As we conclude our Advent series, *The Sounds of Christmas*, I invite you to open your Bible to Luke 2:8-14. As we’ve put an ear to the infancy texts in Matthew and Luke we’ve heard the sound of an old man’s silence, a wise man’s question, and a baby’s cry. Those are earthy sounds. Today we hear a sound from the heavens: *an angel’s song*. Okay, well, maybe it’s not a song, but Handel turned it into one in his masterpiece, *The Messiah*, so I can’t help but hear it as a song every time I read it. Hear the word of the Lord ... *(read the text).*

I

**Have you noticed how people are getting pretty creative with birth announcements these days?**

Some are **clever**. I saw one of a box full of Styrofoam popcorn in which lay a baby partially covered with that popcorn, and tucked behind the baby was a copy of the Owner’s Manual. And there was **this other announcement** too: A picture of a baby alongside these words: “*After nine months of construction our little project is complete.*” Some are pretty clever.

Some are **honest**: A picture of a newborn with these words underneath the picture: “*We had a baby. Send gifts.*” And another one that had a picture of the baby and these words: “*What the heck are we supposed to do with this thing?*” Honest.

And some are **poetic**. Here’s one I saw:

A star fell down from heaven  
and landed in our arms.  
With all of Mommy’s sweetness  
and all of Daddy’s charms.

In our entertainment culture, young people are getting more and more **dramatic** all the time: marriage proposals worthy of a Steven Spielberg production; Princess Di weddings; gender-reveal parties when the expectant couple finds out what they are having; and birth announcements that have a
lot more flash and fanfare than “It’s a boy!” or “It’s a girl!” Young parents are getting more and more creative about birth announcements all the time.

Well, they don’t have anything over on God. Could a birth announcement be any more dramatic than an angel in the night sky surrounded by the flashing, piercing light of the glory of God? I’ve seen a lot of birth announcements in my time. Not one stirred a stitch of fear or raised a single goose bump. But the shepherds who got the birth announcement God sent were quivering like a leaf in a gale. This was not your average singing telegram. This was big-time—brought to a group of shepherds in a field near Bethlehem by Heaven & Earth Productions and directed by God Almighty himself: “Lights! Camera! Action!”

“Jesus’ birth announcement: take one.”

And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

“Cue the choir!”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”

“Cut!”

And as quickly as they appeared, the angels exited “stage up” into heaven and left a group of shepherds staring into that starry black sky with eyes as big as saucers, knocking knees, and racing hearts. Now that’s a birth announcement!
The announcement came first to the shepherds, and if it had a P.S. it would read “Everybody’s welcome.”

Shepherds were not exactly the cream of polite Jewish society. Some of them were akin to the cowhands you might find in an old Western—roughnecks, drifters who moved from one ranch to another. They worked hard and they played hard. Come payday they’d head to town to get drunk, play poker, and pick up women. By and large, they were not family men, and you weren’t going to find them in church either. Too many of them would be sleeping off a Saturday night hangover.

But not all of them. Many shepherds were known to be devoted, selfless individuals willing to risk life and limb to care for their flocks. Didn’t God liken himself to a shepherd? “The Lord is my shepherd,” prayed David in Psalm 23. Isaiah said that God “tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers them in his arms and carries them close to his heart” (40:11). And Jesus even said, “I am the Good Shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me … and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15).

So shepherds were a mixed bag—many good, some bad. But one thing was consistent about shepherds: they were a lower class of people. They were not accustomed to hearing from angels or getting invited to the birthday party of a king. None of them were important people. And yet God chose to invite them to be the first guests at the birthday party of His Son. You wouldn’t exactly enlist these rugged men for nursery duty at church, yet God tells them to go see His baby boy, and then they become the first to spread the word of His birth.

What kind of God wants to invite folks like that to come storming into the dingy, makeshift maternity ward of His Son? I suppose only a God who is serious about this birth being “good news of great joy ... for all people.” All people—the highbrow and the riff raff, the rough and the refined, the bluebloods and the blue-collars, Africans, Chinese, Russians, Serbians, British, Hondurans, Canadians, Americans, those like the Gentile wise men who can bring gifts and those like the Jewish shepherds who can only bring their noisy, uncouth selves.

