

# Good News Of Great Joy For All People

Long Beach Alliance Church • December 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2007 • Merry Christmas • Pastor Chris Lankford

**DO NOT BE AFRAID; FOR BEHOLD, I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY WHICH WILL BE FOR ALL THE PEOPLE; FOR TODAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID THERE HAS BEEN BORN FOR YOU A SAVIOR, WHO IS CHRIST THE LORD. THIS WILL BE A SIGN FOR YOU: YOU WILL FIND A BABY WRAPPED IN CLOTHS AND LYING IN A MANGER.**

**~LUKE 2:10-12 (NASB)**

## **1) The Promises Are For All People**

- A) The miraculous virgin birth of Jesus Christ (Matthew 1:18-25, 24-25; Luke 1:26-35) in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2, cf. Matthew 2:1, John 7:42) was the fulfillment of many promises which God had made through history to the Jews (Genesis 3:15, 12:1-3, 17:1-8).
  
- B) The "Good News" of Jesus Christ (Gospel) was not limited to the Jewish people alone, but was also (as promised, cf. Isaiah 9:2-7) "for all people" (Luke 2:10, cf. Galatians 3:28).

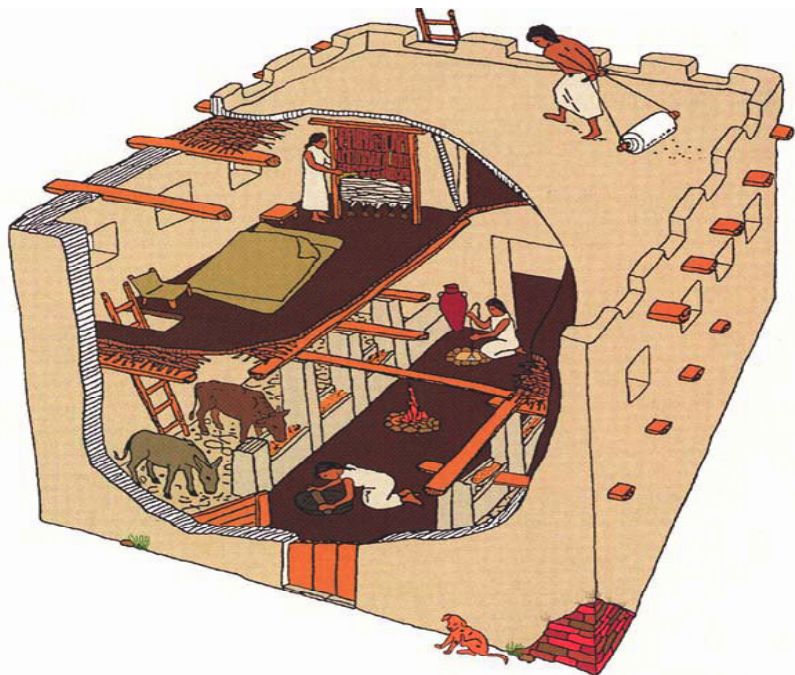
## 2) The Promise Of Christmas

- A) The marvelous story of Jesus Christ's miraculous birth is magnificently recorded in Luke 2:1-20. Jesus Christ truly is 'God with Us' (Isaiah 7:14, Matthew 1:23).
  
- B) Caesar Augustus\* is portrayed by Luke as an unwitting agent of God (Luke 2:1). His decree makes it possible for Joseph and Mary to travel to Bethlehem, the town of the royal-line of David (1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 17:12).
  
- C) The purpose of a census was to make an assessment for taxes, and for Roman citizens, to assure registration for military service. Church history tells us that it was Jewish custom to travel back to your hometown for a census (2:3).

