

## “UNTO YOU... A SAVIOR” 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent

12-17-06

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Scripture: Lk. 2:8-20

TEXT: *And the angel said unto them, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be unto you. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11) KJV.*

### INTRODUCTION

It was Christmastime. Ron Hutchcraft tells about two-year-old Timmy sitting on his aunt’s lap. Soon he was ready to get down and his aunt playfully held him saying, “You can’t get down until you say the magic words.” The words she was expecting were, “Pretty please with sugar on it.” While Timmy knew this game well, he blew her away this time by turning to her and simply repeating the Scripture verse he’d learned for the Christmas program, *Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11) KJV. Ron refers to those as the truly magical words.

I agree that those are the magical words of Christmas. Magical in that they bring us so much that we long for and need— a Savior. And, they are relevant and applicable to almost anything and any situation we face in life. But even more important, *Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord* is not just a statement of fact. It is a personalized message to the shepherds. Consider the difference:

- “One million dollars has been given.” That’s nice.
- “**You** have been given one million dollars.” Now that’s beyond nice. You feel your heart quicken with excitement.

These shepherds didn’t just receive a general announcement of an important event— the entrance of God into our world through the birth of the Christ— it is personalized in the most important way. It is an “unto you” message. That has had me thinking about what I’ll call, “the unto you-ness of Christmas.”

Jesus’ coming was not only personal to those shepherds, but to everyone in the Christmas story and to everyone who has lived since. His coming is not to the world in general, but *unto you*. Jesus did not come to just be a positive influence for good in the world and a great teacher to show us how to live. We need more than that— we need saving from our sins and the mess we make of our lives. We need our hearts changed so we want to do the right things and live the right way. We need the power to be different. And that has to be highly personal, for each of us has messed up our lives in unique ways and we are all different from one another. Yet, to each of us Jesus comes to enter into our lives, saving us and transforming us into what we really, in our heart of hearts, long to be.

In the story of the shepherds, I want us to see how it is we personalize this saving work of Jesus.

It is so easy to know the truths of Christmas and the basics of the Christian faith in general and miss the “unto you-ness” of it all.

### **“GOOD TIDINGS OF A GREAT JOY”**

The revelation to the shepherds is arguably the most glorious in the whole Christmas narrative. If I were able to visit one scene at that first Christmas apart from that scene in the stable, it would be this announcement to the shepherds. Nowhere is there more angelic presence or more thrilling news given. We’re talking more than “an angel of the Lord” (9). They experience “the glory of the Lord... around them” (9) and “a great company of the heavenly host... praising God” (13). That would be quite a scene to be part of in the darkness of the night! Also, they are entrusted with wonderful details about Christ given to no one else.

To the people of that day, that shepherds would be so honored is mind boggling. The Pharisees of that day classified six professions as “unworthy.” One of those was a shepherd. A shepherd was not considered to be a reliable person. They were not permitted to give testimony in court. They were not permitted to enter a synagogue because their activities were considered to make them ritually unclean. People just didn’t have dealings with shepherds if they could help it. Of course sheep were essential to the temple sacrificial system and people ate the meat and used the wool, so I have no idea why it was considered an “unworthy” profession. But, shepherds were on the lowest rung of the workers in that day. So, when you think of that, this display of the glory of God and the announcement entrusted to these shepherds is quite shocking.

Certainly in the shepherds we see illustrated the opening words of the angel’s announcement,

*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

These shepherds are at the lowest socio-economic rung, the least expected to be bearers of any important message. Certainly the message that this is “to all people” is illustrated here. Later, in the visit of the Magi, we see God has included the “outsiders,” the Gentiles. This “all-ness” spans the various age categories from Mary, probably a teenager to the old man Simeon who, 40 days after the birth, lifts up the child Jesus in the temple, praising God, saying,

*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word:*

*For mine eyes have seen thy salvation,*

*Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people;*

*A light to lighten the Gentiles,*

*and the glory of thy people Israel. (Luke 2:29-32)*

And, at the same time, there was the 84-year-old prophetess, Anna, who just happened to be there “at that very moment”— showing that the “all-ness” in God, includes male and female equally.

Beyond the “to whom” these tidings were entrusted, these shepherds are given an incredible revelation. Only to the shepherds is Jesus given the title, “Savior.” Elsewhere, Jesus’ role in saving people is mentioned and Mary refers to “God my Savior”(Lk. 1:47)— but only here is Jesus given the name, “Savior.” They are also given two other names for Jesus, “Christ” and “Lord.” “Christ” is the Greek equivalent to “Messiah,” the promised “anointed One.” “Lord” refers to Jesus’ rightful role as the ruler of the universe as well as our hearts. No other title is applied more

frequently to Jesus in Luke than “Lord.” Indeed, *good tidings of great joy!* God himself has come down to us in the person of Jesus. The way of salvation has been opened to all people. The chock-full-of-meaning titles we use so often— Savior, Christ, and Lord— are first of all entrusted to the lips of shepherds, the nobodies of that day.

Enforcing the message of joy and exalting God, *a multitude of the heavenly host* joins the angel in proclaiming: *Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men* (14). The rest of the heavenly host may have been angels or other heavenly dwellers. Now, it doesn’t say they were singing, but I think we are right in assuming they were. What a sound that would have been to hear! And to think, no one but these “mere” shepherds got to hear that. And, two more amazing promises are given to these shepherds. This Savior will bring peace on earth. Also, His coming is an announcement of God’s favor, “good will toward men.” In Lk. 4:19, as Jesus inaugurates His ministry in Nazareth, He ends with a quote from Isaiah that concludes with, “the year of the Lord’s favor.” God loves us— He favors us!

