

December 28, 2003
Christmas 1

"Hark the Herald Angels Sing"

LUKE 2: 8-14

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

A little girl was looking closely at the manger scene under the family Christmas tree. Her dad asked her if she knew who all the people were in the manger scene. She began by saying, "That's the baby Jesus." She kept on from one to another. "These are the shepherds. These pretty ones are the wise men. This is Mary, and here is Joseph." Pointing to the top of the manger she said, "And this is Harold." "Harold?" her dad asked with a smile on his face. "Yes, Harold." And then she started singing, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."

When I was a little boy, I always hoped my uncle Harold would come to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. I wanted him to hear the congregation sing the hymn, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing." Perhaps he would be touched when the congregation sang his name, and even start coming to church more often.

Herald angels. What an apt description this is of angels who joyfully heralded or proclaimed the message of Jesus' birth. In ancient times kings would send out messengers or heralds to proclaim an important message. If you listen carefully to this message you realize what they said applies not only to Christmas Eve or Christmas Day, but to every day of the year. This morning we want to think of facing a new year by harkening or listening to the message the angels have for us.

1) They tell us not to fear

When the angel appeared to the shepherd they were afraid. Imagine watching your sheep in the still of the night. Suddenly an angel appears to you. To make the moment even more startling, "the glory of the Lord shone around them." In the original Greek language it says literally they were afraid, afraid. The King James Version says, "sore afraid." That happens when angels appear directly to people instead of coming to them in human form. Remember how frightened Zachariah was when an angel appeared to him and said that he and Elizabeth would be parents of John the Baptist. Luke 1 says, "he was startled and gripped with fear." If an angel suddenly appeared to us and reflected God's glory in this building, we would find ourselves overcome with fear. The gut reaction to coming face to

face with God's glory is fear, because we immediately think of how sinful we are.

Perhaps the closest thing we have to being in the presence of God's angels is a sudden brush with death. When the earth trembles and you do not know how long and hard the quake will be, fear grips you. When you have a near miss on the freeway, your heart begins to pound. I will never forget the time I was driving in the rain, not realizing how the roads had turned to ice. The car went into a 180 degree spin, and I found myself going down the road backwards with trees and boulders flashing past me. What amazed me immediately was the presence of God's angels that kept the car from going into more spins, and the heart pounding in my head. Our conscience and Satan's accusing finger tell us, "You are not ready to die! Be afraid! You'll never make it."

The angel told the shepherds, "Do not be afraid, a Savior has been born for you, just for you." What a privilege it is to enter a new year with these simple words, "Do not be afraid." As Jesus said, "Fear not little flock, it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." "Fear not, I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." You don't have to be like frightened children running across a cemetery on a foggy night and shouting to each other, "Happy New Year" or even drinking more than you should to drive away your fears so you do not have to take life so seriously.

2) They tell of great joy for all people

The message the angels had for the shepherds that night was not just for them but for all people. "For, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be for all people." These words "all people" indicate clearly the gift of God's love has my name on it and your name on it. Ruth Graham, wife of the famous evangelist, once gave a Bible to a friend whom she was counseling. She placed a post it sticker in the Bible on the page where John 3:16 was located. She circled the verse and wrote her friend's name about the word "world" in "God so loved the world he gave his only begotten Son."

I know that a lot of people will be playing the lottery in 2004, hoping to strike it rich. Have you ever noticed that when the jackpot balloons into huge numbers perhaps even close to 100 million, more people line up to buy tickets, even though the odds are one in eighty million? The gift of God's Son is not just for the really lucky people, or those picked out of a vast sea of humanity. Jesus is for all people. The little word "all" is like the sticker on the present telling you the present is personally yours. Every time we gather for worship we tell each other how blessed we are not how lucky!

3) They tell us Jesus is Christ the Lord

The angels have another message to carry us through the worst of times and best of times in this new year. "For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior which is Christ the Lord." The child born in Bethlehem was fully human. Yet he was Christ the Lord. That's the mystery of the Christian faith that we carry with us every day of our lives. Every morning you wake up you can rejoice because you have been born again into God's family and you are privileged to accept and believe this mighty truth of the Scriptures that Jesus Christ is fully human and fully God at the same times. Trying to explain that to your Jehovah Witness neighbor or coworker is like trying to describe the beauty of a the

rainbow to a blind man.

Because Jesus is "Christ the Lord" he is able to fix things in our lives that we could never begin to fix on our own. The name Christ or Messiah implies that our heavenly Father has given us someone who can do the job and do it right. I am sure that in this coming year there will be times you need to call up a mechanic to fix your car, a dentist to fix your tooth, a plumber to fix your broken water pipe. When it comes to fixing our problem of sin there is no one in the yellow pages that can help me. I cannot lean on my own resources because no matter how hard I try, I will always fall short of God's glory. As Paul humbly confessed, "The good that I would I do not do, and the evil that I do not want to do, I do... O wretched man that I am who will deliver me from this body of death."

Hebrews 2 (second lesson) tells how Jesus fixed our problem of sin. There it says, "Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death, that is the devil." Jesus, God's Son, the Mighty God, shared our flesh and blood, so he might destroy the devil's strangle hold on us. Every day is a day to rejoice over what Jesus, the Mighty God accomplished with he shared our humanity. The Revelation tells us "For the accuser of our brothers who accuses them day and night, has been hurled down. They overcame him by the blood of the Lamb and the word of their testimony."

Face each new day in 2004 with the words of Martin Luther's catechism ringing in your ears and warming your heart. "Christ has redeemed me a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sin, from death and the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. That I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in ever lasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness."

4) They tell us the importance of signs

Hark the herald angels sing! Listen to what they tell us regarding the importance of looking for signs to guide us. "For this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in the manger." How can we be sure that Jesus is the one, and we should not turn to Allah, or Bhudda or even to ourselves for help? The angels gave the shepherds a simple sign. Look in a manger. Find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes or strips of cloth. This is Christ the Lord.

We have the signs that point to Jesus, given to us by our God on the pages of the Bible to confirm and strengthen our faith. Born in Bethlehem. Born from a virgin. The seed of the woman. The flight into Egypt. The family settling in Nazareth. Then add to these all the prophecies related to Jesus death and resurrection. After Jesus explained these signs from the Old Testament to two disciples the night of his resurrection, they said to each other, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked with us on the way?"

In the game "Pictionary" you receive a card that has a certain saying or thought on it that you need to picture by writing on a board or sheet of paper. By putting enough pictures on the board, people are able to guess the right answer. Believing in Jesus is not a guessing game. We have all the evidence we need to for our faith to be sure. We have the Scriptures

and the prophecies that have been fulfilled that point to Jesus. In our worship we will be singing these well known words. "Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia! These words are written that we may believe That Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!"

5) They tell us to give glory to God

Finally if we listen to the angels we will find a song that we can sing in the best and worst days facing us in the near year. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." I read some where that early Christians would sing this song of the angels as they were being marched to their death in the arena. Whether facing death or life in the year before us, we can give glory to God in the highest for the peace that we have in Jesus. "Therefore being justified by faith we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus and access into the grace in which we stand."

Some Christmas cards you received with a very generic message that said, "Happy Holidays." How much more meaningful is this message from God's angels that give you a reason to rejoice every day in the new year