The P.S. on the birth announcement to the shepherds is “Everybody’s welcome.”
But in its larger context, this birth announcement is addressed not just to the shepherds, **but to people like Caesar and Herod**—the Caesar who was about to lay another burdensome tax on the oppressed people of Israel, and the Herod who, as Matthew tells us in his Gospel, would soon send a murder squad to Bethlehem to kill the baby Jesus. And the P.S. on this birth announcement that shows up in their mailbox reads “**Your days are numbered.**”

The last part of the angel’s announcement, “**Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased ...**,” is very much akin to the prelude of Caesar’s royal proclamations that were read in the marketplace in the occupied territories whenever the emperor wanted something done: “**Glory to Augustus Caesar, God in the Highest, and on earth, peace to those with whom he is well pleased**”—and presumably hell on earth to anyone who opposes him. The obvious relationship in these announcements means this angel’s song is not just a baby’s lullaby; it’s a protest song—a God-righting-the-world song.

The angel’s birth announcement described Jesus as “**Christ the Lord.**” Lord means boss, head honcho, chief, supreme commander, CEO—or to say more succinctly: large and in charge. In Mary’s song in chapter 1, she mentioned that Jesus “**has brought down the mighty from their thrones.**” So sure was Mary that Jesus would do this, she spoke of it in past tense before He was even born. Rulers have their day. Tyrants may run roughshod over people who can’t do anything about it. Dictators may think themselves invincible, beat their chests, and speak of a thousand year reign. But when the Lord is ready to deal with them, he can knock them off their high-horse with one hand tied behind His back—with both hands tied behind His back. All God has to do is blow on them and they will be no more.

It’s good to know in our world of dictators and terrorists and trouble-makers, that when Jesus’ birth announcement shows up at their door it has this foreboding little P.S. at the bottom: “**Your days are numbered.**”

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But this birth announcement also shows up at the **door of the fearful**, and the P.S. on their announcement is the message of the angel, “*Fear not.*” *Lots of people* living in fear these days. In a school in Pakistan this past week, Islamic terrorists massacred more than 140 children and their teachers. In a restaurant in Sydney, Australia, a lone wolf terrorist held many hostages and killed two. On the streets of some of our cities, demonstrators have burned businesses and wrecked whole city streets. There are *black people* who are afraid of the cops, and city governments who are afraid of riots. Sony pulled the plug on a new movie called *The Interview* because hackers have threatened a terrorist attack on theaters that show it. *Lots of fear in our world.* Just think of the **last few years**—who’d have ever imagined that sitting in a school, watching a movie at a local theater, eating at a public restaurant, going to church, sleeping in your bed, or just sitting at a stop sign could get you killed. *Lots of people living in fear these days for sure.*

And it’s more than the threat of terrorism that strikes fear in people’s hearts. Like a culture we don’t understand, running out of money, health concerns, even something like sharing Jesus with lost friends. Plenty of fear to go around in our world. And if this describes you, be sure and check the P.S. on Jesus’ birth announcement to you: “*Fear not.*”

Jesus would tell His disciples that very same message on many occasions: like when Jesus was transfigured and when the disciples saw him walking on the water and when Mary saw the risen Jesus in the garden: “*Do not be afraid.*” God is good. He uses His power for good. Take courage and do not be afraid for God is with you wherever we go.

A mother went in to her son’s room one night to calm him down during a raging thunderstorm. “*Would you please stay in my room,*” he begged. She said, “*No, I have to stay in Daddy’s room.*” There was a pause ... and then that shaky little voice said, “*The big sissy.*” Hey, if you’re a big sissy as you face the fearful things of life, check that P.S. on the Jesus’ birth announcement to you: “*Fear not.*”
And if you're depressed, don’t forget to check the P.S. on the birth announcement that came in your mailbox: “Good news of great joy.” As we all know, Christmas is not so joyful for everyone. If you’re depressed, everything feels like bad news, and it’s hard to find the good news even in Christmas. It can be a little depressing to the poor who want to do more for their families than they can afford. It can be depressing to the family that faces an empty chair at the Christmas table and one less stocking on the mantle—grief is often accentuated by Christmas. It can be depressing to the person who is alone. This “good news of great joy” is easily missed by some.

But don’t you miss it. The good news of great joy is that the real gift of Christmas is not what we give another but what God has given us in Jesus. That’s right. Christmas is the only birthday party you’ll ever attend where the birthday boy and his angels sing “Happy Birthday” to you. He’s the gift. And that gift means “God with us.” You are not as alone as you may think. And your believing loved one who is no longer with you is with Jesus because Jesus defeated death and the grave and robbed it of its power to keep us from one another forever. There’s joy there. And if you’ll open your heart to the birthday boy Jesus, He may surprise you with joy in these next few days. If you’re in the midst of a blue Christmas, read that P.S. on Jesus’ birth announcement over and over again: “Good news of great joy.”