---

\* One of the most significant historical issues in all of the Bible is located here in Luke 2:1-7. The association of a census taken during the governorship in Syria of Quirinius is widely debated. Historically speaking, there is no evidence of such a census ever being conducted during the time of Caesar Augustus, and the only census historically recorded during Quirinius' reign was in A.D. 6 and is well documented because it caused widespread revolt. Further, the Roman census of Jesus' time would not require Joseph to go to Bethlehem, as Roman census' never required this kind of "hometown travel." In fact, historical records show that Quirinius was not a governor in Syria during the time when Jesus was born. The answers to these objections are lengthy, and not appropriate for a simple footnote. I would direct you to Darrell L. Bock's "Excursus #2" (pages 903-909) from *Luke 1:1-9:50, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, for a more thorough discussion. I have made several copies of this selected section available in the lobby this morning, please take a copy for further study. Suffice it to say though, for our purposes here, that a census during the reign of Augustus, and a Jewish-styled census (which would require Joseph to travel to Bethlehem), along with the impending birth of Jesus (making Mary's travel more necessary), and a lower governmental role for Quirinius which could have placed him in a position to have administrated more than just the census of A.D. 6, are all historically plausible explanations for Luke's recording of the facts in Luke 2. As Bock notes, "it is clear that the relegation of Luke 2:2 to the category of historical error is premature and erroneous." I would conclude this note with a final thought... When sharing the message of the Good News with others, these types of objections can be presented with great intellectual force and persuasiveness. Do not be deterred by these compelling presentations. Check out the facts and historical data for yourself, and I believe you will be satisfied with the content of the Scriptures. The Word of God is truly sufficient for all we need (Hebrews 4:12-13)!

- D) Joseph returns with Mary to Bethlehem because he is of the line of King David (2:4). During this time in Bethlehem, Mary delivers her firstborn son, Jesus (2:6).
- E) The reference to an “inn” in Luke 2:7 was most probably the main guestroom in the family home of Joseph (cf., Luke 22:11)†. The manger was most probably a feeding trough attached to the lowest area of the home.



† The passage tells us that Joseph and Mary were there because there was no room at the *κατάλυμα* (*katalumati*, public shelter). *Κατάλυμα* suggests that a formal inn is not in view here. The LXX (Septuagint) refers to the public shelters where many people might father for the night under one roof, cf. Exodus 4:24. Luke 22:11 uses the term of a guest room in a house, while 10:34 uses *πανδοχείον* (*pandocheion*) to describe a formal inn. The Christmas associations of an inn and an innkeeper, however, do not reflect the language of Luke's text. Rather, *κατάλυμα* seems to refer to either some type of reception room or guest room in a private home or some type of public shelter. Since that location was full, the stable was utilized. It is also notable that Bethlehem was a very small village without a great number of overnight travelers because of its proximity to Jerusalem. A public inn would not be practical in this setting. A public shelter still might be possible, although highly improbable. Rather, the private family home with its attached stable is the most historically and archaeologically accurate picture of the first Christmas. Summarized from many sources, at least partially from Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*, pages 207-208.



- F) The birth of Jesus was unadorned and simple. Jesus came into the world in the most humble of circumstances, driven by the decree of a distant ruler, and born to two teenagers who were probably very scared at being away from home.

### 3) A Kingly Pronouncement

- A) Despite this simplicity, there was a birth announcement from Heaven as Jesus was born (Luke 2:8-14)! However, it was to shepherds, a rather lowly and simple (albeit faithful, cf. 2:20) group of laborers in Jesus' time.‡
- B) The angels send the shepherds to find baby Jesus (wrapped in "cloths") lying in a manger (2:12). This would have been a strange sight, and thus, an easier discovery for the shepherds.
- C) The whole birth narrative is highlighted with the angels proclamation in Luke 2:14 of "Glory to God in the highest..." The scene on the Bethlehem hillside is consistent with the view from Heaven, an explosion has split the skies!
- D) News of Jesus' birth traveled fast (2:17-18), but the fullness of what is happening is not understood at this time, even by Jesus' own mother, Mary (2:19). Like all new birth, the treasure of Jesus will not be fully understood until maturity.

---

‡ Some people attempt to represent the shepherds as being the despised and downtrodden class of people in Jesus' time, finding significance that the proclamation of Jesus' coming came first to a class of people which were widely considered sinful. Most of this tradition comes from too late a source (5th Century) to be of real validity. Rather, shepherds are generally viewed in a positive light in Scripture (note that Abraham, Moses and David were all shepherds), and the metaphor of Shepherd is used of Jesus Christ (the Chief Shepherd, cf. 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 5:4), and of leaders in the New Testament church (Acts 20:28, John 21:16). It is most likely, then, that the shepherds were another picture of a larger scene, one of quiet humility, serene ambivalence, and utmost simplicity. Jesus came without much fanfare, in a remote location, to a bunch of people who the world would call nobody's. This was His beginning, and this foreshadowed the objects of His ministry.

