

Fear not!

Luke 2:1-11

December 21, 2014

Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born -- Christ the Lord!

What makes a good life? What makes a life good?

Having enough -- food, shelter, things ... Good health ... Fulfilling work ... Respect ... Fulfilling relationships ... Love ... Freedom ... Leisure ... Opportunities for challenge, for learning, for growth ...

Now, in that context, to come at the question naively, without presuppositions, what would it mean to be "saved?" Wouldn't it mean being rescued from a bad life and being given access to a life that is good?

"Don't be afraid!" the angel said to the shepherds.

Why were they afraid? If an angel of the Lord appeared to you at night and the glory of the Lord shone over you, wouldn't you be afraid?

But it's more than that, deeper than that. We have heard already how the coming of the promised One addresses the fears of people like Zechariah and the Jews waiting for their king: fears about a God who seems absent, fears about a God who seems silent. And we have heard how the promise of the coming One addresses the fears of people like Mary, afraid when God does speak, afraid when God is present. What the carol says of Bethlehem is true: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight."

Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you.

"Don't be afraid, you, shepherds, because I come with good news." What would be good news to a shepherd? What is a shepherd's greatest fear?

A shepherd's greatest fear is that his sons and daughters will grow up to be shepherds. He wants more for them, better for them, more than he has, better than he has. He wants a good life for his children.

The life of a shepherd was not good. It was hard work with little reward and little respect. Shepherds were regarded as dirty and dishonest, uneducated and unrefined. They worked alone and always on the move, so they were

loners, isolated and unattached. When you are a shepherd, you enjoy few of the things that make a life good. When you are a shepherd, you are stuck at the bottom of a highly stratified society: rich/poor, freeman/slave, Roman/Jew, male/female.

So what would be good news to a shepherd? What would it mean to be “saved?” Mary says it well, in the song she sang right after sharing the news of her pregnancy with Elizabeth:

*[The Lord] has stretched out his mighty arm
and scattered the proud with all their plans.
He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away with empty hands.*

Good news for a shepherd means being lifted up and filled up. Good news for a shepherd means turning the world upside down!

Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you.

But the angel said more ...

Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.

To all the people! Because?

Let me tell you a little understood secret. It brings great joy to be lifted up and it brings great joy to be brought down! Because when rich are divided from poor and slave from free and Roman from Jew and male from female and black from white and citizen from immigrant and penthouse from slum and first world from third world -- all are trapped, we all suffer.

God made us for community. God made us for community where all enjoy a good life because all have enough, and where all have enough because all care for each other and provide for each other. When community is broken, when we live divided from each other, when we don't care about each other, when we don't care about every other, life by definition is not good. The life any of us has, on the bottom or at the top, is not good.

The angel promised a savior, one born to save us. Not by destroying our enemies, but by destroying enmity itself. Not by destroying sinners, but by destroying sin itself. It is the oppressive structures themselves -- the economic

and social and even religious edifices that reinforce the status quo and keep people in their places -- that must be overcome and dismantled. These are the real bad guys, harming both exploited and exploiter alike. It is from these that we must be saved.

But how does a savior save? In one of two ways. By rescuing people in peril, by providing an escape, by removing them from danger. Or by defeating their enemies, by removing the danger itself.

How does Jesus save? Not by providing an escape, not by removing us from this world filled with evil, but by defeating the evil, by overcoming selfishness and greed and pride and fear and envy, overcoming them all by love. Jesus saves by making things right, by making things good, by making life good, for all people.

So, does that mean that when Jesus comes, no one will have to grow up to be a shepherd anymore? No. It means that when Jesus comes, shepherds' work, just as the work any of us does, will be regarded as important and valuable and useful and worthy of praise. It means that when Jesus comes, being a shepherd will be an honored and well-respected and well-rewarded profession.

Because, after all, it was our Lord's profession! "The Lord is my shepherd." The Lord protects. The Lord provides. The Lord has provided us a savior ...