

Learning from the Angels

- A television reporter asked people on the streets of NYC basic questions about Christmas. Here are some "facts" he heard: Jesus was born in Jerusalem, his profession was "all-around nice guy," and the Wise Men brought him "frankincense, myrrh, and baby diapers."
- Even with that sad silliness, there's truth to the song that says "It's the most wonderful time of the year." Because at Christmas, unlike any other time, people's hearts are pried open just a little to greatest truths in the universe, those about God and His plan of salvation. I wrote this in my newspaper column yesterday: "Peter Berger, a well-known sociologist and Professor Emeritus at Boston University, identifies five facts about human behavior which, in his view, indicate the existence of God. He calls them "signals of transcendence" in his book, *Rumors of Angels*. The first is humanity's passion for order, which Berger says points to a Designer. The second is our desire for play, which derives from our longing for eternal joy. Then there is our innate commitment to hope, because we will not believe that death has the final word. Berger wrote, "In a world where man is surrounded by death on all sides, he continues to be a being who says 'no!' to death—and through this 'no' is brought to faith in another world, the reality of which would validate his hope as something other than an illusion." Fourth is our belief in the necessity of damnation for true evil. Berger wrote, "For instance, could there have been an earthly punishment sufficient for the heinous activity of the WWII Nazis? There are certain deeds that cry out to heaven . . . these deeds are not only evil, but *monstrously evil*." Finally, there is the argument from humor. Berger says that when we laugh at our limitations, it is because we know that this imprisonment is not final, but will be overcome."
- The Bible says, "God has set eternity in the hearts of men." There is a longing in every creature for something more than this, a longing for the transcendence that can only be realized in God. That's why Christmas is so popular, even among a people who have largely rejected the story behind the season. At the same time that they deny the Bethlehem baby His place in their hearts or in the city square, they long for everything He came to earth to bring us. The light of Christmas shines in the darkness, and the darkness will not overcome it. The darker the room, the brighter the candle.
- Well, let's take a look back at that night on a Bethlehem hillside on the night that Jesus was born. It was the night of nights. There was an appearance like none other the world had ever seen. There was an announcement like none other the world had ever heard. There was adulation like none the world had ever experienced.
- Luke 2:8-14
- The Appearance
- The shepherds were watching their flocks by night. That's all. Just a normal night for a shepherd. Maybe glad to have sheep to watch. But also maybe wishing they were able to do something else for a living that didn't subject them to the elements quite so much. And the quiet. And the dark. It's dark out here! Then everything changed in an instant. For them For the world. The sky was lit up as an angel of the Lord appeared. The word for appeared means to "be at hand in an instant." The angel was not there. Then it was. It wasn't like the shepherds looked way off in the distance and saw a dim light moving in their direction. "Hey, Levi. What's that coming yonder?" "Don't know, Jake. But it's headin' this way." (Hey! Bethlehem IS in southern Israel) NO! They didn't see the angel approaching. There was no warning whatsoever. The angel was on them in an instant. BRIGHT. "The glory of the Lord shone around them." There's light. And then there's the GLORY of the Lord. Cindy said this week she thought about that scene in 1 Chronicles 21 when David was led by Satan to number his troops. God was angry with David for his lack of trust in God, and so He told David he could choose his punishment: 3 years of famine, 3 months of your enemies overtaking you, or 3 days of the sword of the Lord bringing destruction. David chose the three days because he said he

would rather be in the hands of the Lord, even if it is a spanking, than the hands of the elements or his enemies. So God sent “the angel of the Lord” to the earth. And the picture that is described there in 1 Chronicles is awesome: “David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the Lord standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over Jerusalem.” (vs. 16). David fell on his face. That may be what is happening here. Except the angel of the Lord doesn’t have a sword. His hands may have been raised up to heaven in worship, but they were certainly not poised to strike the earth in anger. The pictures that men have painted of this scene over the years are almost comical. They often portray the shepherds as rough-hewn burly men, and the angels as delicate women with curls and rosy cheeks. The paintings often make you wonder who was afraid of whom? Like the shepherds should be saying to the angel, “Don’t be afraid little lady. Us big ol’ shepherds won’t hurt you. Come on down here and don’t be shy. You can talk to strangers. It’s Ok.” NO! The angel was awesome and the shepherds were terrified. “Filled with great fear,” Luke said. It was night of nights and the appearance of an angel changed everything. Because they came with news.

