

December 5, 2010

WHEN ANGELS PREACH, Part One

Jeffery D. Woodhams

It's becoming more and more common to see or hear about atheists posting anti-religious signs at Christmas time. They'll say things like, "Reason's Greetings" or "There is no god—be good for goodness' sake." Others are much more hostile, including one posted next to a nativity scene in Olympia, Washington, that said in part, "Religion is but myth and superstition that hardens hearts and enslaves minds."¹ As disturbing and insensitive as these signs are, we shouldn't be surprised. The atheists who claim that there is no God seem to be fighting against Him as much as they can! If there be no God, with whom are they wrestling? They expend their time, energy and money fighting against the very God whom they claim does not exist.

On a side note, folks, it is absolutely wrong for so-called Christians to vandalize such signs or utter death threats against those who post them. What is the effect of that? It just reinforces to the humanists that they are right about God's people—that we are hateful, spiteful, hard-hearted and ignorant. Look at it this way: the atheists are baiting people with those signs. Those who take the bait serve the message that the atheists are trying to promote.

Yes, we are surely living in a time when the tide of atheism is growing. Atheism grows as Christians retreat. We retreat from speaking the truth of Christ in a loving way. We retreat from living godly lives. We retreat from standing on principles. We retreat from fellowshiping with God's people at church. We retreat from the authority of God's Word.

How can we stop retreating? How can we turn the tide of unbelief to belief? I think it's time that we listened to the angels. Let's look, if you will, at Luke 2:8-14. We need once again to hear the angels' Christmas sermon.

8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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, good will toward men.

¹ Ian Urbina, "Approaching Holidays Prompt Atheist Campaign," *New York Times*, 2 December 2009. Available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/02/us/02atheist.html>.

We've pictured the scene year after year: we see the shepherds out in the pastures, a group of men and maybe boys with their staves, rubbing their arms and trying to stay warm against the encroaching night. The sheep are bedded down while the watchful shepherds listen for any sound of disturbance. On to this tranquil stage bursts an angel with heavenly light.

I mean, can you imagine? Maybe you've been in a room of your house, quietly reading, when suddenly someone nearby began to speak, and you practically jumped out of your skin! You didn't hear that person enter the room, and the suddenness of the noise shocked you. You weren't surprised by the person so much as the *suddenness* of the appearance. Here are these shepherds, minding their own business in the dead of night, when suddenly an angel appears with heavenly light. I'll bet that scared away the hiccups!

So begins one of the most amazing worship services ever held on earth. Let's break down these verses into four parts:

- I. A Joyous Introduction
- II. A Comforting Announcement
- III. A Wise Confirmation
- IV. A Glorious Doxology²

We'll cover the first two parts today and the rest next week.

First of all, **a joyous introduction**. Notice that the angel speaks directly to their most pressing need first: "Fear not!" The angel had not come to judge them or to harm them but to give them astonishing news.

I remember when I was sixteen years old. I was interested in hunting and had an older friend in the church who had taken me with him several times. My father knew I had a real interest in hunting, and he had planned to give me a shotgun for Christmas. However, just before Christmas, one of my friends at school told me he was going to be expelled, and I thought it was unfair and unjust. I decided to take a little piece of metal and cut the back of the bus seat in response. Now, I have no idea to this day how was supposed to make the situation better or fair; but that's what I did. It didn't take long for the principal to hear about it, and when my father showed up, I knew I was done for! I was *terrified*. It was that incident that made my father realize that I wasn't yet mature enough for a shotgun, and I found out after Christmas what he had intended to give me, but couldn't.

The fear of these shepherds is not that kind of fear, but fear leads to greater fear, and the shepherds might begin to think they are in trouble with the Almighty! The angel assures them that they have no need to fear. In fact, the purpose of their coming at all is that fear might be eased by the appearance of the very Prince of Peace!

The angel continues by telling them that he has good news—good tidings of great joy for all people. I don't know about you, but I like good news! When you go to the doctor, you like to get good news. When you talk to your son or daughter, you like to hear good news. Those are matters for us which lift our own hearts; but the message that the shepherds are about to receive is much larger, much greater

² Theodor Christlieb, "The Angels' Message on Christmas Day." In *Great Sermons on the Birth of Christ*, comp. Wilbur M. Smith (Natick, MA: W. A. Wilde Co., 1963), p. 116.

news than any that had been heard before.

Don't you just love it when you can share a little present with a child, something that has been a secret up to that point? "I've got a present for you!" and the little eyes sparkle, and the little mouth begins to ask a million questions (or maybe one question over and over): "What is it? What is it?" I know you delight to do these little things for your children and grandchildren. How much more does God delight to do things for His children!

