

Lk 2:8-20 Hidden Christmas

*Tim Anderson 25/12/2021*

Have you noticed that we have a new way of saying goodbye?  
I've always been bit of a fan of the good old Australian,  
"See you later."  
Cherida's grown up with the rather more affectionate,  
"I love you."  
But for the moment,  
both have been superseded in Australia by "stay safe".  
It's an acknowledgement  
that life is inherently more risky than it was a couple of years ago.  
And with a risky world comes fear.  
A few weeks ago,  
I spoke about how much more anger I've seen in the community  
than I ever have before.  
And I was deluged by comments afterwards  
about how that rang true to people's own experience.  
One lady told me she was just flabbergasted  
when the person ahead of her in the queue at Bunnings  
just tore strips off the shop assistant.  
She'd never seen anything like it  
and she had no idea what to say to the poor shop assistant  
but she felt she needed to say something.  
And when she said something,  
the shop assistant told her it was the ninth time that day.  
Well if you think there is a pandemic of anger out there.  
There is also a pandemic of fear.  
Of course people are scared of the virus.  
That goes without saying.  
And some people are scared of the vaccines.  
Some people are scared that the government is trying to maintain  
some authoritarian control of them by QR codes.  
And you might put that down to paranoia,  
until you look at what is happening in China,  
and you realise

that authoritarian control using electronic means is already a thing.  
I don't think it's a big risk in Australia after the pandemic.  
But I won't sneer at people who do.  
Their fears are based on evidence.  
Other people fear getting stranded if they travel.  
You go interstate  
and then the borders close and you can't get home again.  
Well I don't know what to say about that fear.  
I think you'd be naive if you didn't make plans for that.  
But there are other fears as well.  
After months of being locked down,  
some people found themselves fearing other people.  
Not because they were afraid of catching the virus from them.  
But just they had got used to their own company,  
or in seeing people in ones and twos.  
One lady wrote in an article on the abc  
that she had a panic attack in a shopping centre.  
Not cause she was scared of the virus.  
But because she was scared of crowds of people.  
It was just too much of a shock after months of isolation.  
Fear is out there.

And that is exactly where the shepherds were in the Christmas story.  
2:9 "An angel of the Lord appeared to them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,  
and they were terrified."  
Now lots of folk would wonder a bit at that.  
They might expect,  
"An angel of the Lord appeared to them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,  
and they were filled  
with an overwhelming feeling of happiness and peace."  
Or the slightly more teenage response.  
"An angel of the Lord appeared to them,  
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,  
and they got out their phones and started live streaming it to Facebook.

How cool is this, bro?"

But no.

They were neither lifted up to a heavenly plane,  
nor were they intrigued by the novelty of it.

Instead they were terrified.

Perhaps they were a particularly timid breed of shepherd.

No. It's not that either.

Because in Luke's gospel,

the shepherds are the third people to have a visit from an angel.

First is John the Baptist's dad, Zechariah.

And this is what it says,

"Then an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah,  
standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear."

Second is Mary.

The angel has to reassure Mary with these words,

"Do not be afraid Mary;  
you have found favour with God."

And thirdly we have the terrified shepherds.

You might wish that you could meet an angel.

But chances are if you do,  
you will be scared witless.

Why is that?

Because being in the presence of an angel just makes it horribly clear  
the yawning gap between us and God.

It's actually one of the dangers of Christmas.

Christmas can obscure the yawning gap between us and God  
because a baby in a manger seems manageable.

Trust me there was nothing manageable  
about the angel who appeared to the shepherds.

And the baby in the manger is their boss.

And yet despite the entirely appropriate terror

that those who meet an angel feel,

the angel has a very reassuring message for the shepherds.

"Do not be afraid."

The angel did come with the purpose of scaring them witless.  
That was just an uncomfortable side effect of his heavenly glory.  
He came to give them some good news.

2:10-11 "I bring you good news  
that will cause great joy for all the people.

Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you;  
he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Replace fear with joy.

That's what Christmas does for us.

And it's hard to look at our world at the moment,  
and not come to the conclusion  
that replacing fear with joy would be a vast improvement.

Both states of being are contagious.

When you are with people who are fearful,  
it's hard not to be affected by their fear,  
to take it on board.

But when you are with people who are joyful,  
it's also hard not to share their joy.

To use the theme of the day,  
if you visit a mum who has just given birth to a baby,  
you can't help but feel her joy as she holds her little one.

But how does the birth of this baby cause joy for all the people?

Two words are worth noting.

"Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you;"

Normally when you see a new baby born,  
the joy comes from the new life.

New life is very special.

A new addition to the family warms our hearts.

But that joy is irrespective of what the child might do in the future.

They might be great,  
they might be ordinary.

We still feel joy at their birth.

But this child, Jesus,  
at his birth, we are told of what he will do.

He will be the saviour.

Matthew tells us that he was called Jesus -  
which means "The Lord saves"

because he will save his people from their sins.

