

# Joy brings Hope

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] And now we're going to hear Anna Lauren read to us from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verses 1 to 20. So listen carefully. This is God's word.

In those days, Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth to Galilee in Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

[ 1 : 0 4 ] An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all people.

Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born for you. He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in a manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

[ 2 : 1 8 ] The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Thanks, Anna Lorne. That was great.

We're going to take a look now at what we've just read together. And you might not ever have watched a Cornerstone service before, but over the last few weeks, we've been working our way through the first couple of chapters of the Gospel of Luke, just reorientating ourselves towards the Christmas story.

And Luke's Gospel begins with the author, Luke, writing to his friend, Theophilus, saying, I've put together this account for you so that you have a really reliable record of the life of Jesus Christ.

So it's a well-researched document, the Gospel of Luke. It's well and carefully researched, and it's based on eyewitness testimony. And that kind of thorough research is found here again in the beginning of chapter two, where what Luke does is he locates the story of Jesus, not in some kind of legendary setting or mythical story, but in the days of Caesar Augustus, when a census has been taken, when Quirinius is governor of Syria, when David and his family go, when Joseph and his family go from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the town of David.

So there is this very specific locating of the birth of Jesus in a historical narrative. So that's a good thing to know if you're somebody who has a lot of questions about the Bible or about Jesus.

[ 4 : 11 ] You know, what degree of credibility is there to what we read in the Bible? Well, it's well-researched, and it's geographically and historically located.

That might not be enough to convince you, of course, that you really want to be a Christian. But you're here, watching maybe with a family member or a friend or a little bit of curiosity.

But although you might be willing to sort of take a look at Christianity, you don't really have much sense that you want to become a fully-fledged, Bible-believing Christian follower of Jesus Christ.

You're happy enough the way you are. You're not really convinced that Christianity is what everybody claims it to be or what believers claim it to be. C.S. Lewis, who is the author of the Narnia Chronicles, he wrote this.

He said, In 1929, I knelt and prayed. Perhaps the most dejected and reluctant convert in all of England.

[ 5 : 22 ] That's from his book, Surprised by Joy. C.S. Lewis did not want Christianity to be true, and he did not want to be a Christian. So what happened?

Well, he says himself, He felt the unrelenting approach of him who I so earnestly desired not to meet.

And the more he saw of God and knew God, the more he knew that the desire that he called joy, a desire that C.S. Lewis had pondered deeply throughout his life, that that desire for joy was pointing him towards God himself.

It's a longing for beauty that C.S. Lewis recognized would be met only finally, ultimately, in God.

C.S. Lewis writes this, We do not merely want to see beauty. We want it to be united with the beauty we see, to pass into it, to receive it into ourselves, to bathe in it, to become part of it.

[ 6 : 24 ] And to C.S. Lewis's surprise, he found this beauty, this aesthetic sense fulfilled in God. In God, he found the joy that his heart had searched for for so long.

And the Christmas story is the story of the unrelenting approach of joy. Despite every obstacle, despite human resistance, God comes to bring joy to the world.

We read the angel's message. Do not be afraid, they say. I bring good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

That's in verse 10, if you've got a Bible, or if you're looking at our order of service. So, Christmas is about the approach of joy. I think a lot of us are probably feeling pretty gutted this morning.

There's another setback, isn't there, in terms of coronavirus, a new variant spreading more quickly. And last night, to our dismay, our Christmas plans were largely cancelled.

[ 7 : 34 ] A precious time that we were all looking forward to after a difficult year. A precious time with family and friends was suddenly snatched away from us at the last minute. Can we really then end 2020 with joy?

We feel the darkness and the struggle of our world. Is there a joy that will overcome that? Well, that's what God has promised in his son, Jesus Christ. So, we're looking for the outbreak of joy in our own lives, in our own hearts, and in our own minds.

We're looking for the outbreak of joy in our church, Cornerstone, in our neighborhood, Morningside, in our city of Edinburgh, in our nation, Scotland. We hope that there will be a great outbreak of joy despite the hard things that we're facing together.

So, my message this morning is that when Jesus comes and breaks into our world, and when Jesus breaks into our life, then joy breaks into our life as well.

First thing I want to think about then is this joy, the joy that comes to us because the Savior is born. Then we're going to think a little bit about the Savior, this idea of a Savior that we find here in the angel's announcement.

