

Christmas, Gospel Year C

From Old News to Good News

Luke 2:8-20

Christmas Day

Analysis by Matt Metevelis

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



Faith is no longer about how we imagine the future, but the joyous news that a blessed future has come to us.

DIAGNOSIS: The Old “News”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem): Broken News

Very little is truly “new” in the news. Both the content and the tone rarely change though the events and contexts differ. The ongoing pandemic, ecological disaster, racial injustice, emerging power of authoritarian regimes, domestic political discord and decline, economic uncertainty, and our stumbling civic institutions remain the same. Our own emotions of

anxiety, resentment, accusation, indignation, and powerlessness always accompany them. All of these are the little mental manipulations used to generate attention and clicks. Cable news networks like to flash graphics and music at you and announce “breaking” news. But the world has already broken that information and nothing is new. Another day. Same fallen world.

This epiphany came to me by accident. My phone, which conveys to me news outlets, political podcasts, and social media, fried up after spending too many hours cooking on my dashboard in the fiery heat of summer in Las Vegas. For a few weeks I listened to old CDs and audiobooks from the library. I reflected on how much my mind had been spooled around certain narratives and how much more at peace I felt when I wasn’t constantly thrown onto the treadmill of getting data and forming opinions in the pursuit of “staying informed.” My phone was damaged, but I remained the one constantly overheated.

“Staying informed” is a very unique way that the law likes to lurk in our lives. We have digitized it and made it technical but it’s the same old way the law makes us relate to the world. Be aware of your surroundings. Perceive threats. Get prepared. The world that the news describes might be broader in scope than the one our primitive ancestors experienced but it dwells in the same primal fight or flight mentality. Look out for this danger. Know who your tribe is. Watch out for these strangers. We are all at the mercy of the world outside us and beyond us. The words we receive about it shape the way we relate to the world and our neighbors.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem): “Staying Informed”

Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus centers the activity of the

event not on Mary's labor in Bethlehem but on a gathering of news consumers outside the city limits. Many preachers make a great deal about who the shepherds were and the low social position they may have suffered. But what they are doing is instructive too. The Greek uses two verbs: ἀργαυλουντες and φυλασσοντες. These verbs are usually translated "living in the fields" and "keeping watch." The first verb is a compound verb where one of the components can be translated, "spending the night." "Keeping watch" is an excellent translation for the latter verb due to the military connotations of the verb that also carries the meanings of "protecting" and "guarding." The shepherds are staying out at night away from the comforts of a warm bed so that they can protect their sheep. The shepherds are not the sleepy homespun bumpkins of carols and songs who have the good news stumble upon them. They are awake, on guard, and vigilant. Watching and waiting, they are alert to noises and danger.

We might identify with the shepherds during this season more for their occupation than their status. All of us have become vigilant shepherds in one way or another over the past twenty months. The early hand washing, social distancing, gas pump sanitizing days of the pandemic might be over but some of the disruptions still linger in continued zoom meetings and reduced capacities. News of new strains affects our holiday plans and stock portfolios. Over this time we have been "staying informed" and keeping watch. We too "fear a great fear" as we relate to the wider world and its future.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem): Good News?

Where does faith speak to these fears? Once we see ourselves in the shoes (or the sandals) of the shepherds how do we hear the words that they are given. The words are printed on church banners and Christmas cards and sung in a jubilant arrangement

in Handel's Messiah: "Unto you is born this day a Savior who is the Christ in the city of David." This is a different kind of news. This is something new. Tidings of great joy. "I'm giving you good news" the angel says.

But we have trouble hearing it as good news. For one thing, it's not "on this day" for us anymore but two millennia ago. For another, how does it help us in our fear that a baby was born? Even when we know how that baby turns out and what he does, we can't help hearing this as a story where we already know the end.

The distance between us and this baby makes it hard to trust in the good news that we receive in the same way the shepherds heard it. While we worry about the future, this story is mired in the past. The birth of the Messiah to us doesn't seem like breaking news but very old news. How can we stack up this event against the very real fears that we have about future events? As a hospice chaplain I'm pained every day by the great gap between the very real data about disease process and comorbidities I read on medical charts as opposed to the aspirational and often nebulous words about faith and hope. Trouble always seems imminent. Faith can seem like clinging to things long ago in hopes of things far away.



PROGNOSIS: The Good News

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution): This Just In

We are challenged to truly hear the words of the angels as good news. The child lying in the manger is a “sign” for us. A sign always points to something beyond itself. For pious Israelites the phrase “signs and wonders” would loom large in their prayers and consciousness. “The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with a terrifying display of power, and with signs and wonders” (Deuteronomy 26:8). A sign always pointed to the desire and ability of God to save and deliver God’s chosen people. It was a display of power. Rivers

turning to blood. Darkness filling the land. Waters swallowing armies.

