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Series:
Luke 2:13-14

December 25, 2011

“Christmas Day”
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The news this morning was not good. I don't know how many of you had a chance to listen to the news, but early this morning we heard that in Nigeria, Christian churches and worship services were rocked by blasts. We look at North Korea and there's kind of an uncertainty about where their leadership is going to take them in the world stage, and what our relationship with them will be.

The violence continues in the Middle East. There is some more horrific news (as there has been these days) out of Syria. Hundreds of thousands of folks are protesting on the streets in Moscow against their leadership, and the U.S. and the world economy continues to slip and slide, taking a toll on all kinds of folks. Those are only some of the headlines that were on the news early this morning.

Into that kind of a world, God speaks with this greatest statement those little angels sang about, and we sang about: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."* *On whom his favor rests.* What has happened to the good news? The good news has been diluted. It has been kidnapped by the merchants and the marketers of our day.

I started thinking about it this week. It's as if the world has taken Jesus out of the crib and hidden him somewhere. I was listening to the news at 6:30 this morning, and one of the newscasters on a local news program signed off by saying, "I don't know what you're celebrating today, but I hope it will be a good day for you." I thought, *What a tragic reality in our world that the baby Jesus has been taken, and he has been put somewhere where people don't want to see him; they don't want to find him.*

The commentary on the BBC this past week noted there were more carol concerts, and they thought that was a good thing. More than in the previous years. Not carol *services*, because that would have had a Christian connotation, but carol *concerts*. It's the type of music, according to the reporter, that can make us feel nostalgic and comfortable, and can provide us a little escape from the turmoil of our world.

It's interesting how the world looks at the birth of Jesus Christ and God breaking into the realm of our humanity, but there is a different dimension to this day from God's perspective. When we look through Luke, chapter 2, and I hope all of you have read it at some point today. We read most of it in the service today, but I would encourage you to read and reread that story. It is really a story of extremes. It's really a story of extremes.

There is on one hand the majesty and the wonder of angels, and on the other side there are those lowly shepherds. There is the glory of God that is revealed to a rather inglorious world. There is the wondrous message of joy and hope in a world that the news tells us today is full of darkness and despair. There is this overwhelming light that is brought to a rather depressed world. It's the greatest news ever to a world that's used to bad news.

So before us is the wonder of the birth in the shadow of the cross. It's impossible for us as believers to look at the manger, to look at a crèche, to think about what has happened today, what we celebrate, without also thinking about the reality of where this ends. That ending in effect marks a beginning, but the manger must always be seen in the shadow of the cross of Jesus Christ.

On Christmas morning we see more clearly than ever God's plan of redemption for his people, for those who are seeking him. The news of Christmas is an opportunity for the whole world, but it makes sense only to those who realize they *need* this word of redemption and salvation. Think about it for a moment: The message of Christmas, the birth of Jesus Christ, is a message that God intended for the *whole* world, but it is only accessible to those who understand they need that good news.

The phrase *on whom his favor rests* reflects those whose heart responds to the message of Christ's birth. He doesn't come just for religious folks; he comes for everyone, but the gospel is for those who know they need Jesus. It is for those who recognize there is something missing from their lives. Do we realize we need a Savior? What will it take for God to get our attention?

Imagine with me again the setting we've looked at hundreds of times over the years, and it's those shepherds. They were out in the fields doing what shepherds do. They were watching over their flocks. It's nighttime. Probably not the best job in the world. Shepherds were not treated with all the dignity and respect many other professions had. In fact, it was one rung above the lowest common denominator in the ancient world. You could say about shepherds you would hope your daughter wouldn't marry one. That kind of sums it all up. If something was missing, well, you better check with the shepherds; they probably have it.

Day after day they were experiencing the same kind of routine: leading their sheep, keeping them safe, watching over them, continuing to count. I can only imagine that all they ever did was count. *One hundred seventy-three, one hundred seventy-four... Baa! Oh I missed one. One, two, three...* Kind of a lonely existence for them, but suddenly in the relative peace of that night comes this explosive light, and it's an angel. The angel of the Lord appeared, and the Judean skies lit up.

They were just minding their own business, they were doing what they did, and out of nowhere this angel makes an entrance. Apparently it took something pretty grand to get their attention. That leads me to the question...*What does it take to get our attention?* Is it just the events of this Christmas Day? I don't think so. I think sometimes it takes a lot more for God to get our attention.

We had one of our choir members die a couple of months ago, and one of his observations on his website just before he died... He was a very quiet man. He was a guy who was very much loved around here, but he was very quiet and not very well known. He had trouble expressing his views. He thought he was uninteresting. He wrote in his blog how amazing it was that God had to give him cancer in order to get his attention.

What does it take for God to get our attention, to open us up to him? Well there was something missing for those shepherds. So when those angels came to them, proclaimed that something incredible had happened, their lives were changed. This wasn't the first time angels had appeared. As we've heard in the series here, they've appeared to Zechariah, appeared to Mary, to Joseph, and now probably the lowest common denominator of all. They weren't even the *owners* of the sheep; they were just simply working stiffs who pulled night duty.

So what are these people in the order of things? How do they rate such an invitation to the banquet of the Lord? Well they rate because they rate. They are chosen because God chose them. It has nothing to do with who they are or what they have done. It clearly can't be unless there was nothing at all for them.