The message to the shepherds that night is God's good tidings of great joy for all people: rich, poor, young, old, Jew, Gentile, male, female. No matter how *we* classify them, God loves them. God's good news brings great joy to all who will receive it.

I want you to imagine your whole family gathered together for Christmas. You've got several generations all together in one home to celebrate Christmas day. What one gift could you give to each of them that would delight and thrill them? What could you give to a very small child that would also be a wonderful gift for a teenager? A thirty-something? A senior adult? There are very few things that could fit into that category; but the good tidings of great joy are for all people. It is the one gift that everyone in the entire world needs above and beyond all others.

The world we live in wants to have the "great joy" of Christmas without the "good tidings." It's almost as if the modern American says, "Give me a season of joy, but leave out the reason for the season." How dull and how purposeless is Christmas without Christ! Without Christ, we simply have a season of greed: "Daddy, I want *that* for Christmas!" There's the scramble of finding "the right present," the hassle of fighting the crowds and setting out decorations and going to parties—and it's all meaningless because we've left out the meaning. We ignore and suppress the meaning, the good tidings. And when we do that, whether we claim to be Christians or not, we are living as though we are atheists. We might be offended by the atheists' sign, but when it comes right down to it, we live as though God doesn't matter, so what is the difference?

What, then, are those "good tidings of great joy" for all people? Let's continue to **the comforting announcement:**

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

These are the good tidings, the very reason for our Christmas celebration: a Savior is born! We should examine this phrase by phrase.

"Unto you": Yes, you shepherds, poor and powerless though you be, this message is for you. It is for you and for all people. It is for you, sons of Israel; it is for you, born into the Gentile nations. It is for all the nations of the earth. Unto you—you, here this morning, with your burdens, your cares, your troubles.

"Is born": We recall the words of Isaiah, "For unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given" (Isaiah 9:6). Dr. Theodor Christlieb, a nineteenth century theologian and preacher, put it elegantly thus:

The poor have their part in Him who Himself became poor, and is lying in the manger. The mighty ones of the earth and the rich have theirs, for is He not Christ, the Lord of all, born in

Bethlehem, the city of King David? Servants have their part in Him, for He has taken upon Him the servant form; Jews, for He comes of the tribe of Judah; Gentiles, for long has He been their desire, and will now be their light. All sinners may share in His grace, for He is come to save them from their sins, nay; even the fools and slow of heart, for He will baptize them with the Holy Ghost and with fire.³

“This day”: The long wait is over. The promised Messiah has come this very day. Yes, the promise given first to Adam and Eve the very day sin was brought into this perfect world, bringing death and ruination—that promise, long awaited, long expected, has finally come: *“But when the fulness of the time was come, God sent forth his Son, made of a woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law, that we might receive the adoption of sons”* (Gal. 4:4).

“A Savior”: This is both His name and His purpose. The very name *Jesus* in Hebrew means “savior” or “deliverer.” Perhaps the shepherds thought that the angels meant this newborn child would grow up and save the Jews from Roman oppression; but God’s plan is much larger and reaches much farther. This child would save all people from the oppression of sin, of enslavement to their own passions, lusts, and foolishness. This child is meant to be the Savior of all! Here, friend, is your salvation! Here is your Healer!

“Which is Christ the Lord”: The title “Christ” means “anointed one.” The anointing means that God will show beyond doubt that this Child is the Chosen One. God revealed the special nature of this Child through messages to Mary, Joseph, and Zechariah, father of John the Baptist. He revealed the special nature of this Child to the shepherds on this night. He revealed the true nature of this child to Simeon and Anna in the temple afterward. He revealed the special birth to a number of wise men who traveled from the east to find Him. Before His birth, at the hour of His birth, and after His birth, God made it abundantly clear that this was the Anointed One, the Christ. God would again reveal the divine nature of Jesus at His baptism and through many marvelous occurrences during His lifetime and at His murderous crucifixion. Yes, indeed, there can be no doubt but that Jesus is God’s Anointed One, and no other.

But friends, it is nothing for you that Christ is born if He is not born *unto you*! It makes no difference when He was born if He is not born unto you *this day*! Is He your Savior? Do you accept that God’s Anointed One, the very Son of God Himself, was born for you? The love of God reaches out to you this day, just as it did that very first Christmas in the sermon of the angel. Will you listen to the message of the angels today?

³ Ibid, p. 120.