

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: July 9, 2023, Year A, "Christmas in July"

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: Good News for Whom?

Focus: Have you ever had to explain something that seemed puzzling to others? When we've heard the Christmas Story so many times, what does it mean or what's distinctive about it? The coming of Jesus was announced and recognized in different ways. The angel Gabriel announced his coming is "good news of great joy for all the people" (Luke 2:10). We are bearers of this good news.

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And 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!" ¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Why Did You Do That?

- "Why did you do that?"

Do you recall a time when someone has flat out asked you that?

Have you been in a situation in which you were prompted to describe why you decided what you decided or why you acted in a particular way? Maybe you've taken some kind of stand and you wonder how people will respond.

And as that situation came up and you considered how to address it—what you would say, maybe you had some anxiety. You might have asked yourself,

- “How does this sound?”
- Or, if you’re writing something, you ask, “Am I expressing myself clearly or well?”
- “How will this other person respond?”
- “Will they find what I’m saying (or doing) to be persuasive?”

Maybe after you’ve asked yourself those questions and responded to them, maybe you’ve reassured yourself that you’re on the right path or making a sound decision. Maybe you’ve coached yourself that you understand that not all people may agree—that other people might make a different decision or take a different action, but if you’re clear on what you’re doing and why and you’re okay with that well-thought-out decision, and then there are people who disagree with you. . . well, maybe you’ve decided you can live with that.

- “As long as I’m comfortable with my decision. . . then I can live with that” you might say to yourself.

Writing a letter to accompany the gifts we made to Reconciling Works and Our Center (“Northern Nevada’s LGBTQ+ Community Center”)

I have had a situation like that recently when I wrote a letter to go along with the financial gifts we at Good Shepherd made to Reconciling Works and Our Center.

- **Reconciling Works** Mission: “Lutherans for full participation”
- **Our Center** is Northern Nevada’s LGBTQ+ Community Center

I did not expect either of these groups/letter recipients to be anything but grateful for our letter and gift, but writing the letter prompted me to express exactly why we at Good Shepherd were doing what we were doing.

- **What prompted us to give.** Namely, I explained what happened at Good Shepherd when the Pride flag was vandalized back in January.
 - “On Saturday evening, January 28, the night before a special worship service celebrating our mission as a Reconciling in Christ congregation which seeks to intentionally welcome LGBTQ+ siblings, our Pride flag was vandalized, and a hateful sign was left.”
- **That an act of fear and hate will not dissuade us because this is how we understand the love of God in Jesus:** In the letter, I explained what we had decided to do in response and what flying the Pride flag means to us:

“In response, we have reaffirmed our intent to be a welcoming congregation and to continue flying the Pride flag. We understand it to be a declaration of the breadth and depth of the love of God in Jesus. We are flying it

because LGBTQ+ people have been made to feel unwelcome or unloved in our society and in the Church. Because of that, we need to particularly declare that the love of God extends to LGBTQ+ folks and that Good Shepherd intends to be a welcome place.”

“Christmas in July”

I had an extended-family member once ask me if it was hard to preach on holidays like Christmas when, she assumed, everybody knew the scripture reading, everybody knew the story, and so how do you preach a familiar story in a fresh way.

In part, the dilemma or the challenge that she points out is why we have chosen to celebrate “Christmas in July” at Good Shepherd. Christmas in July is a chance to hear familiar texts in a fresh way. Maybe when it’s not December or not cold outside or *“It’s not beginning to look a lot like Christmas”* that we will be able to hear this good news of God’s presence among us in Jesus in a new way.

The reading from Luke *is*, of course, a familiar one.

- It is the story of Jesus’ birth by storyteller Luke.
- We hear it every Christmas Eve in worship at church.
- We might also hear it from Charles Schultz’ Peanuts gang when an exasperated Charlie Brown asks, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” and Linus, holding his blanket, responds with this story.
- There is the decree from Emperor Augustus about the census (v. 1).
- The trek to Bethlehem (v. 3).
- The birth of Jesus, Mary wrapping him in “bands of cloth” (NRSV, v. 7) or, as the KJV expresses it, she “wrapped him in swaddling clothes.”
- . . . and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (NRSV, v. 7).

For all the text’s familiarity and perhaps our ability to recite the story from memory, whether that is the KJV or some other, the detail that sticks out to me this time is this declaration from the angel Gabriel:

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

The part that sticks out to me today is that this is good news **for all people**.

Stacey Spain, Programming and Operations Manager at *Our Center* in Reno.

