



Roanoke, Virginia
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“Good News”

Isaiah 52:7-10 and Luke 2:1-20
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Isaiah 52:7-10

- 7** How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,
who brings good news,
who announces salvation,
who says to Zion, “Your God reigns.”
- 8** Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices,
together they sing for joy;
for in plain sight they see
the return of the LORD to Zion.
- 9** Break forth together into singing,
you ruins of Jerusalem;
for the LORD has comforted his people,
he has redeemed Jerusalem.
- 10** The LORD has bared his holy arm
before the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.

Luke 2:1-20

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** All went to their own towns to be registered. **4** Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. **5** He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. **6** While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. **7** And she

gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. **9** Then an angel of the Lord stood before 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; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: **11** to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” **16** So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. **17** When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. **19** But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

How beautiful upon the mountains

are the feet of the messenger who announces peace,

who brings good news,

who announces salvation.

Celebrated TV and film writer and producer, Aaron Sorkin, known for *The West Wing* and many other things, created a show a few years ago called *The Newsroom*. I highly recommend it. *The Newsroom* is the story of a news broadcast team, who are fighting against the public demand for insubstantial stories. The team is trying to tell the news, in a way that is significant and nuanced, to an audience whose primary desire is to gorge themselves on human-interest fluff pieces and consume images of other people’s tragedies.

Their attempt to produce this nuanced and serious news broadcast doesn't go very well, because the audience just doesn't know what to do with them. The show's ratings keep dropping, and try as they might to broadcast a news show that presents all sides of important issues that the American people need to be aware of, that's simply not the kind of news their viewers want to hear. You know, people may spout ideals about wanting to hear the news from a media perspective that is balanced and thoughtful, but often, that's not how it plays out in reality. Especially in this digital age, it is becoming increasingly easy to only hear the news you're predisposed to like.

We don't always know what to do with good news when we receive it.

Of course, this is by no means a new problem. People have never been good at discerning which news to trust.

Think all the way back to Adam and Eve, who believed the wrong news about the tree in the garden.

Or all the people who must have laughed as they watched Noah build an ark on dry land.

Or Abraham and Sarah, who weren't immediately convinced by God's promise that their descendants would be as numerous as the stars.

Or the Israelites, who wanted to return to the land of Pharaoh even though they had just been freed from slavery.

I think of Zechariah, who is so dumbfounded by the good news that his wife Elizabeth will bear a child, even in her old age, that he simply cannot believe it.

Even Mary, when she hears the news that she will bear the Son of God, she gets on board quickly, but her first question is, “Excuse me, how is this going to work?”

And today we read of shepherds, sitting in a field minding their own business when all of a sudden the glory of the Lord shines all around them. And they don’t celebrate at first, at first they are terrified.

We don’t always know what to do with good news when we receive it.

In our defense, though, the good news that we celebrate at Christmas is not the kind of news that makes sense at first glance. Just picture it, you’re in a field with your sheep and the glory of the Lord is shining all over the place and an army of angels appears in the sky and they’re singing, “Glory,” and it’s all for a child? A poor child, at that, born in a barn to parents of little consequence? This is how God chooses to come to the world? A baby, lying in manger? This is good news?

When we read the same story year after year, it’s easy to lose sight of how strange it is. We get used to it, like it’s no big deal that God’s salvation of the world begins in a barn. But we’ve got to be able to keep some sense of wonder. We can’t forget the strangeness of it all. Because the fact that this story is the story of how God’s good news breaks into the world has so much to tell us about who God is.

The story of Jesus says that we don’t have to get ourselves up to some high place for God to meet us, we don’t have to be people of influence or power, we don’t have to waste our time searching for fame or approval. Because when God comes into the world, God comes to the lowly, the people you would never expect. God doesn’t wait for us to be strong, God meets us in our weakness. That is good news.

And it's not just good news for Mary or for the shepherds, and it's not just good news for us, the angels say this is good news of great joy for all the people.

So here we are, on Christmas Eve in Roanoke, Virginia, reading the story again. If you're lucky, the presents are already wrapped, and the grocery shopping is done, and there's time to relax with family and friends. Or maybe you're a procrastinator like me and this afternoon will be spent with ribbons and paper and tape. But either way, we're all gathered here together in this moment to acknowledge that in the birth of Jesus Christ, the world has received good news.

And so the question then becomes: If there is good news, if the birth of Jesus Christ, God With Us, is good news of great joy for all people, what then are we to do with it?

What is the appropriate response? Is there any gift we could bring or give that would match this marvelous gift from God? Is there any song we could sing in praise of the Incarnation that would match the voice of angels singing glory and peace? Is there any word we could speak that would match the beauty of the Word made flesh?

Of course not. If we added together the goodness of all of our hearts and all the good gifts we plan to give to our loved ones and any good deed we might think to do on behalf of our neighbors this Christmas, all of that still is nothing compared to the goodness of the news that in Jesus, God has come to be with us.

It seems to me that all there is to do is to follow the example of Mary, to receive this story as a treasure, and ponder it with wonder in our hearts. And then

to follow the example of the shepherds who when they heard the news about Jesus, started talking about it, telling the story of what they had seen and heard.

Isaiah writes, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who brings good news.” That’s our work. That’s the response this story requires, that we be people who with great joy bear witness to the truth that in Jesus there is good news for everyone.

I’m not talking about finding a soapbox, and dragging it out to the street corner to start preaching, I’m talking about living a life that conveys good news, finding ways, by your welcome of strangers, and your love for your enemies, and your care for the hungry, and your courage in the face of trouble, to communicate that we don’t have to be afraid because God has come to be with us.

Every time we lift our voices together in song, or create space in our home to welcome someone who is lonely, or teach our children that they belong to the family of God, or visit with someone who is sick or in prison, or offer forgiveness to someone who doesn’t deserve it, we embody the truth that no matter who you are, no matter where you’re from, no matter what you’ve done, God has come to make a home with people, God has come to make a home with you.

And even on the days when we don’t know what to do with it, this is good news. Thanks be to God. Amen.