Christmas-V (2021)

**JOY TO THE WORLD**

Luke 2:1-20

Key Verses: 2:10-11

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”

At every Christmas worship service, I used to say, “Merry Christmas!” in many different languages. However, I stopped doing it because it didn’t sound authentic. After all, I don’t speak any other languages except English and Korean. But I am going to try again, starting from Mandarin-Chinese *“****Sheng Dan Kuai Le!,”*** Spanish *“****Feliz Navidad!”,*** French **“Joyeux Noel!”,** German *“****Froehliche Weihnachten!”***, Japanese ***“Murisumasu Omedeto!”,*** Korean ***“Chook Sung Tan!”,***and finally American ***“Merry Christmas!”***

Unfortunately, however, we feel more sadness than joy in the world these days. We’ve been experiencing unprecedented pandemics for the last two years. If that’s not enough, many people worldwide suffer from sickness, poverty, and natural disasters. Facing so many challenges in life, we feel overwhelmed. It’s hard to celebrate Christmas in a joyful and meaningful way. We even question God, saying, *“What is God doing for the world today?”*

By the time of Jesus’ birth, the world was dark and depressing, not much better than what we experience now. Yet, on the night of Jesus’ birth, the angel appeared to several shepherds and announced the birth of the Messiah, saying, “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” This morning, let us think about what this good news is about and what the baby's birth in a manger means to us today.

Look at verses 1-3. “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.” We live in a democratic country. The principle of democracy is *“of the people, by the people, and for the people*.” But Rome wasn’t run by the principle of democracy. At the time of Jesus’ birth, Caesar Augustus was the emperor of Rome. He worked hard to establish a solid political and financial infrastructure, promising peace and prosperity to the world's people. Yet, his promise for peace and prosperity proved to be false. People suffered endlessly under the iron fist of Rome. Caesar Augustus, wanting to raise taxes, issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. People grumbled and complained about the decree, yet they had no choice. Whoever didn’t follow the order had to expect punishment.

Look at verses 4 and 5. “So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to 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.” The distance from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea was about 70 miles, which was no short distance for any pregnant woman to travel. If it were not for the census, Joseph and Mary wouldn’t have come to travel such a long distance to Bethlehem. But God used it to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem at the right time and fulfilled the prophecy he made about the Messiah’s birthplace through the Prophet Micah. “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Mic. 5:2) Even though Caesar Augustus was the one who issued the decree, but God still worked behind it according to His good purpose and perfect timing. It wasn’t just a coincidence but God’s providence. Humanly speaking, the pandemic is nothing but a disaster. Some people are afraid because they think the pandemic is the devil’s conspiracy. Well, we must not be too scared because we know that God, who works for the good in all things, will bring ultimate good for those who have been called according to his good purpose (Ro. 8:28). Do you want to believe in the devil’s conspiracy or the providence of God?

Look at verses 6 and 7. “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.” It seems that many travelers went back to their hometown to register. As Joseph and Mary came close to Bethlehem, Mary began to have birth pains. Yet, no room was available for Mary to have her child. Their trip to Bethlehem must have been very tiring. They needed a place to rest but couldn’t find any. Yet, thank God that someone offered them a humble stable, which provided a small shelter for Mary to deliver the child. I am sure that Mary and Joseph were grateful to God because they saw God’s invisible hand of protection and provision. We must remember that God's provision is never lacking if God’s will.

When the baby Jesus was born, it was in the middle of the night. So we have a Christmas hymn called *“Silent Night and Holy Night.”* It was called a holy night because the Holy Son of God was born in our midst that night. Indeed, it was one of the marvelous moments in history. Yet, no one knew about it. No CNN or Fox news reported it. Some people may think that God is not doing anything for this world. But that may not be the case. Instead, even when God does great things among us, we may not be aware of it. God is always at his work.

Look at verses 8-10. “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 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 the people.” What could be good news for these poor shepherds? A good and high-paying job or big bonus would be good news for them. For the Jews, the destruction of their enemy, Romans, would be good news. In the last couple of weeks, students had finals. Some are anxiously waiting for their final grades, and getting ‘A’s would be good news for them. Yet, that is temporary.

The angel announced not just **“good news**” but **“good news that will cause great joy for all the people.”** It almost sounds overly exaggerated and unrealistic. Is there any news that can bring great joy for all the people? All the people, including the Jews, Romans, Americans, Russians, Asians (Chinese, Taiwanese, N. Koreans, S. Koreans & Japanese), Africans, Latinos, Europeans, and all others? The answer is “yes!”

What is the content of such good news? Read verse 11. “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” The content of the good news is the birth of a Savior. What does this Savior save us from? Well, through studying Zechariah’s song of praise, we learned that Jesus does not necessarily save us from our political enemies, as most Jews would expect. Instead, he saves us from the power of sin and the devil. Well, some people might say, *“I don’t need a Savior! I am perfectly fine!* Or *“I can manage it by myself.”* Can we? If we think that we can, it may be an illusion.

For example, all of us, without exception, must face many types of problems in life. Some problems are definitely caused by our own mistakes, and others are caused by others and often inherited from our ancestors. Life is full of complications. People suffer because they are broken and emotionally damaged. They might seek quick and easy solutions, but there aren’t miracle drugs or medications to fix our problems. After all, no matter how successful, reasonable, and strong we may be, we will eventually get old, sick, and die. Some people will die unexpectedly and too young. Sad!