How strange then for shepherds to hear about a “sign” of a savior and be told about a child in swaddling clothes lying in a feeding trough for smelly barnyard animals. Our beautifully arrayed manger scenes and centuries of pious art and imagination have obscured what a weak and lowly “sign” it must have been to behold the infant Jesus. We might be inclined, like Ricky Bobby in Talladega Nights, to hold up “eight pound two ounce” baby Jesus in our table graces, but we have to confess that this image is the opposite of a sign of power. In my experiences, babies are best known for crying and pooping.

But there is a particular piece of “breaking news” in the story that we might miss. As the angel is calmly broadcasting the good news of the birth of a savior from the heavens, the newscast is interrupted: “Suddenly” the fullness of the heavenly host just starts singing and crying out:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace on earth among those whom he favors.”

A word now has been joined to this event. The heavens are rejoicing, and peace is being given to all humanity. We might miss out on this when we read the adjective as limiting the blessing only to those whom God favors. But the passage might be better read as “peace on favored humanity.” This sign means that God has conferred favor, grace, good will and peace to all humanity. It’s a cosmic spoiler alert. This child is God’s embrace of all humanity in their struggles, toils, fears, sins, and deaths with a great declaration of peace upon all of them. As Paul will put it later “all the promises of God are a ‘yes’ in him” (2 Corinthians 1:20). Christ is God’s peace and the living, breathing, crying, and pooping blessing on all

humankind. In Christ we rejoice because we hear that we now are favored.

“If the humanity of Christ were without the word it would be a vain thing,” Luther taught. The mere fact alone that Jesus is born is not what makes us rejoice. There’s a promise attached to that birth. All of the things that we dread, and fear, and fuss about are contained, borne, and conquered in this child. There is a powerful scene in the 2006 movie *The Children of Men*: The movie depicts a dystopian society where no child has been born in many years. The main character rescues a mother and child from a gutted building in the middle of a firefight. The sight of the child is enough to get soldiers to stop firing, lay down their weapons, and kneel. The child is a sign that there is a future for humanity. Christ is that sign for us. God holds him up with outstretched arms against everything arrayed against us. Faith is no longer about how we imagine the future, but the joyous news that a blessed future has come to us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution): Treasure All These Words

“Staying informed” is an interesting turn of phrase. We don’t say “getting informed” or “going informed” but “staying informed.” The phrase implies stasis. We stay in one place while bombarding ourselves with information. There’s no motion. What a contrast this is to what the shepherds do when they hear the good news. “Let us go,” they say, “and see what the Lord has made known to us.” They are turned from passive observers to active investigators of Christ’s presence in the world. When we hear these words, we too are inspired not to stay in our places of fear and worry but to go and see every arena of our life as places that are changed and transformed by Christ. Like the shepherds, instead of “staying informed” we are charged to go out and inform others what God has made known

to us—namely that all humanity is blessed in Christ. We do so through our vocations to bless others with our labor, by bearing the cross in our relationships with forbearance and forgiveness, and walking into whatever challenges that face us by knowing that Christ has entered them first.

Most of all we are transformed from those who “stay informed” to those who are given the incomparable gift of informing others about the good news of Christ. The most wonderful scene in the story to imagine must have been the scene where the shepherds walked into the very place where Christ lay to share the good news over Jesus’s very crib. Upon hearing that good news we are told that Mary “treasured all these words” and “pondered them in her heart.” You might translate the latter phrase “encountered and met these things in her heart.” How different this is than anxiously looking around us for threats and dangers! The good news of Jesus Christ transforms us by setting all of God’s promises loose in our hearts.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution): Film at 11

Many of my patients are stuck at home with a steady diet of cable news. I still remember one saint who would regale me on every visit with the things that she had seen on the news and Christian television depicting the coming of the end of the world. On every visit she would ask me, “Chaplain, how do you feel about how they are trying to chase God out of the world?” It took me a few visits to get my stock answer. “Great, because God isn’t going anywhere. It’s God’s world.” I wanted her to hear God’s promise just as loud as she heard the news.

Faith does not change only the way we think about God, or ourselves, but the way that we relate to the entire world. Christ is here. It’s God’s world now and forever. That’s what the heavenly host was shouting about over the shoulder of the

angel. Glory to God. There's peace now. There's God's favor now. The world is not an arena of threats; it is restored with God's inexhaustible gifts. Though the fallen world hums its news in our itching ears and anxious minds, the sounds of heavenly beings glorifying God resounds with the announcement of a Savior that comes with Christ's birth. We might not know how it all will happen, but we know that it will. Glory to God! Until then we are free—in the midst of whatever news comes our way—to rejoice, to forgive, to love, to give thanks, to celebrate, and to live. God's favor is ours today. A child is born. And that's only a sign of the good things to come!