," she said, "but even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸ Then Jesus answered, "Woman, you have great faith! Your request is granted." And her daughter was healed from that very hour.

All Jesus wants to hear is that she believes in him and will humble herself before him...because God is a God of love who became a human being mysteriously and uniquely and the Angel said his coming will be "Good news for all people!" But let's go back to the text. Look with again at what the Angel said:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

This was not so much a promise that every human being could be saved for eternity...although God does desire all to be saved [1 Timothy 2:4] but a promise that salvation would be offered to all people groups! We cannot over state how hard it was for the Jews to grasp that after the Resurrection...the Christian faith...eternal life in Christ Jesus...was available to people outside of the Jewish nation. It took a supernatural vision in the life of Peter to make this clear. We find it in the Book of Acts:

Acts 10:11-15 (NIV) ¹¹ He saw heaven opened and something like a large sheet being let down to earth by its four corners. ¹² It contained all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles of the earth and birds of the air. ¹³ Then a voice told him, "Get up, Peter. Kill and eat." ¹⁴ "Surely not, Lord!" Peter replied. "I have never eaten anything impure or unclean." ¹⁵ The voice spoke to him a second time, "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean."

Peter took a day or so to realize that the permission to consider certain foods clean was really permission to call all people groups clean. He later said to some Gentiles as he entered their house:

Acts 10:34-35 (NIV) ³⁴ [Then Peter began to speak:] "I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism ³⁵ but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right."

But Peter had a very hard time explaining to his Jewish friends that now non-Jews would be welcome to share in the Kingdom of God. And eventually they would come to see that would include Africans and Arabs and Indians and men and women of all tribes and nations...that these distinctions would be meaningless because God's elect people would be brothers and sisters in Christ. All people groups would be welcome.

But this invitation to come to Christ regardless of which people group you are from...should not be misunderstood. While it is true that there is no place in the Body of Christ for discrimination based on ethnicity or color or status, we must live according to the Word of God or we cannot be part of the true church. I recently read an article where a man sarcastically mocked Christians

for hating all gays. But he does not understand that the invitation to belong to Christ does not mean anything is acceptable in the way of lifestyle. If we learn that someone is in the church and taking part in this family of Christ but they live in sexual immorality or drunkenness or thievery, they must be confronted and, if they will not repent, they must be asked to leave. Actually, the church leadership must not judge based on ethnicity *but it must judge* behavioral patterns. That is why Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth:

1 Corinthians 5:9-13 (NIV) ⁹ I have written you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people-- ¹⁰ not at all meaning the people of this world who are immoral, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters. In that case you would have to leave this world. ¹¹ But now I am writing you that you must not associate with anyone who calls himself a brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man do not even eat. ¹² What business is it of mine to judge those outside the church? Are you not to judge those inside? ¹³ God will judge those outside. "Expel the wicked man from among you."

I have taken the time to clarify that because I do not want to be misunderstood. God will not have his church discriminate based on color or wealth or status. But we must discern persistent sinful behavior that reveals if a person is not truly in Christ. For their sake as well as purity in the church, such people must be confronted. But never with hate. The angel said:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."

But if I was the devil, I would have spiritually darkened people show up claiming to be Christians carrying signs that say "God Hates Fags!" Then those who do not know what the Word of God says will be glad to insist that Christians are filled with hate. God does hate. God hates sin not sinners. The Word of God says thru the Prophet Ezekiel:

Ezekiel 33:11 (NIV) "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways!"

We've seen some bad guys die lately. John McCain said he hopes that Kim Young Ill from North Korea is in the hottest place in Hell. Many people did high fives when our Navy Seals killed Osama bin Laden. A sense of justice is felt at such times. I understand. But do I weep at the thought that a human being made in the image of God will be eternally lost? And how am I to understand a God who loves all people and could save all...but does not? How can He who is love be so hard to understand? We cannot explain these things. But perhaps...maybe...in the coming year we can ask the Holy Spirit to show us someone we do not care for and who gives no evidence of loving Jesus...and perhaps we can ask the Holy Spirit to give us a chance to invite that person not first to Cornerstone but first to our own homes for a dinner and conversation.

Perhaps, starting with me, we can say to God “Please Lord..make 2012 a year in which I really begin to love all people as you love them. In Jesus’ name. Amen”