[ 8 : 46 ] Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. And we're going to think a little bit about glory. The angels sing glory to God in the highest. On earth, peace to men in whom his favor rests.

And we're going to think a little bit about worship. The shepherds in this story finish off in a place of worship. They're returned. We read in verse 20, glorifying and praising God.

So, joy, salvation, glory, and worship. Four ideas that are so closely connected to the Christmas theme. So, the joy that the angels announce is a joy that says, today in the town of David, a Savior has been born.

That's the reason for joy. The Christ has come. He is Christ the Lord, the Savior. So, what the angels are pointing to as the source of joy is what Christians call the incarnation of God.

And this amazing, deep, wonderful theological truth is revealed to some shepherds on the hillside. And in that, again, Luke is showing us something that we might call the upside-down kingdom of God.

[ 9 : 58 ] God doesn't come to the rich, the powerful, the successful, the good. In the first chapter of Luke, he comes to an elderly and childless couple or to a young virgin who's waiting to be married.

And in this chapter, he comes to shepherds. And shepherds, in that culture, and I'm quite defensive of shepherds. My dad was a shepherd, so I like to stick up for the shepherds of this world.

But in that culture, shepherds were seen as being religiously and socially unclean. They were religious and social outsiders. There's a pub in Morningside called the Cannymans.

And I think the sign is gone now, but there used to be a sign outside the Cannymans that was quite famous because it was there. It was a brass plate and it said, no smoking, no credit cards, no mobile phones, no cameras, no backpackers.

So there you go. That was the landlord's attitude. Well, the synagogues of the first century in Israel apparently had a similar sign that said, no Gentiles, no tax collectors, and no shepherds.

[ 11 : 03 ] Shepherds were at the bottom of the heap of respectability. But it's to these shepherds that the angel comes to announce the incarnation, the birth of Christ the Lord in Bethlehem.

He is Christ the Lord or the Messiah. That means he's the anointed of God, the divine savior. We call this the incarnation. And the incarnation is a stunning idea.

It's not just the idea that God has somehow taken on human shape or human form, as some religions might say. It's not some kind of syncretism, you know, half God, half man.

The incarnation in Christian understanding is this, that someone who is fully and absolutely God becomes also fully and absolutely human.

He is completely both. His deity is complete and his humanity is complete. He is God in human flesh. He is like us in every way, the Bible tells us, except without sin.

[ 12 : 16 ] So in Jesus, the incarnate son of God, we find two complete and perfect natures in one person. His divine nature is exactly like the Father's in heaven and his human nature is exactly like ours, except without sin.

And both those two natures retain their own distinctive characteristics, but are united in the one person of Jesus Christ. Bethlehem is a place of wonder.

God is made flesh. That's an incredible thing. And it happens because God is sending his son to be the one mediator between God and man.

He's come to be our savior, and that's a cause for joy. Now, not every day, even in the church, wants to go down this road of believing in this great truth of the incarnation as it's expressed like that.

Some people want to sort of disengage from the supernatural and the miraculous elements of the Christmas story.

[ 13 : 30 ] But it's so important for us to understand that Christmas is a supernatural intervention. It's the breaking in of the kingdom of God.

It's another world striking into the darkness of our world, a world of light and glory and hope. That's what we need to know. And it's not an idea or a principle or a metaphor.

It's a historical event and reality that means it has real impact in our lives. It's not just an idea to give us hope in the darkness of winter.

It's God come to rescue us from what we cannot undo, our own sin and lostness. If it's not incredible, miraculous and mind-bending, it's not really good news, is it?

If it's just a metaphor, it's not really going to save me. So there are a lot of people in the modern world who are embarrassed by the supernatural, the transcendent.

[ 14 : 33 ] They've lost all true sense of the sacred order. But if there is no transcendent, if there is no sacred order, then there is no one greater than us to redeem us from the mess that we're in.

And if there's no one to redeem us from the suffering of our current lives and the current situation of our world, then we begin to lose hope.

We've got no way to navigate the suffering. But if there is a God, we should not be surprised that that God comes and intervenes in the world.

But what does surprise us perhaps when we see the bitterness of our own lives is that that God comes to intervene in love and in humility and in grace.

So there is joy because God has intervened. There is salvation. The Saviour is born this day. That's my second point, isn't it? The root of this joy is the coming of the Saviour.