Stacey Spain, a key leader at Our Center, called me the very same day they received our check and letter in the mail. She said, “Thank you for the check, but what we appreciated even more was the letter.” Before she and I spoke on the phone, I listened to the voice message she left when I was out of the office. She thanked me and then she got choked up a bit because of what the letter meant to her and the staff members to whom she initially showed it. She apologized, saying she was trying to be professional (and not get emotional.)

In our conversation, she said,

- “You know that there are people who come to Our Center and access our services who have been traumatized by religious communities.”

She said it to me as though I might be surprised to hear that. She didn’t exactly say that, but it was her tone that signaled, “You may not know this, but. . .”

I wasn’t surprised at all, I told her. We know that—that’s why we explicitly acknowledge the pain that the Church has caused in our **Welcome Statement**:

- “**Welcome** especially to all who have ever been made to feel unwelcome by the church.”

The Angel Gabriel Appears to the Shepherds

In an email to the Tuesday Bible Study and then posted to our Good Shepherd Facebook page this week, I inserted this line of scripture (just mentioned above) and then posed a few questions:

I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

- Who said this?
- To whom was it spoken?

You likely know immediately. . . The Angel Gabriel declared this to “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night” (v. 8).

The Angel Gabriel proclaims with his words that this is “good news of great joy for all the people.” It’s for *all people*, and it’s for the people who most need to hear it—the ones who most often hear and receive *bad* news.

This is good news, Gabriel is saying. It's good news for all people. It's good news especially for outsiders.

Gabriel declares this message with his words, but also demonstrates it with his actions. To whom was this message delivered?

Look at the beginning of the passage: It opens with a nod to the political realities of the day—that the Emperor Augustus has made a decree—that all should go back to their ancestral hometowns to be counted. And so, accordingly, Mary and Joseph and all the others subject to this decree trek across the region.

Emperor Augustus is the one with the power, the one with the ability to decide something and declare it so and people are then on the move.

And yet, this good news “for all the people” is not announced, first of all, to the powerful and wealthy, but to the shepherds of the field. It is good news for them.

You may have seen that US President Joe Biden recently hosted India's Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, for a state visit about 2 weeks ago.¹ This was an example of one powerful person, the head of state of one nation, hosting another head of state. The invitation and all the events are a recognition of the other's power and an effort to gain influence as you seek a particular outcome.

The scene in Luke is of a heavenly messenger, the Angel Gabriel, bypassing the person of power acknowledged in the opening verse to bring his message directly to the lowly and the outsider and the overlooked as represented by the shepherds. They are people of comparatively low power—only the sheep listen and move in response to the shepherds--and maybe not even then!

God chooses to deliver this message to the shepherds, those of lowly status. In the age of Augustus, when power is rooted in imperial Rome and when the emperor himself is often acclaimed as a savior,² the angel delivers a counter message that the joyful good news, for all people, is that a (real) Savior has arrived.

Where shall they find him? In an animal's feeding trough in Bethlehem. The emphasis on lowly status continues.

¹ A private dinner June 22 at the White House kicking off other special events, including an address by Modi to congress. See Matthew Cullen, “Modi's Pomp-Filled State Visit” in “The Evening” Newsletter from the New York Times, June 21, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/21/briefing/biden-modi-visit-justice-alito.html>

² See Commentary on Luke 2:1-20 by Ruth Anne Reese from *Working Preacher*, posted for December 24, 2012. <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/nativity/commentary-on-luke-21-14-or-21-20-2>

Good News for Whom?

Good news for whom? It is good news of great joy for all people. Which also and especially means those who most need to hear it or those who are most hurting or those who are so often the lowly and the left out.

- Jesus walked the earth speaking with the poor, the hungry, the lonely, and the outcast.
 - The woman at the well in John 4.
 - The rag tag bunch he chose for disciples.
 - Sharing a meal with people like Zacchaeus
 - Stories he told like the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the lost son (sons and father)

So, what's our role?

Our role is like the scenario with which I opened the sermon. Our role is to be able to respond when someone asks you a question like, "Why did you do that?" Our role is to be bearers of the Good News that we know in the coming of Jesus.

We have good news in response to what Stacey Spain told me: "You know. . . some people who come to Our Center have been traumatized by religious communities."

"Yes, Stacey, I know. . .that's why we have to share this good news of God's love for us in Jesus. This is 'good news of great joy for all the people.'"

The Angel Gabriel was a messenger of good news. We, too, are bearers of good news of the love of God for all the people. Thanks be to God.