VI

And if you’re a sinner, read the P.S. on the birth announcement addressed to you: “a Savior who is Christ the Lord”—God sent a Savior. There are four statements in the gospels where Jesus describes why He came in the first place. Two of them point particularly to those who don’t know Him.

- “I have come to seek and to save the lost” (Lk. 19:10).

- And Mark 10:45 — “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Jesus came to save sinners, to find the lost, to give His life so that we may live and live forever. He did that on a cross in which He bore our sin and endured our hell and killed sin’s penalty and power over all who will put their trust in Him. And just to prove that Jesus was more than just one more
martyr for one more cause, on the third day He rose from the dead alive, victorious, and Lord.

If you’ve never put your trust in Jesus, if you have no idea what would become of you should you keel over dead today, then you need to be saved from your sin. Only Jesus can do that. And Jesus wants to do that. So turn from your sin, throw yourself on the mercy of God, and receive the gift of salvation God wrapped up for you and laid at the foot of a Christmas tree that looks oddly like a cross. And the angel’s song declared it so on that Bethlehem night when Jesus was born. So if you’re a sinner and have yet to put your faith in Christ’s finished work in the cross and resurrection, go ahead, check your birth announcement and read that P.S.: “A Savior who is Christ the Lord.”

VII

But if you are a saint—I don’t mean a perfect Christian; I mean someone who is saved already—you’re not left off the birth announcement list either. And the P.S. on the announcement with your name on the envelope is this: “On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.” This is not a declaration that those who please God will have a problem-free life. We Christians can have just as hard a life as those who don’t know Jesus. We can get cancer. We can go broke. We can face the tragic loss of those we love. We can be served with divorce papers. We can fail to make the team. We can watch our family go down in flames. We can lose a job. We can see our dreams die. We can be victims of crime and abuse. We can hurt others in ways that come back to haunt us. We can get hurt in falls and crashes and relationships. But no matter what happens to us, we’ve got this: we’ve got the peace of God.

“Peace I leave with you,” says Jesus. “My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid” (Jn. 14:27). We who know Jesus have peace. “How so?” some ask. It’s part of the fruit the Holy Spirit brings into our lives when He moves in. But I can’t explain it. If I could, it wouldn’t be a peace that passes understanding (Phil. 4:7), a peace that makes no sense based on the current circumstances. But we saints have the peace of God. Maybe it’s because we know that God is with us and we can talk with Him about whatever’s on our mind or happening in our lives—our troubles, our triumphs, our sins, our failures, anything. Maybe it’s because we know that nothing happens to us that catches God by
surprise or hasn’t passed His counsel. Maybe it’s because we know that God works for the good in all things for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. Maybe it’s because we know that no matter what happens to us, in the end we get heaven, and nothing that befell us in this world will matter anymore. We Christians—we saints—can’t explain this peace, but we can experience it.

It doesn’t mean we have no anxiety; it does mean we have a place to carry that anxiety when it comes. It doesn’t mean we won’t stew on occasion about this or that; it does mean that Christ finds ways to dump His peace into that stew and make it go down easier. That’s the P.S. on the end of Jesus’ birth announcement to the saints, and we praise God for it: “On earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.”

VII

Quite a birth announcement, huh? And with a little P.S. on there for us all. Sort of makes you want to join the angel song and sing, “Glory to God in the highest!” It stirs the soul.

In her classic book, The Best Christmas Pageant Ever, Barbara Robinson tells the story of the Christmas play that was invaded by the Herdmans—a local family with barely two nickels to rub together and trouble-makers to boot. They never came to church until they heard that the church provided snacks. Despite protests from other church members, the kids were given roles in the Sunday School Christmas play. Gladys Herdman was assigned the part of the angel who spoke to the shepherds. As the shepherds knelt near the front of the church, Gladys the angel came swooping in from the back and began pushing toward the manger saying, “Hey! Hey! Unto you a child is born! Hurry up and go see him. Come on, hurry up. Unto you a child is born.” Not exactly a direct quote of Luke 2, but I like it: “Hey! Hey you! Yes, you! No matter who you are or where you are, what you’ve done or what you’re struggling with, unto you a child is born!” That’s the angel’s song all right, and it’s a glorious thing.

So glory to God in the highest,
and in the lowest,
and everywhere in between.
Glory to God!
For unto you is born on Christmas day
a for-everybody, Caesar-thumping,
fear-destroying, joy-giving,
soul-saving, peace-making
Savior who is Christ the Lord.
   GLORY!!

And Merry Christmas!

Preached: December 21, 2014
First Baptist Church, Hot Springs, AR
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