[ 15 : 34 ] The incarnation is the rescue plan of God swinging into action. Now, the idea of redemption or salvation is deeply embedded in the human soul. We all want a Redeemer, a Saviour.

We all hold on to the idea that there is some one person or something who is going to come along and turn our lives around. It might be a Prince Charming.

It might be a benefactor, a hero. It might be a lottery card that you're hanging on to turn around your life. It might be the researcher who finds a miracle cure for our disease.

It might be the researchers who are finding vaccines for COVID-19. We see hope only if there are people who will rescue us from the dire circumstances of our lives.

This is a familiar human story. We all feel this need to be rescued from our problems, from our loneliness, from our suffering, from our struggles.

[ 16 : 41 ] Now, that same story of redemption, that sense of redemption, is powerfully embedded in the Bible. You know, the Bible is not just a random collection of ideas, stories, poems, history.

It's a carefully constructive narrative that from beginning to end is woven through with this great theme of redeeming love. The grace of God coming in to a lost world to bring life, to bring hope, to bring joy.

From Genesis onwards, there's the promise of a rescuer, a redeemer. And the time that Luke is writing of here in first century AD Israel, the people of Israel feel that need for a redeemer, for a rescuer, for a savior.

They feel that really deeply. Their world feels dark. For the nation of Israel, the prophets have been silent for generations.

For the people of Israel, their land is occupied by the Romans, an alien people who have rendered Israel, the sacred promised land, unclean.

[ 17 : 58 ] This is a time of deep national distress, a time of political and religious turmoil. And so this hope for a redeemer, a messiah who will turn things on their head, burns deeply in the heart of many Israelites.

And now that hope is reaching its crescendo, its turning point has come. The rescuer, we're being told, the Messiah, the Savior has arrived.

There is great joy for all people in the town of David as Savior has been born. He is the Messiah, Christ the Lord. So at this coming of Jesus, the breaking in of the Christ is a source of amazing joy.

It's one of the great truths of Christianity that joy comes to God's people still in the midst of the difficulties of life, that our lives, our lives where sorrowing and rejoicing can coexist.

I know that quite a lot of you are sorrowing this morning because of your circumstances. You're grieved that you can't be with the people you want to be over the Christmas season.

[ 19 : 06 ] And I'm not saying that Jesus will take all that grief away, but what I am saying is that into that grief, he comes with the joy of his salvation.

We have sorrow along with rejoicing because this is a moment of grace, isn't it? Of undeserved love and favor. God stepping into our world, humbling himself to take our nature, embracing our sorrows, our tears, our suffering, our loneliness.

Think of the family in heaven that he left, the father that he departed from in his human incarnation. Think of the glory that he left to be in the darkness, the coldness, the sorrow of this world, so that he can bring into the mode of our suffering the joy of his being, the joy of hope.

He's the savior. And the joy of his being becomes ours when we will embrace him as savior. To be saved is to have our sin forgiven, our rejection and rebellion against God forgiven through Jesus Christ, through his death and resurrection.

That's the nub of the Christian message. We're loved so much that God gives his one and only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish for their sin but have everlasting life.

[ 20 : 47 ] So there's joy, there's salvation and there's glory. The shepherds hear something amazing. verse 13, sound waves pour down through the night skies.

They vibrate with the most beautiful noise the shepherds have ever heard. There's an intimation, an announcement of another world in the songs of angelic hosts.

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly hosts appear with the angel praising God. The heavens are parted. They're given a view into another greater reality in which God exists in all glory.

His majesty unveiled. And the angels are praising God and saying glory to God in the highest peace on earth to men on whom his favor, his grace rests.

rests. What a beautiful thing the shepherds were given. A taste of a greater and a better world.

[ 22 : 03 ] A taste of the angels of heaven praising the God of redemption and rescue. Delighting that the birth of the Savior means that God's rescue plan for a lost world is being put into action.

And the angels sing glory to God and on earth peace to men on whom his favor lies. I love that connection. It means a lot to me personally.

You know, my heart gets troubled and struggles just like yours. worries, fears, doubts, concerns, inadequacies.

Often life feels restless and difficult rather than peaceful. The more we see of glory, the glory there is in God's salvation and in God's Savior, the more we find our peace.

peace. The more we see of his glory, the more we'll have peace and not be afraid. And we see his glory, not the way that the angels see it in bright light of a greater reality.

