

Finding Hope in Unexpected Places

Luke 2:11-12

This Advent season we are listening in on heaven's perspective of Christmas—giving ear to the angel's announcement in Luke 2:8-20. Last week Pastor Bruce helped us think about what the angels meant in v. 10 when they said, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people." This morning we're going to take a close look at the actual good news itself in v. 11, and the evidence that God is at work in v. 12—the sign that salvation is coming.

Each Christmas season we are bombarded with exhortations to be happy, merry, joyful, holly jolly, to be of good cheer and so on. It is a time of celebration—the festive lights, the beautiful decorations, the warm family gatherings.

But for many the constant reminder that we're supposed to be happy and holly jolly can simply exacerbate the fact that we're not, and that we're having a hard time finding a reason to be. Everybody else is gathering with their family, but what if my family doesn't want to see me? What if I have spoken to my parents in years—I've let them down one too many times? What if I would love to go see them, but in this economy, we're spending Christmas alone this year.

Christmas can have a lot of different effects on different people. For so many it is a time of joy, a time of generosity and love. But for those who have lost a parent or a spouse, or a child or sibling or a close friend this past year, it's at best a bitter sweet time, and at worst, just plain bitter. For some who have always wanted to be married, or the couple who have longed for children but for some reason the Lord has never answered those prayers, it can be hard receiving all these Christmas cards with these beautiful families and their beautiful kids, all the pretty Christmas dresses—everything you've always wanted but for some reason don't have. The child who shows up to school in January, hearing all the stories of the new toys and video games and gadgets his friends received, and feels compelled to lie about what he got for Christmas because he's too embarrassed that his parents couldn't afford to get him anything this year.

And so Christmas, while the radio stations bark at us to be joyful, can be a painful reminder that something's wrong with this world. Spouses aren't supposed to die of cancer at age 40. Children aren't supposed to be abused. Groceries aren't supposed to be hard to come by. The mortgage shouldn't be that hard to pay. Friends aren't supposed to betray us, and hurt us, and take advantage of us.

And if you've ever felt that inconsistency, if you've ever been puzzled about why we're supposed to be joyful when so much is messed up, if you've ever been frustrated and upset and let down by life, then you're in the right position to understand what Christmas is actually all about.

Christmas doesn't make sense in a world where everyone's happy, where everything's perfect. There's *no need* for it if all is well. Christmas is about God stepping into the chaos, into the mess, into the disaster called life, and doing something about it. The message of Christmas is that God has acted decisively in his Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue a broken, rebellious people and redeem his fallen world. It's a message not only of happiness, but of hope. And that hope is sometimes found in unexpected places, which is what our passage shows us this morning.

Something feels anticlimactic about the angel's actual announcement in Luke 2:11-12. Look back at the scene in vv. 8-10: The shepherds are watching their flocks at night, and all of a sudden a light pierces the darkness, and an angel of the Lord, a messenger from heaven, appears to them, and gives them a message from God that he's going to do something about this broken world—a baby has been born, who is going to fix what's wrong with the world, who will make all things new, and here's the evidence and proof of it: *he's sleeping in a feeding trough in a stable right now as we speak*. Doesn't exactly rouse your expectancy that things are going to change in this broken world, does it? There's some family that was too poor to have their baby in a home or an inn, and so they had to turn a barn into a delivery room and a manger into a bed—and that's supposed to be a sign that the world is being made new? That God is actually showing up to change things? Looks like just another sign that the world is broken if you ask me.

But notice how the shepherds responded after going and seeing this sign, this baby in v. 20: "The shepherds returned, *glorifying and praising God* for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." Sometimes we find hope in unexpected places.

So what did the shepherds see in this child that we don't readily see? How is it that they were able to make sense of such an unexpected sign of hope? And how do we cut through the commercialism and materialism that drown the Christmas holiday to see with our own eyes a hope that is stronger than sadness and grief, more satisfying than a family meal or presents under the tree, more secure than our human relationships, and powerful enough to shatter the deepest darkness and flood our lives with the light of God's very presence?

We need to listen carefully to the story behind the Christmas story—the story that the shepherds knew and saw being fulfilled before their very eyes. The story of ancient Israel, and God's promise to rescue a people and redeem his fallen world through their coming King.

