

Go Tell It On the Mountain

Luke 2:8-20

Introduction

Christmas Songs Are Weird: This series is based on famous Christmas songs. But, have you ever noticed that so many of the secular Christmas songs are a *little strange*.

- “We Wish You a Merry Christmas”: Bring us some figgy pudding (bad taste); won’t leave until we get some (rude).
- “Little Drummer Boy”: The least desired gift for the mother of a newborn is a drum solo.
- “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas”: It may be your last? Thanks Debbie Downder.
- “All I Want for Christmas is You”: I don’t want a lot for Christmas (just you); am I not a big deal?
 - I have strong Christmas opinions: “Die Hard” is more of a Christmas movie than “It’s a Wonderful Life”; the new “Grinch” movie is better than the original or the Jim Carey remake; I’d rather see a 40-year-old Macauley Culkin as Kevin in a Home Alone movie than any new kid.

Songs of a Savior: This series is about *Christian Advent Hymns*. Despite the silly and secular songs, we have a rich tradition of theologically beautiful songs that powerfully explain the significance and magnificence of the incarnation of our Savior.

- I had a few choices for songs to illustrate tonight’s passage, including “Hark the Herald Angels Sing.” But I landed on **“Go Tell It On the Mountain.”** for a couple of reasons.
 - (1) It simply and memorably tells the story of the angels and shepherds -and-
 - (2) It comes from the African-American spiritual tradition (a tradition that was developed in suffering and solidarity). This is time-tested, real-world, suffering-refined theology that buoys the spirit and focuses the heart.
 - (3) It connects what we *learn* about Christ to what we should *do* in response.

Go Tell It On the Mountain: Go, tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Go, tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.

- While shepherds kept their watching o’er silent flocks by night, behold throughout the heavens there shone a Holy light.
- The shepherds feared and trembled, when, lo! above the Earth, rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior’s birth.
- Down in a lowly manger our humble Christ was born and brought us all salvation that blessed Christmas morn.

The gospel calms our fears and brings joy to our hearts, compelling us to worship Jesus and tell others!

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ 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. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” ¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

1. An Unexpected Audience (vv. 8-9)

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ 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.

The Myth of Outcast Shepherds: The main characters we’re going to focus on in this week’s passage are these shepherds. Put yourself in their shoes: you’re sleepily sitting with your sheep. Maybe you’re huddled around the fire sharing stories. Then all of a sudden, an angel appears!

- But there’s a little bit of a myth about these shepherds floating around (there’s a few Christmas myths floating around: silent night, donkey, etc.). Some preachers like to make the case that the shepherds represent the outcast, the poor, the shunned of society. That the shepherds would be unwelcome in polite Jewish society because of their occupation and reputation.
 - This comes from a few sources (Rabbis, Aristotle, etc.), but all of these historical sources are hundreds of years after the time of Jesus or from places like Greece (not exactly Israel).
- But this makes no sense. Shepherds were an integral part of society. Sheep were an important part of the economic and religious system. Many children would have grown up caring for sheep (West African child shepherds). Plus, some of the most important people in the history of Israel were shepherds: the great prophet, **Moses**, was a shepherd at one point (burning bush). The great king, **David**, was famously a shepherd.
 - Jesus describes the problem of Israel as a shepherd problem (sheep without a shepherd). Jesus describes himself as the good shepherd.
 - In the Jewish sacrificial system, the sheep dies for the shepherd. In the gospel, the Good shepherd dies for the sheep.

Ordinary People: I think the idea that shepherds aren’t outcasts belies a more insidious fear we have and a more subtle problem the Gospels point out. The shepherds are perfectly *ordinary* people. They aren’t poor, they aren’t rich. They aren’t powerless or powerful.

- They are normal, hard-working, everyday people. They aren't famous or infamous. In fact, they are sort of forgotten to history.
 - And Jesus is announced to *this* group. He's heralded to *ordinary* shepherds. This is seen over and over again in the infancy narrative. Born in an ordinary town (not a capital city or metropolis), to an ordinary girl (not a queen) and a contractor (not a king, philosopher, or general).
- Have you ever felt, like me, little and insignificant in a world of 7 billion people, where all the news is of big political and economic and social movements and of outstanding people with lots of power and prestige? God's love and power is as present and clear for every ordinary person as anyone else.

But we don't think this way. One of the reasons that so many missed Jesus was his particularly nondescript entrance.