# Engaging Advent

The word "Advent" comes from the Latin *adventus*, which means "the approach" or "the arrival." The Latin verb is *advenio*: "I arrive. I come. I am coming."

For centuries, followers of Jesus Christ have observed this season with a passionate anticipation of Christmas morning, marking the joy of the birth of God in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

Despite its significance, our culture has largely captured this season and disguised it with Lord's-a-Leaping, Sleigh Bells Ringing, and a Jolly Old Elf.

Of course, there is nothing wrong with any of these special traditions... Unless we miss Jesus Christ in the midst of all the tinsel and trappings.

If we miss Jesus Christ, then we have missed Christmas, and we have missed the message of "Peace on Earth, and goodwill toward men..."

*Will this year be any different?*

Simply, you are invited to engage Advent, perhaps for the first time in your life.

Through this season, which encompasses the four Sundays which lead up to Christmas, there will be special Advent Scripture readings which you (and your family) are invited to read during the week. There will also be some readings from Christian writers who have contemplated Advent over the centuries.

Will you schedule a time each day to anticipate His coming? Will you engage Advent? Join with the shepherds, walk with kings from the East, sit with Herod as he hears of the Christ child, exult with Mary & Joseph, gaze on the star of Bethlehem all over again, as though this is the first time...

# Advent Reading #4 ~ Thomas Merton

Thomas Merton (1915-1968) was a highly influential writer and Catholic theologian. He is also one of the most influential spiritual writers of the 20<sup>th</sup>-Century. Merton was a Trappist monk, and shared (in his writings) of a vibrant faith and soul-searching desire to honor God. With over 60 books to his name, Merton continues to be a favorite author for many people who are seeking Jesus Christ. Before his untimely and accidental death in 1968, Merton served in Kentucky at a Catholic Abbey.

---

## *The Time Of No Room*

*He who has come to men  
Dwells where we cannot tell  
Nor sight reveal him,  
Until the hour has struck  
When the small heart does break  
With hunger for him;*

*Those who do merit least,  
Those whom no tongue does praise  
The first to know him,  
And on the face of the earth  
The poorest village street  
Blossoming for him*

*~Jane Tyson Clement*

So, there was no room at the inn? True! But that is simply mentioned in passing, in a matter-of-fact sort of way, as the Evangelist point to what he really means us to see – the picture of pure peace, pure joy: “She wrapped her firstborn Son in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger” (Luke 2:7). By now we know it well, and yet we might still be questioning it – except that a reason was given for an act that might otherwise have seemed strange: “There was no room for them at the inn.” Well, then, they obviously found some other place!

But when we read the Gospels and come to know them thoroughly, we realize there are other reasons why it was necessary that there be no room at the inn, and why there had to be some other place. In fact, the inn was the last place in the world for the birth of the Lord.

The Evangelists, preparing us for announcement of the birth of the Lord, remind us that the fullness of time has come. Now is the time of final decision, the time of mercy, "the acceptable time," the time of settlement, the time of the end. It is the time of repentance, the time for the fulfillment of all promises, for the Promised One has come. But with the coming of the end, a great bustle and business begins to shake the nations of the world. The time of the end is the time of massed armies, "wars and rumors of wars," of huge crowds moving this way and that, of men "withering away for fear," of flaming cities and sinking fleets, of smoking lands laid waste, of technicians planning grandiose acts of destruction. The time of the end is the time of the Crowd: and the eschatological message is spoken in the world where, precisely because of the vast indefinite roar of armies on the move and the restlessness of turbulent mobs, the message can be heard only with difficulty. Yet it is heard by those who are aware that the display of power, *hubris* (power) and destruction is part of the *kerygma* (message). That which is to be judged announces itself, introduces itself by its sinister and arrogant claim to absolute power. Thus it is identified, and those who decide in favor of this claim are numbered, marked with the sign of power, aligned with power, and destroyed with it.