God's solution to dealing with the darkness, sadness, and sin of this world centered on the ancient people of Israel. They were the descendants of Abraham, through whom God promised to bless all peoples of the earth (Gen. 12:3). God had chosen them to be a people for himself, not because of anything they had done, not because they were stronger or more powerful than other nations, but because of his love and his promise to Abraham their father (Deut. 7:6-10). So he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and made a special arrangement with them called a covenant, where he promised to be their God and they promised to be his people. He gave them his law—his rule—so they would know how to live as his people (e.g. Exod. 20; Lev. 26; Deut. 28). And eventually he gave them a king to rule over and shepherd them—King David, and the descendants who would sit on his throne. Israel was to be God's special people through whom he would accomplish his promise to redeem the whole world—from the evil of injustice and oppression, to the sorrow of broken relationships, to the very root of all our problems—human sin and rebellion against God.

As Isaiah 42 puts it, Israel was to be God’s servant who “will bring forth justice to the nations” (42:1). God says of them, “I am the LORD; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness” (Isa. 42:6-7, ESV; cf. 42:1; 41:8-9).

But like Adam in the garden, Israel fell short of their job description and broke their covenant relationship with God. Isaiah 42 continues, “Who is blind but my servant, or deaf as my messenger whom I send? Who is blind as my dedicated one, or blind as the servant of the LORD?” (Isa. 42:19, ESV). The servant whose job was to open blind eyes had become blind himself. The kings of Israel rejected God’s law and ruled the people for selfish gain; the entire nation gave their allegiance and affection to the false gods of the surrounding nations. And so they brought upon themselves God’s just judgment for their sin and rebellion, just like Adam in the garden. As one author puts it, “the covenant people have become part of the problem, not the agents of the solution.”¹

You know you’re in trouble when the brightest light in the room is just as dark as the blackest shadow in the corner. For Israel wasn’t alone in their rebellion. All humanity followed in Adam’s footsteps—not just Israel. Every nation. And every individual—including everyone in this room today. The greatest problem with this world is not the brokenness we experience daily, whether it’s relational, emotional, financial, vocational, physical, or otherwise—these are all symptoms and echoes of a deeper, more systemic problem—the problem of human rebellion against God and the judgment that comes with it. This is not to say that someone’s cancer is a direct result of their sin; it’s to say that cancer didn’t exist until humans threw off God’s rule and tried to place themselves on his throne, thinking we would do a better job as God and King than he. And so as a result the entire fabric of creation has been fractured. Sin and death reign where God had envisioned life and joyful relationship with him.

So if the solution has become part of the problem, what hope is left? That’s a good question; no doubt a question that people like the shepherds were asking themselves so many years ago as they made their way in a dark world, still living with the results of Israel’s sin and covenant unfaithfulness—foreign oppression, ongoing weakness, sin, and death, and the unsettling silence of God that speaks of his separation from his people.

But God was not done with Israel, nor with the rest of the world. His love for his world was too great to leave it in the shambles of sin and separation from him. And so even though Israel and all humanity had proven unfaithful to God, he would remain faithful to his promise and his plan. Despite Israel’s sin, God had promised through his prophets that he would raise up a representative of Israel—a new king to sit on David’s throne and do what Adam and Israel failed to do. A king who, to use Tolkien’s turn of phrase, will make “everything sad . . . come untrue.”

This is the hope of Christmas. This is the promise of Israel’s coming king. It’s the promise we read together earlier from Isaiah 9—the one the shepherds watched unfold before their very eyes. “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned” (Isa. 9:2). The shepherds were literally walking in darkness,

¹ N. T. Wright, *Paul: In Fresh Perspective* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 29.

watching their sheep by night as the light dawned, and the very glory of God's presence shone around them. And listen to the similarity between the angel's pronouncement and the promise of Isaiah 9:6:

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given . . ." (Isa. 9:6).

"For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior . . ." (Lk. 2:11).

And what child is this? "He is Christ the Lord"—Israel's Messiah and the world's true king, the anointed King who sits on David's throne (Lk. 2:11). He is the king that Isaiah 9—a book written some 800 years before Christ's birth—talked about:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever.