So, whoever claims to be our Savior has a real tough job. I wouldn’t dare to claim to be a savior. How can the Savior Jesus save us from our sin, death, and all kinds of life problems? The angel didn’t explain it. It’s a big topic, which requires a thorough investigation. But simply speaking, Jesus saves us from sin and death through his sacrificial death on the cross, which is the epitome of his earthly messianic ministry. Our sins are atoned for when Jesus gave himself, shedding his blood on the cross. The gospel of Jesus is simple but profoundly deep.

Jesus not only rescues us from our sin and the devil, but he also heals us from our brokenness and restores us to be wholesome people. We see people suffering not physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. Sick people are not happy unless healed from the inside out, no matter how wealthy and successful. Our happiness comes from the gradual and complete restoration of our wholesomeness through Christ Jesus. 1 Peter 3:20 states, “‘He himself bore our sins’ in his body on the cross, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness: ‘by his wounds you have been healed.’” Salvation should be real to us now, not just in the future. That’s why Jesus said in John 10:10, “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.”

Indeed, the birth of Jesus is the good news of great joy for all people. Some of us may be going through tough challenges in life now. Christmas time is supposed to be the wonderful time of the year. But it isn’t easy for us to have Merry Christmas. So, how can we have ourselves a Merry Little Christmas? Due to many of my friends going through troubles and sufferings in life, I felt down recently. Then I began singing a Christmas carol, *“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas,”* because I felt connected to the lyrics. *“Have Yourself a Merry Little Christ. Let your heart be light. From now on, our troubles will be out of sight.”* We can celebrate the birth of Jesus even in our suffering and trouble when we are confident that God, who began a good work in us, will carry it on to completion until the final day. (Php. 1:6)

Look at verse 12. “This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” This verse shows the characteristics of the newborn king Jesus Christ. It’s a surprise that the sign of God’s salvation for all humankind is the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. If God wanted, he could have let the baby Jesus be born completely differently, either in a palace or hospital. But God chose to let the baby Jesus be delivered in a humble manger, a wooden box for feeding animals (Pic#1). The prince from heaven was placed in a manger. According to the angel’s message, the baby in a manger is a sign from God.

What does God want to communicate with us through this sign? There can be many messages. One central message might be that God’s way of working for our salvation is different from how this world operates. The author Luke contrasts the baby in the manger with Caesar's throne, symbolizing power and dominion. But as history attests, the kings and the kingdoms of the world, giant corporations, business executives, world leaders, political or religious systems, which are glamorous and powerful, do not necessarily provide people with peace and prosperity. We are often motivated by worldly ambition for power and glory. But when we follow those glamorous signs, we often end up in the wrong place with regrets.

But our God, who is almighty, works in a very different way. Amazingly, God came to this world as a tiny and helpless baby. His life on earth began in a manger and ended on the cross. He never used political schemes or military force to achieve his goal. But the baby Jesus in the manger is genuine, lovely, admirable, gentle, peaceful, tender, and humble. He is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). We often think that God almighty should fix the world’s problem to prove himself to be a true God. But what true God does is different from what we expect. He became a baby in a manger to be hugged by us. As we embrace him, we experience heavenly peace and joy. This is the mystery of God’s salvation in us.

Look at verses 13-14. “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.” The angels’ chorus summarizes the meaning of the birth of the Son of God: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” What do these two phrases, **“Glory to God in the highest heaven”** and **“Peace to those on whom his favor rests”** mean? Even though these two things seem to be separated, they are not. They are one. In other words, “Glory to God” and “Peace to men” are not separated. I like what St. Irenaeus in the early century said, *“The glory of God is a human being fully alive.”*

When God sent Jesus to this world as the Savior, his vision was to create the new humanity in Christ Jesus. We also know that true peace does not come through material prosperity, a balance of power, or negotiation. There must be a fundamental transformation personally and collectively through Christ Jesus. True peace comes through Christ Jesus, who became a man and became a peacemaker between God and us and between people. “Glory to God and peace to men” is God’s great hope for us through Christ Jesus. And God is still at his work even today.

In verses 15-20, we see that when the angel had left them, the shepherds went to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. They became the first eyewitnesses of the Messiah’s birth. They celebrated the first Christmas and spread the good news.

Let me close my sermon. The birth of the Messiah Jesus is good news for all people, including you and me. It’s good news for Jews, Romans, Americans, Europeans, Africans, Hispanics, Asians, and all creation, including animals, trees, and beyond.

Facing the cold and harsh reality of the world nowadays, we feel overwhelmed. Some of us even ask, *“Where is God when I am hurt?”* We don’t have a final answer to our unending questions. But we do know one thing that our God is not just sitting on His throne in heaven, watching us until we perish. He began his good work in us through Christ, continues, and will complete it until the final day. And you know what? If we believe in Jesus and abide in him, he abides in us. And we will never die even though we die. (Jn. 11:25-26) We are one with Christ who rose from the dead. There is no death for those who are Christ Jesus.

So what are we afraid of? If the baby Jesus is born in our hearts, we are truly blessed and have everlasting life now and forever. Undoubtedly, 2021 was a very tough year for many of us. Yet, we can be confident of God’s salvation in all circumstances. And we have a sure reason to celebrate Christmas. Being confident of God’s faithfulness and love, we can celebrate the birth of our Savior and King, So my dear friends in Christ, I encourage you to have yourself a Merry Little Christmas and share the joy of heaven with your loved ones. **“Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year!”**