Now I mentioned at the start of the sermon

some of the many things that are causing people to fear at the moment.

All of them are very real.

People genuinely feel threatened.

I would say most people don't feel particularly under threat  
because of their sins.

But God tells us that is what should be concerning us the most.

Covid can only hurt you in this world.

Sin affects your future forever.

But the Lord Jesus was born to be a Saviour.

Imagine if there was a pill developed that could cure covid instantly.

That would be the cause of untold joy all over the world.

A Saviour being born should be even more exciting.

If it's not, then our perspective needs to change.

I said there were two words that are important,  
in understanding why the birth of this baby brings joy.

Saviour is one.

The second is the word 'to'.

That's a funny word to concentrate on.

But it's quite strange if you think about it.

A Saviour has been born to you.

Back in May, baby Elizabeth was born.

So much has happened this year,  
it seems like longer ago than that.

But it was just back in May.

Now if someone said to me,

"Baby Elizabeth was born to you."

I would say to them,

"No she wasn't.

She was born to Chris and Sari."

I celebrated with Chris and Sari.

But I wouldn't for a minute say Elizabeth was born to me.  
But the angel says to the shepherds,  
"A Saviour has been born to you."  
Would the shepherds say to the angel,  
"Don't be silly.  
The baby was born to Mary not us."?  
Well no.  
Jesus was born not just to Mary,  
not just to Mary plus the shepherds and wise men.  
Jesus was born to all of us.  
How?  
He was born to you in that he was a gift from God to you.  
Not just a gift to Mary and Joseph.  
A gift to you and every other person on the planet.  
He was born to you,  
because everybody needs a saviour.  
His role as saviour meant that he came to you  
and to everyone else.

Sometimes things happen which are important,  
but not directly relevant to me.  
Vladimir Putin sounds like he's going to try  
to take over part of the Ukraine.  
That's very significant for those who live in the Ukraine.  
But it's not super relevant to me.  
No one should say that about the baby born in Bethlehem.  
The angel says he's born to you  
because it is relevant to you.

So if I were to summarise the message of the passage so far,  
it would be "Fear not because a Saviour has been born to you."  
Now there are going to be some people thinking,  
"I can't help my fear.  
I can't stop it.  
I just am afraid."  
Look, I understand that.

Fear is a powerful human response.  
You can't just turn it off and on at will.  
But over time you can get fear under control.  
The key is to spend time thinking about the things  
that give you confidence in the face of fear.  
When the angel called together all his mates,  
and they sang their praises to God,  
they gave to us the message that deals with our fears.  
2:14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests."  
Who does God's favour rest on?  
Those who accept Jesus as their saviour.  
If you have accepted Jesus as your saviour,  
that means God's favour rests on you.  
What does that mean?  
It means you have absolutely nothing to fear.  
Whatever the world can throw at you,  
nothing can disturb your secure status before the creator of the universe.  
And at the end of the day,  
nothing else matters.

You might know that in your head  
and still find that fear frustrating still rears its ugly head.  
What do you do?  
Well you could take the approach that Mary took.  
2:19 "But Mary treasured up all these things  
and pondered them in her heart."  
I take it that there are two things Mary did.  
She treasured up all the things that happened to her.  
That means she thought about them.  
She probably made herself a list of all of the incredible events  
because she wouldn't want to forget any of what had happened.  
No one else was going to have the experience that she had,  
and her experiences were relevant  
even for people born 2021 years after they happened to her.  
When Luke came to write his gospel,

he must have spoken to Mary about what happened to her.  
It was probably 40-50 years later that Luke was doing his writing.  
And there is much that is written down here  
that Luke could only have know if Mary had told him.  
Isn't it wonderful that Mary treasured up all these things?  
I am personally grateful to Mary  
for bothering to remember the words of the angel.  
I'm so glad she did.  
Because it tells me that Jesus is my saviour.  
It tells me that God's peace rests upon me.

But Mary didn't only treasure up what had happened.  
She also pondered the things that happened in her heart.  
That means she didn't just make a list of what happened,  
she also thought deeply about what it meant.  
How does this change my life?  
How should it affect my feelings and my actions?

If we follow Mary's example.  
If we take the message of Christmas.  
If we treasure it up.  
If we ponder it in our hearts,  
then we will get some of the benefits of Christmas flowing to us.  
God has proclaimed peace to those on whom his favour rests.  
Christians have a guarantee of that peace when we get to heaven.  
But who doesn't like opening their Christmas presents a bit early?  
Why not have some peace now?  
Why wait till you get to heaven?  
So treasure up the message of Christmas.  
Ponder it in your heart.  
And open the gift of peace a bit early.  
God doesn't mind you opening your presents early.  
In fact he wants you to.

Fear not.  
A Saviour has been born to you.

And peace with God is available to all who put their trust in him.  
Peace in heaven for all on whom his favour rests.  
Peace now for those who treasure and ponder all he has done.  
May you have a peaceful Christmas.