

Good News of Great Joy!

Luke 2:8-20

Series: *Advent 2017*

Introduction: Take your Bibles and join me in Luke 2, Luke chapter 2.

James Montgomery grew up in Scotland and then Ireland in the late 1700's and early 1800's. His father, John, was the only Moravian pastor in all of Scotland, but he and his wife were especially burdened to take the Gospel to the island of Barbados. Their deep commitment to Christ fueled their deep desire to spread the good news of great joy which the Gospel brings. And so, at the age of 6, James' parents enrolled him in a Moravian settlement in Ireland and then sailed for Barbados. James never saw them again. The death of his parents in Barbados left James with nothing, which produced a tumultuous coming of age. By the age of 20 he had dropped out of school, failed as an apprentice, and found himself eking out an existence and trying to find something at which he could make a living. In his early 20's he found himself working for the local newspaper in Sheffield, England, and he finally found his niche as a writer. Eventually James was able to purchase the newspaper business and he used his platform to promote and publish editorials which were not well received by local officials. Two different times he found himself thrown in prison for his views, but each time he emerged with more popularity than before. He used this new-found fame to trumpet his favorite issues. Chief among them was the Gospel. Even though James had lost his parents in service to Christ, he remained devoted to his Lord and to the Scriptures. He was especially active in the cause of foreign missions and in the British Bible Society. It seems that even though he knew great pain in life, he knew even greater joy in a good God!

By the age of 45 he was the most respected citizen of Sheffield. And on Christmas Eve morning, in 1816, he found himself reading the text which is before us this morning – Luke 2. Verse 8 says this.

James Montgomery's heart was captivated by verse 13. These heralding angels, which proclaimed the glory of God in great praise to the lowly shepherds, grabbed his attention. As an act of meditation and worship he picked up his pen and began writing – which is what he knew best. By the end of the day his Christmas poem was being read in his Christmas Eve paper. The first 2 verses of his poem went like this:¹

Angels from the realms of glory,

¹ Taken from Robert J. Morgan, *Then Sings My Soul: 150 of the World's Greatest Hymn Stories*, pg. 91.

Wing your flight o'er all the earth;
Ye who sang creation's story,
Now proclaim Messiah's birth.
Come and worship, come and worship;
Worship Christ, the newborn King!

Shepherds in the fields abiding,
Watching o'er your flocks by night;
God with man is now residing,
Yonder shines the infant Light.
Come and worship, come and worship;
Worship Christ, the newborn King!

Within 5 years James' poem had been set to music and was being sung in churches. And it has stood the test of time as one of the most fitting expressions of praise in celebration of Christ's coming to Earth. The great joy of the good news of the Gospel captured James' heart and compelled great praise from his pen. And so, 201 years later, we gather on Christmas Eve and worship the same amazing God who has given us good news of great joy. Like James Montgomery, my heart has been captured with the goodness of God as seen in this passage. What God has done in sending Jesus to Earth and announcing it to the shepherds and magnifying that announcement with a multitude of angels – all of this magnifies the great goodness and kindness of our Lord.

And that is what I want to do for just a few minutes here – I want to point you to the unimaginable goodness of our great God as seen in Luke 2. If Christmas is anything, it should be a celebration of the great goodness and lovingkindness of God. He has provided a Savior for mankind because He is good. He has made that known to us because he is good. He has given us a voice to praise Him because He is good.

As we have walked through Luke's narrative over the last few weeks we have seen the joy of a God who has worked through strong and strange providence to bring the sure provision of a Savior. He has kept His word of promise spoken over thousands of years, and as His Son takes on flesh, there is a cause for great joy! That is what the angel announces to the shepherds in verse 10. He is bringing them good news of mega-joy – a full to the rim and abundantly overflowing kind of joy. An unending and unremitting joy. A joy so great that words cease to be effective in describing it. This news is so good that it produces a mega-joy! And this is fitting. Jesus will tell us later in his ministry that there is joy Heaven over 1 sinner who repents and believes and is saved. So, there is obviously indescribably great joy in Heaven over the 1 Savior who came to provide that salvation. And it is this great joy of heaven that we see splashing over onto earth in this text. And all of this is because of the great mercy and kindness of God. We have great joy at

Christmas because God has mercifully and kindly provided Jesus for us to save us from our sins. Consider these ways in which we see God's great kindness and mercy in this scene in Luke 2.

God's great kindness is seen in:

1. The Recipients of the Good News

- a. God's great kindness is seen in whom God chooses to send this message of the birth of His Son to first. He sends the birth announcement to the lowliest of the low. These shepherds were the last to know anything of any significance. They held the most common of occupations, and one of the most unskilled jobs in the Kingdom. They were political nobodies, and power nobodies, and social nobodies. They were the lowest common denominator of society.
- b. And yet, here they are as the recipients of God's one and only angelic visitation about the birth of Jesus to announce it after it happens. Now, God is God so He can choose anyone in the world to send an angel to, to receive this good news of great joy. But he doesn't choose the political elite, the kings or governors. He doesn't choose the militarily powerful – the generals or the captains. He doesn't choose the religious ruling class. No, he chooses the shepherds – base, smelly, common, and ceremonially unclean shepherds! And this is an act of God's great mercy and kindness. This is a key part of his Gospel – He loves to bring this good news of great joy to those who know that they need good news. The powerful and elite and prestigious are often too sold on themselves as their own Savior. But the lowly, the humble, the common, the ones struggling to make it through life – they know their sins, they know the wrath of God against their sins, and they are ready to hear of a way of salvation that is outside of them rather than inside of them. They are ready, like these shepherds for an announcement that a baby has been born and He will save his people from their sins! God delights in saving the lowest of the low. We who are nothing have been given good news of great joy which is everything! God is full of great kindness!