[ 23 : 24 ] We see glory in the fact of the incarnation. That's a glorious thing that God took flesh and came to die for us and rescue us.

it's in this humble self-giving love that we see his glory most clearly and most definitively. That this God of majesty and eternal greatness is willing to humble himself, to love us in such a costly way.

That is glorious and this is our peace. He gives us peace with God, peace with the difficult circumstances that we face together at the end of 2020, peace with each other in hard relationships, peace with our past and the things that bring us shame or guilt, peace with our future as we worry about what's ahead, peace with death as we think about our humanity and mortality.

All that peace through the coming of Jesus and the glimpsing of his glory. This is good news for us. It's good news for angels.

It's good news for first century shepherds and it's good news for 21st century Edinburgh's or wherever you're watching from. And because it's good news, there is peace and there is joy.

[ 24 : 52 ] And we find that here, don't we? We find worship. worship. The shepherds return glorifying and praising God for all the things they've seen.

They worship Jesus. So they head down to Bethlehem, they see the baby in the manger, they talk to Mary and Joseph, they tell many of their angelic visit, and then they head off again, changed men with their hearts, ignited with a sense of worship.

Meeting with the Savior, knowing the Savior has come, replaces fear with worship. They've been allowed to see beyond the struggles of this world to the goodness and the grace of God.

God here shows his love to some unlovely shepherds. They don't deserve his love, they can't earn his love. And God equally shows his love today to unlovely us.

We don't deserve his love, we can't earn it, but he loves us anyway. So I want to encourage you this Christmas, maybe even for the first time, to be a worshiper of Christ Jesus, the Savior, the incarnate deity.

[ 26 : 13 ] This is a difficult season for us, for our world, for the human race in the face of a pandemic. It's throwing the economies into chaos, it's going to have a huge impact on everyone and lots of us have suffered loss, bereavement, illness.

And one of the things that is true of us as modern people is that we're not well equipped for suffering. one of my favourite books is a book by the Canadian author Douglas Copeland, and he's got a book called Life After God, and he talks about what it means to be human in a world where the reality, the presence of God has been discounted.

And he acknowledges that it makes us fearful, stressed, anxious, and insecure. Tim Keller, who is a well-known minister in Manhattan at Redeemer Presbyterian Church, said that modern society is the worst culture in the history of the world at preparing us for suffering.

And this is a time of suffering, and we find ourselves ill-prepared. And that's because religious people find the meaning of life in a sacred order outside of this world.

And that sense of sacred order allows suffering to serve a purpose. If we have a sense of sacred order, then we can see some place for suffering.

[ 27 : 54 ] For the Christian, it might be that we think that suffering will get us closer to Jesus, to depend more on him. In a non-Christian religion, it might be that we believe suffering will get us a better deal with God or a better reincarnation.

But if we have a sense of sacred order, then for us, suffering will have a value in it. That's true for Muslims and Christians and Buddhists.

But modern secular people don't have this. And in our time of widespread suffering, without a sense of God, many of us are struggling to navigate what's hard and to maintain a sense of hope.

We live in a culture that is marked by a lot of despair, a lot of destructive lives and lifestyles. How do we escape this life of fear, anxiety, and insecurity?

How can you escape your life, your fearfulness, your anxieties, your insecurities? Let the glory of God in the person of Jesus enter your life.

[ 29 : 13 ] Open yourself to that reality. Open yourself to Jesus. Even now, sitting where you are, right in your home, invite Jesus into your life.

Just say that simple prayer. Lord, I don't know what's going on here. I struggle to believe, but I need you. Help me. Speak to me. Show me something.

Help me to be part of your story. Help me to know you as my saviour. Let your joy fill me this Christmas. Let me say a short word of prayer.

I'm going to hand back to Fergus. I'm going to have a song, and then we'll have a time of prayer, and then another song, and then we'll end. So let me pray briefly. Lord Jesus, we do want to just thank you for the joy of knowing that our saviour has come, that we get a glimpse of the glory of God and the incarnation of Jesus the saviour, and that this is given to us, that we might know what it is to worship you and find life in you.

We pray for each of us today, no matter the difficulties or the sorrow that we face in life, that we will not be overwhelmed, but that you will be our peace, and that even in grief we will find joy.

[ 30 : 39 ] Lord, what an amazing gift that would be. Grant it to us, we ask, in the name of your Son and for his glory. Amen.