

## **From Fear To Joy**

**Luke 2:8-14**

**Bryn MacPhail / Dec. 25, 2011**

I continue to be amazed as I reflect on how the Divine plan unfolded more than two thousand years ago.

You might say that the Christmas story comes to us as *a catalogue of unlikely events*.

It begins with the angel Gabriel appearing to Zacharias in the temple and announcing that Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth, will have a son in their old age and that this son will be the forerunner to the promised Messiah (1:13-17).

Gabriel then appears a second time, and on this occasion he appears to an unlikely young peasant girl named Mary, in the despised town of Nazareth, to announce to Mary that she will conceive and bear a son by unlikely means.

Additionally, Mary is told that her son will be called “**Son of the Most High**” (1:32). This announcement from Gabriel perplexes Mary causing her to ask, “**How can this be, since I am a virgin?**” (1:34).

Gabriel goes on to explain how the Holy Spirit will bring this about, reminding Mary that “**nothing is impossible with God**” (1:35, 37).

From the outset, we are greeted by a series of unlikely events.

Angels are appearing, normal biological processes are being amended, and cultural expectations are being bypassed.

But, as Gabriel explains, we should not be altogether surprised by this.

We are talking about a God who is not confined by the usual ordering of things; we are talking about a God who does not conform to human expectations; we are talking about a God for whom nothing is impossible.

The catalogue of unlikely events continues as we come to the announcement that the Messiah has been born in Bethlehem.

We have yet another appearance of an angel, followed by an appearance of a multitude of angels.

We've heard this story so many times before that we're in danger of missing the profundity of the context.

The context is not a palace, it's not the Temple courts, but rather, our account takes place in the cold, dark, and rugged fields of Judea, where heavenly angels announce the birth of Jesus the Christ.

And, again, it is not to kings or to princes, it is not to priests or to the noble of society that the angels appear, but to shepherds **“keeping watch over their flock by night”** (2:8).

To the 1st Century reader, the idea that an announcement of this magnitude would come first to shepherds would have been totally outrageous.

In those days, you could not even say that shepherds were 'middle class' citizens—shepherds were counted among the most despised

within society. By the religious leaders, they were regarded as ceremonially unclean. By the rest of society, they were regarded, at best, as unreliable and, at worst, as thieves (Hughes, *Luke*, 87).

Furthermore, there is no indication within the biblical text that these men were devout. There is no hint that these men were deserving of such a privileged announcement.

Nonetheless, the wisdom of God ordained that these lowly shepherds be the first to hear the news of the birth of Israel's Messiah.

That God would choose such a group of people makes an important theological point: *No class of people is beyond the reach of God's grace.*

Some people imagine that they have strayed too far from God.

Some people imagine that their mistakes have been too severe.

Some people consider their faith too weak to be loved by God.

The message of Christmas corrects these notions.

The God revealed in Scripture is not concerned with those people who think they have it altogether.

The God of this universe is concerned with those who are most in need of Him.

The apostle Paul echoes this notion in his first letter to the Corinthians, when he says, **“Consider your calling brothers. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before Him”** (1Cor. 1:26-29).

Where would Paul get this idea?

Could it be that he got this notion from the Christmas story?

A young peasant girl from the despised town of Nazareth is chosen to give birth to the Son of God, not in beloved Jerusalem, but in the little

town of Bethlehem. The infant Messiah is not born in a palace and robed in silk, but He is wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a feeding trough (2:7).

The announcement of Christ's birth does not come to the noble, but to lowly shepherds. The angels gather, not in the esteemed temple, but to the cold fields of Judea.

God chose the things that are not to nullify the things that are, so that no one can boast before Him.

On the one hand, that is very humbling. That is to say that I'm here, not by merit, but by mercy.

I'm here, not because I had it altogether, but rather, I qualified for God's grace because I was falling apart.

*That's the Christmas message.*

*Moreover, that's the Gospel message.*

God is glorified by giving grace to the undeserving.

Notice how the earliest manifestation of this grace was overwhelming for the shepherds. Luke tells us that they were “**terribly frightened**” (2:9).

Again, we see that the countenance of this angel is such that even a group of rugged shepherds are reduced to sheer dread at his appearing.

In response the angel replies, “**Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people; for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord**” (2:10, 11).

Notice what the good news produces, and notice how far reaching it is. The angel says that **the good news** will produce **a great joy** and that will be **for all the people** (2:10).

That’s good news for you, and good news for me.

We should also notice, however, that before the shepherds could rejoice, they needed to shake off their fear—they needed to shake off their anxiety about their current predicament.

It seems to me that this is a helpful and relevant word for you and me.

We can sing, ‘Joy To The World’ until we’re blue in the face, but if we haven’t meaningfully dealt with our worries and our fears, the great joy of Christmas may pass us by.

I wish I could tell you that the Christmas message is that all of our problems will soon be solved.

I wish I could unveil to you a formula that would heal diseases, repair relationships, and balance household budgets—but I lack such a formula.

What I can do, however, is echo the ancient proclamation that God has a plan for you and that conformity to this plan will bring you great joy.

I don’t know about you, but I need that.



I desperately need a joy that surpasses painful circumstances.

Friends, Christmas has taught us that in Christ, our deepest need is being met.

We need forgiveness.

We need our fears allayed.

We need enduring joy.

We need our relationship with God to be restored.

Jesus was born for this.

If we could do it on our own, if we could gain God's favour by our own efforts then we would have something to boast about.

But we can't do it on our own, and that is why Jesus came to earth.

God's design is a most perfect arrangement: We gain forgiveness for our sins and God gets the glory that He deserves.

This, of course, is the substance of the angels' song. The news is so tremendous that one angel will not suffice.

We read that, **“suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,**

**‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased’”** (2:13, 14).

Here the shepherds were attempting to adjust to the presence of a single angel when **“a multitude of the heavenly host”** arrive on the scene—not 50, not 100, not 1,000, but I reckon the number of angels singing was beyond count.

Try to imagine what that would have looked like. Angels in the open field—stretching from horizon to horizon as far as the eye can see.

Once you get that image in your mind, try now to imagine *the sound*. I imagine it was a perfect delight to the shepherds' ears as the angels lifted their voices to God **“in cosmic stereo”** (R. Kent Hughes).

On that night two thousand years ago, the filthy, lowly, shepherds got a close-up glimpse of heaven's glory.

Friends, *the joy those shepherds experienced is a joy that is available to all of God's children.*

Let's not miss that.

Let's not allow anything to diminish the great joy that was delivered to us in the arrival of Jesus Christ.

This is not a joy that can be manufactured through decorations, presents, or family gatherings.

We cannot replicate this joy—this joy is the gift of God so that no person can boast.

As you give and receive presents this Christmas, don't miss the enduring gift of joy that God offers us in Christ.