

Theme: GOD GIVES GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

- I. The humble child born in Bethlehem
- II. The angel’s announcement to humble shepherds nearby
- III. The good news brings great joy to humble hearts today

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

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 that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

God gives you good news of great joy this Christmas!

A devout believer in our Lord lost his fortune, or so the story goes. No money meant no dowry for his daughters. In the world around 300 years after Christ’s birth, that made their prospects grim; these young women didn’t have many options aside from marriage. At least, until their pastor caught wind of their plight. Legend has it, he snuck three bags of gold coins into their house through the window, one at a time. After the first two daughters got married, the father stayed up through the night to catch the man we know historically as Saint Nicholas tossing the final bag of gold into his house.

Some still leverage that tale of generosity to encourage people around Christmas time to give great gifts or bring out the best in people. We may think of Christmas in years past and all the gifts we found under the tree as children, or the greater joy we experienced as we grew older and gave good gifts to those we love. But this year the joy seems stilted. They’re calling it a “Christmas like no other” after all that’s going on in the world. Maybe the number of presents under the tree has shrunk, as has the celebration with family. In this “Christmas like no other,” our

thoughts go back, not to the joy of days gone by or the great gifts we've given and received throughout the years; we go back to a Christmas truly like no other—the first Christmas, when God gave the perfect Christmas gift. **GOD GIVES GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY** at Christmas.

The first Christmas opens upon a scene of serene simplicity. A young couple, come to be taxed in the town of Bethlehem because they traced their ancestry there. The census crowds that little town of Bethlehem, population about 4000. In this scene we find Joseph and Mary, a man with his fiancée, a virgin with child. They're likely staying with friends or relatives; their family line comes from Bethlehem. And then it happens. The time comes. The baby won't wait. And like every baby born in human history, the child comes. Stunning in how ordinary it happens. At the same time, profound beyond human comprehension. This child, born like every other, and also like no other. His birth that first Christmas creates a Christmas like no other.

The guest room cannot contain these three. Perhaps it was too crowded because of all the travelers. Perhaps for privacy, Mary and Joseph go downstairs, the part of a house where people usually kept the animals, to deliver the baby. No room for them in the upper room. In this way, God enters the human race. A humble birth so common. Mary places the baby in a feeding trough for animals. His first bed. Maybe nowadays we might question how sanitary that would be, or why a carpenter like Joseph couldn't build a better bed for the babe. In the days of hospital births and natal care units, we might wish the Lord of the universe had better provisions, like we would want for our children. But for poor people in the 1st century, such a bed was completely *common*. Any number of newborns in those days may have slept in a manger as their first bed.

The difference strikes us. This is no ordinary child! Why should his birth be so humble, that he would share the details of his birth with so many, save that his birth was long foretold by prophets of old? God comes down from his throne in heaven, conceived and born miraculously by the power of God through a virgin mother. Born without sin. No trumpets announce the newborn king. No gender reveal filled with fireworks. Just the same simplicity of a child so weak and helpless, he needs his mother to bundle him up to protect him from the elements. The God who upholds the universe has become completely dependent on human parents. Hardly fitting for a king, much less God-in-the-flesh! But this is the birth our God chose; it all unfolds exactly according to his plan. God's Christmas present, the greatest gift of all, his Son, **GIVES GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY**.

Not everything about his birth is ordinary. Whenever a newborn child comes into the world, it fills hearts with joy. Mother, relieved at the end of labor, overjoyed to see her pain pays off. Father, beaming with pride. Grandparents showing off pictures to everyone they encounter. They share their joy with friends, relatives, neighbors, whoever will listen. The birth of a good king's heir multiplies an entire nation's joy. So this child, heir of God's promises, King of kings and Lord of lords, GIVES GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY not to the whole world.

God didn't let it go unnoticed. The birth announcement for his Son still fills eager hearts with joy. Yet for all the extraordinary, it still comes unexpectedly ordinary. God makes his announcement, not to the great and important people of history, but to simple shepherds. Without this account of the first Christmas, their story would be long forgotten. No one knows their names. Shepherds of their day were poor; they often needed to hire themselves out to make ends meet for their families and flocks to flourish. That night, those shepherds were working, like any ordinary night. But this was the night God chose to GIVE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY to shepherds who didn't ask for it, didn't earn it, didn't deserve it.