2. The Heralds of the Good News

- a. We also see this in the heralds of the good news. God is so kind to send one angel at first and then after the initial message is given to send the multitude of angels. The first angel comes with authority and power, and a bright light shines around him. This is then confirmed by the great multitude of angels who suddenly appeared and proclaimed the glory of God together. This is thousands upon thousands of angels who appear here – possibly millions. See the merciful restraint of God here. The King of Kings has come to earth. God himself has taken on flesh through the incarnation. The whole earth should be full of the manifest glory of God here. All sinners should be consumed by the great holiness of the babe lying in the manger. But God shows merciful restraint. That which is appropriate is covered over by that which is necessary. Mankind needed a Savior before it needed the full glory of the King of Kings. We needed a God who would

humble Himself to the point of death, even the death on a cross, so that we could be saved from our sins and spend the rest of eternity adoring the greatness and the glory of our Savior.

- b. And so instead of filling the earth with His manifest glory which would have consumed all of mankind because of sin, God mercifully restrains the celebration and barely pulls back the curtain separating Heaven and Earth and shows just a sliver of His own glory and of his joy over the birth of His Son on Earth! There is great kindness and goodness displayed by our Lord here.
3. **The Confirmation of the Good News**
- a. We also see this goodness in the confirmation of the Good News.
 - b. *To the Shepherds*
 - i. It was enough for God to declare this good news of great joy, and to bring that message to the lowest of the low in a display of merciful restraint, but he also gives a sign to the shepherds to confirm this good news. So, the strange providence of God which led to Joseph and Mary not finding a place to stay and having to set up camp in some kind of animal shelter, is now the sign given to these shepherds. They will know that this baby just announced is who the angel said he is by the fact that these shepherds will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. This strange providence of God now becomes a sign to the shepherds that what they have heard is indeed from God. Wherever Jesus was born, it would seem apparent to me from the text that the shepherds knew where it was, and it was unique enough for them to see this as a confirmation of the angel's words. I personally think it was a cave on the outskirts of Bethlehem that these shepherds had used before to shelter their sheep for the night. I think Jesus was laying in an animal feeding trough that these shepherds had seen and used before. But the text doesn't say that, it just says that wherever Jesus was it was confirmation to them that all they had heard about him was true. God was so very good to give them a confirming sign.
 - c. *To Joseph & Mary*
 - i. And they are not the only ones who know the kindness and goodness of God in this way. The Shepherds coming and sharing their story of the angel's message with them was a confirming sign to Joseph and Mary. Up to this point they had been the only ones who had heard directly from God about this son who was to be born to them. But now that He is born, God speaks through the angel to these shepherds to tell them about Jesus, and this must have been extremely encouraging and confirming to Mary and Joseph. They had been doubted and dismissed by so many others, but now here are several men telling them that angels came in great light to proclaim to them the glory of God as seen in this humble birth. How kind

of God to give Joseph and Mary a sign confirming all they had been told already. Indeed, their son was God's Messiah, God's Son!

4. The Clarity of the Good News

- a. Lastly, we see this great kindness of God in the clarity of the Good News which the angels bring to the shepherds. They cannot mistake what is being announced to them. It is a message of good news which will bring great joy that will be for all people. In verse 11 the angel tells them why it is such good news of great joy. There is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. In other words, this baby born is born in the city of David as a son of David who will one day sit on the throne of David as Israel's Messiah – Israel's Christ. Not only is He their future King, but He is also their Savior and their Lord. It is a package deal. It all comes together – if this baby is the Messiah, then in God's system he must be the Savior, and if He is the Savior he must be the Lord.
- b. This message from the first angel is so clear that he is accompanied by the great host of angels who declare the great glory of God in the highest and the great peace of God on earth. To paraphrase these angels in verse 14 they are declaring the most high glory for the most high God who has greatly humbled Himself through the incarnation for the purpose of saving mankind from their sin. The contrast in verse 14 literally reads – In the highest heights – glory, and in the lowest lows – peace! Jesus came from the highest heights of glory to the lowest lows of human existence so that God could shine the kindness of His good favor upon those with whom He is pleased. This is not a statement of God giving peace to those who earn it, but rather a statement of sovereign grace. God brings Christ to be the Savior of those whom He has graciously chosen to save to Himself through Jesus Christ. The question here is not, “Why does God show favor to some and not to others?”, but rather the most appropriate question is “Why does God show favor to anyone at all?” That is the real mystery of the incarnation, and in this we see the great goodness and lovingkindness of our Lord made known!

Conclusion: Do you know this great goodness of God? Have you seen this babe lying in a manger as more than a generic Savior of mankind? Do you know Him as the Savior of your soul? Do you agree with God about your need for a redeemer? Can you admit that your rebellion against God deserves His eternal punishment, and can you humble yourself and look to this Jesus as your only hope to save you from that just wrath of God? Jesus didn't come in this manger in Bethlehem so that we could have a holiday full of great food and fun family gatherings and awesome gifts. No, He came so that we could be saved from our sin so that He would be eternally glorified. His birth will soon be followed by His death on a Cross to pay for the sins of mankind. Do you know this salvation? If not, you must turn to Jesus today. You must repent of your sin and you must believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and be saved! If you do know this kind favor of God through Christ in the forgiveness of your sins, then may you worship Him even more this Christmas as you see in the nativity story the unimaginable kindness and overwhelming goodness of God! May you be full of the great joy of this good news! Let's pray.