There is a textual variant that causes most newer versions to translate the second half of the angelic doxology, *and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests* (NIV). This is apparently the more accurate rendering. But remember, we enter into a relationship of favor with Him through faith in Jesus. That is available to all of us. As we enter into that relationship we have that incredible peace in our hearts that passes all understanding. And, as we know peace with God, we can become agents in bringing that peace to others.

## SAVIOR

In the shepherds, I see a wonderful impression of God’s desire to bring salvation to all. Salvation is one of those truly huge Biblical words. We are probably most aware of it as meaning our eternal salvation. When we ask for the forgiveness of our sins through Christ’s death on the cross and invite Him into our lives as our Lord, we are given the gift of eternal life. That is the promise of John 3:16.

But salvation involves more than that. It also means that Jesus is at work in our lives right now, saving us in our current living. When sin entered the world, all the destructive and bad things we experience came into being. When Jesus enters our world, He begins to set us free from many of these effects of sin. His earthly ministry is witness to that. He healed people of their diseases. He saved the disciples in a storm. He delivered the demon possessed from bondage to Satan. His truth continuously set people free. With Christ, anxiety and worry are displaced with hope and irrepressible joy.

So, once we come to Christ and turn our lives over to Him, we are saved— we have eternal life and are assured of heaven. But, we are also being saved. It is an ongoing process of redeeming parts of our lives from the work of the enemy— being transformed more and more into the likeness of Christ. This happens as we continue to grow in the faith, living in relationship with our Lord and Savior. Through the power of Christ within us, more and more of the old garbage of our lives is cleaned out and replaced with healthy newness of life.

The other day, I received a letter from someone I'd been a pastor to in another church, Dennis. I was shocked to hear his wife, only 60 years old, had died unexpectedly from an infection she didn't even know she had. In these last few days, as I've remembered Dennis in my prayers, I've also thought of his remarkable spiritual journey of getting saved and then being saved. He and his family had only recently moved to our community and begun attending our church. We had decided to have our first all-church retreat, and Dennis and his family came. The attendance was rather small and the camp was more rustic than I thought desirable. In addition, it was cold and rainy the whole weekend— not pleasant. Nevertheless, Jesus met us there, and it was at that retreat Dennis was saved. Not long after that, Dennis came to see me. He knew God had done a miracle in his heart, he knew he was born again. Things were different inside. He had a peace he'd never known. However, there were still some things very wrong. He shared that he was a Viet Nam vet, and told me of horrible experiences he'd had there. I won't go into all that he was continuing to deal with, but most of the things were clearly tied to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and were quite debilitating. Dennis needed to be saved from all that damage done by his experiences in Viet Nam. Over the next several years, I was able to see how Jesus continued His saving/ healing work in Dennis's life. When he'd come in to visit with me and pray with me, I was often thrilled at how faithfully Jesus was healing things, layer by layer.

Dennis found out about a Christian support network for Viet Nam vets called Point Man, based in Seattle. He began a group in our area of N. W. Montana. Through personal contacts and e-mail contacts the on-going saving work of Jesus in His life began spilling over to many others. I was often amazed at the stories he shared with me from those contacts. The healing Dennis had received and continued to receive flowed outward in miraculous ways. Several years ago, Dennis was able to return to Viet Nam for a few weeks with a ministry team of other vets— a final step in Jesus' ongoing saving work in that area.

In Dennis's letter about the death of his wife, he sounded absolutely overwhelmed with sorrow, confused, lonely, wondering, dealing with regrets. But as I pray for him, I'm strengthened in the knowledge that Dennis has a Savior who has saved him and is continuing His saving work in this latest tragedy.

That's the way it is for all of us. At Jesus' invitation, we enter into salvation— the gift of eternal life He offers. That is the beginning of a relationship with this Savior who continues to work in and through all the suff of our lives with his ongoing work of restoring us, healing us, changing us— saving us. Eternal life is a gift we receive in an instant. But our Savior doesn't just leave it at that. He is there in the difficult, tragic things to prevent them from destroying us. He continues to work, healing our damaged emotions and relationships. He will continue moving us on toward inner wholeness until the day He calls us home to heaven. As Paul affirms in what is to me one of the most hope-filled verses in the Bible,

*being confident to this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. (Phil. 1:6)*

## CONCLUSION

Do you realize that one out of every five gift-card recipients last year never used their cards? That's 20%! Half of those not using them said they just hadn't found the time to use them and another 37% hadn't found anything they wanted. The rest were careless and lost them or let them expire.

The message to the shepherds, "unto you," constitutes a gift-card of eternal salvation. They respond by going and searching-out their Savior. Then, they spread the word widely to others what they had been told about Jesus.

But it is to us too. We are in the "all people" category. Do not let another day go by without seeking out your Savior. This gift is one we dare not fail to receive. Don't miss the "unto you-ness of Christmas." Each of us must personally receive the Savior in our hearts. Use God's gift-card that is the only one with the resources that can purchase our eternal salvation. And then, let this Savior go to work in your day-to-day living, reversing the effects of sin and evil in our world.

This process of being saved is assuring and peace giving because, as the angel Gabriel tells Mary, *for nothing is impossible with God* (Lk. 1:37).