- He wasn't born in the luxury of Herod's palace.
- He wasn't born to the royalty of Rome.
- He wasn't born to the High priest at the Temple in Jerusalem.
- He wasn't the son of a powerful military general.
 - He was born to an everyday girl, in an everyday city, and his birth announcement came to everyday shepherds.
- "As there are no little people in God's sight, so there are no little places" (Schaeffer). I'm not sure how to get this through our heads and hearts. We have to stop chasing celebrity or infamy. We have to stop seeking fame or pity. The gospel allows us to be ourselves in Christ.

Why Is This a Shock to Us?: There is still a huge disconnect between the truth of who Jesus calls and who society values. They value the powerful, the palace, and the prestigious.

- "Not only does God not say that size and power (and prestige) go together, but he reverses this and tells us to be deliberately careful not to choose a place too big for us. We all tend to emphasize big works and big places, but all such emphasis is of the flesh" (Schaeffer).
- Power is always preferred by the world rather than humility.
- But none of us can wield power, or deserve power, and, ultimately it destroys us.
- God comes to the humble, he seeks the meek, he looks for the forgotten.

2. A Spectacular Announcement (vv. 10-14)

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Amazing News: Notice Mary wasn't amazed at *who* heard the announcement but *what* the announcement was.

- Have you ever received amazing news (e.g., a few great birth announcements, Joshua)?
- This announcement *is* good news and *causes* great joy

Gospel: The word “gospel” literally means “good news” (εὐ + ἀγγελιον; εὐ + λόγος). It is a type of news that brings joy (rather than dread or fear or sadness). Cf. “tell me the good news first; want the good news or the bad news.” **Biblically** it is talking about the news that God has made a way for us to enter his kingdom through the death and resurrection of Jesus by God’s grace alone. It’s news that changes a life forever.

- After being invaded and enslaved by Persia, Greece won two decisive battles at Marathon and Solis (ca. 490 BC). The Greeks sent out heralds, also called evangelists (good news announcers), to proclaim good news to the cities. We have fought for you. We have won. And now, you are no longer slaves but free.
- The reality is we are all slaves. Slaves to sin and slaves to death. We are slaves in need of good news. Enter Jesus, God’s Son, fully God, fully man. Bringing news that would change our lives forever. His news was this: ‘I have come to you to do what you could not do for yourself. I will take what you deserve so you can have what I deserve. It is a gift. Follow me because I am true life. Follow me because I’m the Savior you’ve been looking for. This is good news for you. This is the gospel that you have been saved by grace and you are slaves no more’” (Dan Stevers). ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.
 - The true King, the true Messiah, God become flesh has come to save you.

Good News for Fearful Hearts: ¹⁰ 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.

- “Fear not” is an important phrase in Luke (e.g., Zechariah, Mary) and in the Bible (Josh 1; Deut).
 - Fear is the normal and natural response to an angelic messenger (you should really see how angels are depicted elsewhere in the Bible). Fear is the normal response to the messages these folks are receiving. It is too big for them, too impossible for them to imagine.
 - But in each instance, the angel tells them not to fear. Here, instead of fear, they are called to rejoice. What the angel tells them is **good news that conquers their fear**.

The good news of the gospel overcomes their fear. When we explain the gospel we focus a lot on the legal aspects of our sin (e.g., condemnation; guilt; etc.); and we should! This is true and central and important (it matters).

- But there are other effects of sin we sometimes forget about. In Gen 3, when Adam and Eve sin it says they hid themselves from God because they were naked and afraid. **They experience fear and shame**.
 - We know that we are helpless, so we are afraid. We are embarrassed by our sin and shortcomings.
 - But God seeks them out and covers their nakedness (they tried some leaves but God makes proper clothes from sacrificial animals).

- The beauty of the gospel is not only that God cancels our debt, but he covers our shame and calms our fears.

Life Without Fear: The Bible teaches us to fear God and not to fear anything else. When we fear God, the one with ultimate authority and power, the one who created everything that is, then *we don't have to fear anything else*. And because he is a good God who loves us and protects us, we don't need to worry about anything else.

- The only person you should fear (God) has promised to love you and is for you.
 - God is not a vindictive tyrant but a loving Father. Father is a helpful idea. As a child, I feared my father (if I messed up, or talked back to my mom). He would punish my mistakes. But his discipline was out of love. I also felt safe in his arms. His strength was comforting because of his love.
- This is why the Bible says that perfect love casts out all fear.
- “So many people live in dread and anxiety of their worst fears becoming reality. Let me report from the front lines: even there He will hold you, sustain you, and guide you.” (Erik Reed). He is greater and stronger than your worst fears (e.g., medical diagnosis, financial ruin, relational loss).
 - It's amazing to me how our most practical problems stem from fear and insecurity and how the gospel calms our fear” (Barley).