Israel longed for a king who would come take away the reproach of the nations and restore them to God's favor. They longed to be free from the curse of sin's darkness, just as we long for that same freedom today. We long for hope. Not some wishful thinking that dissipates as soon as you try to grasp it, but a hope we can wrap our arms around. We want to know that it's not always going to be this painful. That there's life beyond foreclosure, that there's hope for reconciled relationships in the family. That I might be able to know and relate to the God who made me, even though I'm unworthy to enter his presence. We want to know that somehow, someday, "everything sad [will] come untrue."

And it's tempting to look for that hope in all the wrong places. We think we can buy it in store, or chase it in a career, or capture it in family. Or we think that finding hope in God means first making it up to him for all our failure. We have to punish ourselves for messing up, and come up with a way to try harder so that he'll accept us and have favor on us and give us what we need.

But Christmas is not an invitation to enroll in some self-salvation program, whereby you commit to improving yourself and God will reward you with a better life. There is no hope in such an arrangement, because God doesn't work that way, and even if he did, we'd all be destined to fail. Christmas is an invitation to believe in Jesus. To place the full weight of our hope and longing in him and what he has done for us in his life, death, and resurrection, and to live in that hope everyday—a hope that is stronger than sadness and grief, more satisfying than a family meal or presents under the tree, more secure than our human relationships, and powerful enough to shatter the deepest darkness and flood our lives with the light of God's very presence.

Jesus is God's answer to Israel's hope and the longing and desire of every nation. God decreed to send his only Son, his eternal Son, Jesus Christ—fully God—to take on human flesh and become fully human—at the same time. He sent him because no fallen, human king was capable of accomplishing his purposes. He sent him to stand in the place of fallen humanity, to live the life we were supposed to live but couldn't—a life of covenant faithfulness and perfect obedience to his Father. He sent him to die the death we deserved in our place, as our representative, taking upon himself the full weight of God's holy anger against our sin, and exhausting the

consequences for all who place their faith in him. God is able to forgive our sin because Jesus paid the price for us. God sent Jesus to take on himself the full weight of every painful experience we've ever had—to taste betrayal, physical abuse, loneliness and isolation, the grief of loss—even to be abandoned by his own Father as God poured out his holy wrath on him—and to do it all as a willing, loving sacrifice for us.

God does not redeem this broken world by rescuing us out of it or just taking the pain away, but by putting on flesh, entering into the world, and taking humanity's pain, sorrow, and rebellion upon himself. There is no trial in life that you can experience that Jesus Christ can't sympathize with. There is no trial in life that he is unable to carry you through or rescue you from. There is no trial and no sin that will be left standing when Christ returns in his *second* advent to finish his redeeming work and establish God's new creation. Listen to Revelation 21, where we hear another voice from heaven, saying:

Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev. 21:3-4, ESV).

Christ began his saving work with his first coming; he will finish it with his second.

Christmas tells us to look for our hope in the most unexpected place. Not in the mirror, not in a magazine or a job listing, not in a portfolio, or the eyes of a lover, but by peering into a feeding trough in a smelly stable and laying eyes on a newborn baby—God's sign that the world is being reborn. It tells us to look beyond the manger to the cross—that most ugly of torture instruments, the greatest shame of the ancient Roman world, the throne of our king. Christmas reminds us that our greatest problem—the problem of sin and human rebellion and the damning consequences of it—that our greatest problem has been *decisively dealt with* on our behalf by God himself.

God has acted decisively in his Son, Jesus Christ, to rescue a broken, rebellious people and redeem his fallen world. May we find great hope this Christmas—a hope we wrap our hands and our hearts around, a hope that can carry us through the darkest night—in Jesus Christ, God's Son, Israel's Messiah, our Savior and King.

Discussion Questions

1. The sermon suggested that Christmas has a different effect on different people—some for joy, others a reminder of the brokenness in this world. What does your own experience of Christmas tend to be like? Where do you tend to feel the most dissonance between the holiday spirit and the realities of life?
2. Define hope. How is this word used in everyday speech, and how is that often different from the biblical idea of hope?

3. Read Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:8-14. What similarities do you see between these two passages? How does the connection between these two passages (and the events they describe) fuel hope in a broken world?
4. How would you explain the hope of Christ to a friend or family member at Christmas?
5. How does Christ's first advent move us to look and long for his second advent?