For this same Jesus, whom they will rush to worship, shall fill his own feast hall with the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind; with all those who travel on highways and byways and lurk in hedges; for those who are considered outcasts. The shepherds are people without names, position, reputations, or privilege. Guess what? We're the shepherds. It's us.

As if one angel appearing to these shepherds wasn't enough, *"Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.'"*

The angels' refrain serves as a commentary. I was thinking about that this week. It's like there weren't 50 angels that showed up, or 150, or 1,500, but I believe that every single angel in heaven showed up, and the Judean sky was filled from corner to corner with this bright, brilliant light. It would have been golds, and pinks, and electric blues, and hyacinth, and ultraviolet, and probably even sparkles.

The entire sky was covered from one end to another, and the glory of God's creation, the stars and the moon and all that, was covered up by this glory of these angels. When they sang it was like in cosmic stereo. The angels joined the voices at the greatest creation of all: the birth of God-man, the perfect Savior, God become man. This was the good news to be praised for all eternity.

Glory is given to God in the most exalted of ways, but we must see that this child means peace for those on whom his favor rests. The picture of being a person of God's favor in the Jewish way of thinking was that it was someone who was numbered among God's chosen people, but this remark makes it clear that salvation in its fullness is not automatic for everyone. Only those who respond to God's grace and follow will experience this peace. Jesus had come for all, but by their own choice, not everyone will benefit from his coming.

After calming the shepherds' fears, the angels informed them there is a reason for them not to be afraid, that the message is one of great news which will change their lives, and it will bring great joy. The messianic Savior is born. This event was not distant. It was not something that was going to happen out there, but it already had happened. So the shepherds were told to go and see.

It reminds us God is a God of action who comes to his people with a plan of redemption that is accessible to everyone. It is the good news for all who are willing to hear it. Somehow are we ready to be interrupted by God here in church? Well we are. We listen for God's voice here. But are we ready to be interrupted by God in our workplace? In our home? In our community? In our day-to-day routine?

You see, the story of the shepherds is God interrupting whatever it is that was happening to them. It was a holy interruption. What do we do with the holy interruptions in *our* lives? Do we discount them? Do we discard them? Do we take the baby out of the manger now that this is all over and put him in a closet, and hope no one will know or see?

The shepherds responded by doing what? They ran. They ran as fast as they could to see what these angels had proclaimed. The divine interruption into their routine caused them to *change* their routine. Drastically

change it. Remember, these were hirelings. They were supposed to take care of these sheep. In the middle of the night they get up and leave. They just left, and they ran to see what the angels had talked to them about.

The announcement is awesome because it reminds us of God's intention in our lives. *"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you..."* A Savior is born to *you*. There are a number of titles that are used here: Messiah, Savior, and Lord. Lately I've been thinking a lot about the difference in the terminology between *Savior* and *Lord*. There's quite a difference there.

For many of us, we would say, *Well yeah. This Christ child, Jesus, he's our Savior. He saved me. I understand that.* But I think for many of us he's not our Lord. What does *Lord* imply? *Lord* implies that this life is not my own, that I belong to someone else. I belong to God. I belong to his Son, Jesus Christ. Whatever decisions I make, whatever commentary I have, however I live my life, they're not my choices anymore. If Jesus is truly my Lord, then he's the one who decides.

How do we know what he has decided? Well we know that not just on one day of the year, or one season of the year, but we understand his direction as it comes to us day after day after day after day. The only way I know that happens to us these days is through his Word. Without the Bible we will never know; we will never understand the lordship of Jesus Christ in our lives. We will never understand what we have been saved *from*. We will never understand what it meant that the Messiah *has* come, that he has come to save us, to redeem us, to lead us, and guide us; not just on one day of the year, but every day.

The message of Christmas, however we look at it, and I see it in the light of those little angels, especially the one who was bouncing her hands on the floor. That should be our response to this message of Jesus Christ, shouldn't it? Shouldn't we just let loose with all abandon and just be ready to proclaim, as we sang about a moment ago, this great news that Jesus Christ has come in? Because this message is about a message on whom his favor rests.

On who does God's favor rest? It rests on those who are ready to hear it, to receive it, to accept it, and to allow it to change their lives forever and ever. Is Jesus your Savior? Is Jesus your Lord? He better be both, or we've still not put the baby in the manger. He's still gone. Savior and Lord. That was the good news that the angels proclaimed, and that's the good news we have.

Do you have a sense that the favor of the Lord rests upon you? If you do, it means you have truly heard the message of this day, and you may have every reason to sing with the angels of heaven and shout the good news about your personal interaction with the Creator of the universe.

It is not enough just to hear about Jesus. It is not enough to peek in the manger and say, "Oh how nice. What a lovely scene. It gives me such good feelings." The truth is, even if Christ was born in Bethlehem 1,000 times but not within you, or not within me, then we would be eternally lost. The Christ who was born into the world must be born in our hearts. When he is, we have good news to proclaim. Let's proclaim it.

Let's pray: Father, we come to you, Lord. Thank you for just reminding us again of the simplicity of the Christmas story. It isn't really complicated at all. It's a simple message of your love, and your desire to come into our self-centered lives to wrestle away control, and just to keep putting your arms around us to let us know how much we are loved. Father, may the good news of this day permeate every fiber of our

being, every part of who we are and who we are to become. May we then go into the world and proclaim this incredible news of your birth. Amen.