A person who only fears God, not man or the things of man, has amazing power in this world.

- It changes the way you live: “When you feel stuck while making a decision, ask yourself, ‘What would I do if I wasn't afraid?’” (Sarah Mack). Only God can truly make you not afraid.
 - “For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control” (2 Tim 1:7).

Peace: Another promise of the gospel is the promise of peace. ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased

- What is your idea of Peace? We have our idea (Ms. America “world peace”).
 - The Israelites had their idea (occupation, liberation); not a messiah who would die (should have known, shepherds not kings, manger not palace); helping us see the real battle (look up to heavens)
- Peace with God, ourselves, and others. Jesus said that he “did not come to bring peace on earth” or, at least, “not peace as the world gives.” We should, however, “take heart” because Jesus has “overcome the world.”
- The reality of Jesus as the Prince of Peace is more significant than simple everybody-get-along-coexistence. One day, all of the created universe will be brought under the peaceful rule of Jesus. However, the greatest war in all of history is not between two armies but between sinful humanity and its creator.
- But, rather than destroying the whole operation (which he could), God came to earth as a baby to begin a rescue mission. Jesus became flesh to save. Christ broke through the battle lines drawn between us and God and sacrificed himself for our redemption: “He himself is our peace.” He has given us the most important peace in the world—peace with God.

- The angel's message is good news because of who came and why he came. Our savior came to rescue us. **We can't have salvation or rescue, comfort or peace, hope or true love, without Jesus.** "God cannot give us happiness and peace apart from himself because there is no such thing" (C. S. Lewis).
- I see this mistake so often, people who want a good life, inner peace, blessing, and happiness. They're even happy to ask Jesus to give it to them, but they don't realize it can only be found **in him**. Jesus did not come to just endorse your dreams of the good life and grant you a few wishes, **he came to be your life!**

3. A Worshipful Response (vv. 15-20)

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Couldn't Ignore It: They had to check it out. A sign of a gospel impacted life is the internal motivation and desire to see and learn and experience more of Jesus.

- They sought out the God who came to them. They pursued him. Don't stop pursuing! Too often we ignore (like ignoring a medical problem or financial issue; if I don't look it's not real). Ignoring doesn't change reality. If the Spirit is working in your soul tonight, don't white-knuckle the pew and walk out without doing something about it.

Glorified and Praised: The true and right response to God's promises being fulfilled is to worship and praise him. His grace has broken through. His blessing has found us (not the other way around).

- The gospel humbles us by bringing us to God. We can't find him ourselves, he has found us. What else can we do but give thanks? What else can we do but have gratitude?
 - Described as God's favor that came to Mary and the shepherds (favor = grace). It was God's kindness to come to these shepherds. They weren't out searching for him, the angels found them on that ancient hillside.
 - Salvation at its core is a gift (one reason gift-giving at Christmas is a helpful illustration of the gospel). How many of you, on Christmas morning, would see a pile of packages with your name on them, then just leave them there. Have you done this with Jesus, your greatest gift?

Told Everybody: They made known.

- The angel's response (heavenly praise and proclamation) confirms the life-changing truth of Jesus. The message of the angels confirms the power of the gospel.
- Our response is similar because the gospel is so great and Jesus is so good, we can't help but tell everyone.

- When you've experienced Jesus you can't help but tell others!
- Have you told others the good news? "The gospel is only good news for someone if it gets to them in time" (Carl F. H. Henry).

Motivation: Sharing the gospel is not a laborious obligation, it is a joyful opportunity. The motivation to share is the very fact that it is **good** news.

- Who doesn't love to share good news? A pregnancy? A promotion? A once-in-a-lifetime trip?
- Jesus is good for everyone. We share because we want them to experience the joy we've found.
 - I do wonder why some people seem so angry about sharing Jesus. It makes no sense.
 - We are not trying to win an argument or build a brand or fulfill an obligation, we are sharing the gospel because of the joy of Jesus and our love for our neighbors.

The gospel calms our fears and brings joy to our hearts, compelling us to worship Jesus and tell others! So, like the old spiritual implores us, we want to "Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere." We want everyone to know Jesus. Who are you going to tell?