

Sermon, December 24, 2022

Luke 2:1-20

“Good News of a Great Joy”

In this morning’s reading the angel of the Lord proclaims to the shepherds in the field that he comes with “good news of a great joy”. But the question is ‘in what way is it good news’? To best understand we have to keep in mind that the historical context in which the story takes place is quite different from our own. For the most part we read the story in a religious way. The people hearing the story in the first century would hear it that way in part but would also understand the social and political aspects which we might not pick up on.

To begin with, it would have seemed a bit shocking that the angel first brought the news to shepherds, who, in that time and culture, were about as low on the social ladder as you could get. One would expect the news to be brought first to the priests and other religious leaders of the people. Some people would have been appalled by the fact that “the glory of the Lord” shined around the shepherds. But as we know from other biblical stories God does have a habit of choosing the rather unexpected people to do his work in the world. We think of Abraham and Moses and another shepherd named David. The choice is also a foretelling of the child’s future concern and affection for the poor and the marginalized. The first to receive the good news will be the primary recipients of that good news.

We also have to keep in mind that the story takes place in a region in which the people were oppressed, living under the tyranny of the Roman Empire. That knowledge gives the three titles the angel gave to the child a rather radical slant, those being Savior, Messiah, and Lord.

The Greek word for Savior is ‘soter’. We are used to using that term as having to do with one who saves us from the power of sin and death, but it literally refers to one who delivers people from their enemies. The word ‘savior’ does not appear in the Old Testament in reference to the Coming One, but it does use the Hebrew word Messiah ,

or in Greek *Christos* , both of which means 'anointed one', and which means that it refers to someone anointed to lead the people.

You can see how those two words would sound like a threat to the occupying forces, but the one that may be the most radical would be the word 'Lord'. Of course, the people used the word 'Lord' when speaking of God, but the Romans also referred to the emperor as Lord. And so, to say that Jesus is Lord was to say that the emperor is not! Not a safe thing to say in that time and place.

It is reminiscent of a document that was written and signed by representatives of the Reformed and Lutheran traditions in Germany in the 1930s, including Karl Barth, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, called the Barmen Declaration, which essentially declared that Jesus is Lord, implying, of course, that Adolf Hitler was not. A document, as you might imagine, did not go over very big in Germany at that time.

The three titles remain important for us today, although they may have somewhat different meanings depending on when and where they are used. The word 'savior' is certainly meaningful, although it carries various meanings. Some interpret it as having to do with our reconciliation with God through our justification by grace through faith, entering into a New Life altogether. For some it is a form of enlightenment, an awakened relationship with Truth, Goodness, and Beauty. Yet, for others it is a sort of guarantee of going to heaven after death. It's not unreasonable for salvation to have more than one meaning considering the myriad things from which we may need to be saved.

We don't use the word 'Messiah' all that often, but certainly use its English equivalent, Christ, which obviously is not Jesus' last name, but the recognition that he is the anointed one through whom God's will and love is revealed to us.

The word 'Lord' remains the most challenging and should not be taken or used lightly. To proclaim Jesus as Lord is to accept His particular claim on your life. To say that Jesus is my Lord is to commit to try to live a Christlike life. Spiritual writer, David

Steindal-Rast, put it this way. "Faith in Jesus Christ as our Lord finds expression in one's commitment to the ultimate authority of Love to which he bears witness in the world. Without this commitment, Lord is an empty title". In other words, to call Jesus Christ Lord is to strive to live a life grounded in love, compassion, mercy, faith and hope. Steindal-Rast goes on to say that to declare Jesus " as our ultimate authority, we will have to question the claims of all other authorities- respectfully, but no less radically."

Savior, Messiah, and Lord. When we come to understand them in our own context, we can begin to understand how they convey "good news of great joy"! Amen.

Let us pray: Blessed are you , O God, for you have visited us and redeemed your people, coming to us in Jesus, delivering us from all enemies, remembering your holy covenant, the oath you swore to our ancestors in the faith. You have come to set us free that we may serve you without fear all the days of our lives. In Christ you have given us salvation and forgiveness of sin. You have come to us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet in the way of peace. Therefore, we praise you with prayers and carols and with thanksgiving in our hearts for your gift of yourself in Jesus. Through your Spirit, May we put on compassion, kindness, humility, and patience to understand and forgive one another. Bind us together in the perfect harmony of love. May the peace of Christ rule in our hearts that we may be instruments of your peace on earth. Amen.