Out of nowhere, a divine messenger showed up next to these shepherds with a Christmas message like no other. At the angel's appearance, the night sky turned bright with resplendent light. The glory of the Lord, the brightness that knows no bounds, shone around these shepherds. God himself is present with the human race. And in the light of God's presence, these simple, sinful shepherds react in total terror. A regular response to a surprising situation.

But their fleeting fright fades with the angel's message. "Do not be afraid. I bring you GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY." Fear replaced by rejoicing!

So why point out the profoundly ordinary circumstances of that extraordinary first Christmas in 2020, "a Christmas like no other"? In these days, you turn on the news, and Christmas has not stopped the virus, the violence, the vitriol that hangs over our world. Nothing but bad news! Ruled by the Christchild? Ruled by fear, more like. The proud and powerful dominate the world, while the weak watch the great gain power. Then there's those who seem unconcerned with the present state of affairs. Not afraid, but also confident they can keep right on as they did before, as if our world hasn't halted this year. Fear on one side, pride on the other. Bad news all around. And the dark, depressing despair of death drains the joy right out of us. Many have buried loved ones this year. Even if you didn't, our Christmas celebrations are stripped to a shadow of what they once were. Relatives stay away;

activities are cancelled. When has the world ever needed joy more? Some began their Christmas celebrations months ago because they desperately needed *something, anything* to look forward to!

Of course, we all need the GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY at all times. In a Christmas like no other, we're finally able to put aside other stressors and focus on the true meaning of Christmas. The joy may seem muted; nothing could be further from the truth. All people desperately need this GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY, the frightful and fearful as well as the proud and prominent, the cold and uncaring. Now, as always, the simple sights and sounds of that Christmas like no other reverberate in our ears. Our sin strikes the same sudden terror in us that it did for those simple shepherds. And just like God did not come to them as great Judge and Ruler of all, but as a helpless babe, so he comes to us through the words of the angel. In that Word, GOD GIVES GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY.

This good news is for all people. Young and old. Black and white and anything in between. The strong and the weak. And like so many years ago, we find it so often hits those who least expect it, as it came to shepherds. The GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY summarized so succinctly in the sound of the angelic statement: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord."

And so the Savior came, not the way expected. Not in pompous fanfare or with resplendent glory, but as a child wrapped in strips of cloth and placed in a feeding trough as his cradle. Not the Savior expected by the great and powerful. But here we are reminded, through the words of the angel, that God's plan is in effect. In the simplicity of that Christmas like no other, THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY makes its way to us.

A Jewish legend states that in the fields around Bethlehem, shepherds raised sheep for the temple sacrifice in Jerusalem. These sacrifices, offered daily, made atonement for the sins of the people; yet not one of them could bring an end to sin. How much more appropriate, then, that in Bethlehem the Lamb of God, our Savior Jesus was born! He takes on human flesh and blood just like you and me, raised by Mary and Joseph, God's true Son from eternity. This Lamb, Jesus, will make his final entrance into Jerusalem, where in fulfillment of the ritual slaughter of sheep, he will offer himself as the one sacrifice to take away the sin of the world. Yes, that's why the Savior is born—not so you and I can marvel at the cute baby, but so that this helpless, weak infant can live as the perfect substitute. Powerful, but not

proud. Filled not with fear, but faith. Just how this can be—that God and man are united in one person—is a truth so profound, not even the keenest minds can fully comprehend it. But the purpose is clear. He becomes a man to bring you **GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY**. Sins forgiven, taken upon this Son of God and Son of Man. God's purpose completed, your heavenly home secured. Even in 2020, all goes according to his good plan for you. And our fear, like those shepherds, turns to joy—great joy, the greatest joy in all the world. Our Savior loved us, loves us, lived and died for us, so we can live with him forever.

There may not be all the same Christmas gifts under the tree this year. Maybe some of the traditions from years have been set aside. We give our gifts, not because we've behaved or we're the greatest, but because we imitate our God who gave the greatest gift of all. Our Christmas is like no other, because Jesus gives us the greatest joy. This child, wrapped not with paper and a bow, is wrapped with swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. He still comes to humble hearts who trust his saving work, a gift given to those who did not earn it, did not deserve it, but desperately need it. **GOD'S GIFT** is like no other; for us he offers up his Son to save us from our sin. Not the happiness of human holidays, but the joy of heaven come down to earth. **GOD'S GIFT OF GOOD NEWS GIVES the GREATEST JOY** of all; because of Jesus, our Savior, Christ, the Lord, we will live in heavenly joy forever. May this good news of great joy fill your hearts not just at Christmas, but all the way from this world into heaven with Jesus! Amen.