- The Announcement
- The angel says, “Fear not!” They shepherds were still shaking, maybe hiding their faces on the ground. The angel says, “I bring you good news of great joy!” (vs. 10) It is the good news that is *not only* the answer to all of our fears but is the source of all our joy. All our fears. Gone. All our joy. Now here. Maybe that was the inspiration for perhaps the most often-sung Christmas Carol, Isaac Watts’ popular hymn, “Joy to the World.” Remember verse 2?
- Joy to the Earth! the Savior reigns; Let men their songs employ; While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains, Repeat the sounding joy...
- Fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains...that reminds me of what Jesus said in Luke 19 as He was entering Jerusalem and the people were praising Him, shouting “Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the LORD! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!” The Pharisees said, “Hey, Jesus, tell these people to be quiet!” Jesus replied, “I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out.” We all know how much stones know, right? Nothing. Aristotle said that’s what rocks dream about all day. Nothing. So is Jesus saying that those who refuse to sound forth His praises are as dumb as a rock? No, that’s not nice to rocks because they are praising Him. The rocks and the trees and the fields and even the floods. All of creation praises God. That’s why Isaac Watts pleads with us, “Let men their songs employ.” Put your songs to work praising God, like the heavens and like the earth does.
- But here’s why it is such good news that brings great joy: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”
- The announcement is first a message of what He has come to do. Save us! And just for emphasis, there is no definite article in the Greek text. The translation is more literally, “For unto you is born in the city of David, **Savior**, who is Christ the Lord.” Hey shepherds, the One who came to save you is here. In Bethlehem. Not in Jerusalem. Or in Rome. He is born today in the city of His ancestor. King David. The irony is that the one who thought he was the Savior and was hailed by the Roman Empire as Savior and Lord, Caesar Augustus, decreed that all the world should be registered for a tax, which required Joseph to take his pregnant wife to Bethlehem, because he was of the house and the lineage of David. There the real Savior would be born. Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, a man named Paullus Fabius Maximus, proconsul of Asia during Augustus’ reign, proposed that the year should start with Augustus’ birthday: He wrote, “We could justly hold it to be the equivalent to the beginning of all things.” Sorry, Caesar. The Savior could be found in a manger, not seated on a throne. Hey, shepherds. He has come to be your Savior. “But, who is He?”
- He is Christ. That’s not a name but a title. Messiah? The Anointed One. He is Christ! This is the one whom the prophets foretold, Unto us a child is born; unto us a son is given.” He is Christ, and the government shall be upon His shoulders. Just to make sure there is no mistake who He is the angel adds...

- He is Lord. Christ is who He is on earth. Lord is who He is in heaven. Oh, shepherds, you will not see the Lord in all of His glory and power and might like we have, the angels might have said, but Lord God Almighty He is. He has come to save. He will come again to reign! It was a night of all nights, and the announcement was like nothing the world had ever heard.
- The Adulation
- It was about this time that the angel was suddenly joined by a heavenly host of angels. Again there was no warning as a multitude, a military brigade of angels stepped through the veil to join their fellow messenger. Then they began to worship together. "Glory to God in the highest." There is no greater glory that God could receive than He received through His Son Jesus. Our Savior, Christ, and Lord. His Son. There is no greater glory that we will ever know than the glory of Jesus. Paul said, "And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." (2 Cor. 3:18). "For God, who said, 'Let light shine out of darkness,' has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Cor. 4:6). The shepherds looked into the face of the angels and saw the glory of God reflected there. But not anything like what they saw when they looked into the face of Jesus. Or when you and I do the same. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. Where is that peace found and why is it only for those with whom He is pleased? It can only be found at the cross. Christ came to "make peace by the blood of his cross," Paul said in Col. 1:20.
- It was an appearance like none the world had ever seen. It was an announcement like none the world had ever heard. It was an adulation like none the world had ever experienced. Here we are today. Still celebrating that first Christmas. When we got everything we ever wanted, and everything we ever needed.
- Franklin Graham told the story at Operation Christmas Child a few years ago about a little orphan boy in another country who was invited to come to the church to get a Christmas shoebox. "I don't want a shoebox," he said. "I want a Mom and a Dad." Well, we don't have a Mom and a Dad for you...but we do have a shoebox. Won't you come and receive your gift? The little boy went reluctantly and was given a gift and when he opened the box he found gifts, but there was also a picture of a young couple, a note from them, and their address. "Hey, why don't you write to this couple and thank them for the gift?" The boy agreed, sent his letter, and six weeks later they got it and wrote him back. Six weeks later, he got their letter and wrote them back. And six months after the little boy first received a shoebox, he got what he really wanted: the young couple took him home as their adopted son.
- There's good news of GREAT joy today. The Father has sent His Son to make a way for us to BE His sons and His daughters. That's what we all want. It is certainly what we all need.