Why then was the inn crowded? Because of the census, the eschatological massing of the "whole world" in centers of registration, to be numbered, to be identified with the structure of imperial power. The purpose of the census: to discover those who were to be taxed. To find out those who were eligible for service in the armies of the empire.

The Bible had not been friendly to a census in the days when God was ruler of Israel (2 Samuel 24). The numbering of the people of God by an alien emperor and their full consent to it was itself an eschatological sign, preparing those who could understand it to meet judgment with repentance. After all, in the Apocalyptic literature of the Bible, this "summoning together" or convocation of the powers of the earth to do battle is the great sign of "the end."

It was therefore impossible that the Word should lose himself by being born into shapeless and passive mass. He had indeed emptied himself, taken the form of God's servant, man. But he did not empty himself to the point of becoming mass man, faceless man. It was therefore right that there should be no room for him in a crowd that had been called together as an eschatological sign. His being born outside that crowd is even more of a sign. That there is no room for him is a sign of the end.

Nor are the tidings of great joy announced in the crowded inn. In the massed crowd there are always new tidings of joy and disaster. Where each new



announcement is the greatest of announcements, where every day's disaster is beyond compare, every day's danger demands the ultimate sacrifice, all news and all judgment is reduced to zero. News becomes merely a new noise in the mind, briefly replacing the noise that went before it and yielding to the noise that comes after it, so that eventually everything blends into the same monotonous and meaningless rumor. News? There is so much news that there is no room left for the true tidings, the "Good News," the Great Joy.

Hence the Great Joy is announced, after all, in silence, loneliness and darkness, to shepherds "living in the fields" or "living in the countryside" and apparently unmoved by the rumors or massed crowds. These are the remnant of the desert-dwellers, the nomads, the true Israel.

Even though "the whole world" is ordered to be inscribed, they do not seem to be affected. Doubtless they have registered, as Joseph and Mary will register, but they remain outside the agitation, and untouched by the vast movement, the massing of hundreds and thousands of people everywhere in the towns and cities.

They are therefore quite otherwise signed. They are designated, surrounded by a great light, they receive the message of the Great Joy, and they believe it with joy. They see the *Shekinah* over them, recognize themselves for what they are. They are the remnant, the people of no account, who are therefore chosen – the *anawim*. And they obey the light. Nor was anything else asked of them.

They go and see not a prophet, not a spirit, but the Flesh in which the glory of the Lord will be revealed and by which all men will be delivered from the power that is in the world, the power that seeks to destroy the world because the world is God's creation, the power that mimics creation, and in doing so pillages and exhausts the resources of the bounteous God-given earth.

We live in the time of no room, which is the time of the end. The time when everyone is obsessed with lack of time, lack of space, with saving time, conquering space, projecting into time and space the anguish produced within them by the technological furies of size, volume, quantity, speed, number, price, power and acceleration.

The primordial blessing, "increase and multiply," has suddenly become a hemorrhage of terror. We are numbered in billions, and massed together, marshalled, numbered, marched here and there, taxed, drilled, armed, worked to the point of insensibility, dazed by information, drugged by entertainment, surfeited with everything, nauseated with the human race and with ourselves, nauseated with life.



As the end approaches, there is no room for nature. The cities crowd it off the face of the earth.

As the end approaches, there is no room for quiet. There is no room for solitude. There is no room for thought. There is no room for attention, for the awareness of our state.

In the time for the ultimate end, there is no room for man.

Those that lament the fact that there is no room for God must also be called to account for this. Have they perhaps added to the general crush by preaching a solid marble God that makes man alien to himself, a God that settles himself grimly like an implacable object in the inner heart of man and drives man out of himself in despair?

The time of the end is the time of demons who occupy the heart (pretending to be gods) so that man himself finds no room for himself in himself. He finds no space to rest in his own heart, not because it is full, but because it is void. If only he knew that the void itself, when hovered over by the Spirit, is an abyss of creativity... yet he cannot believe it. There is no room for belief.

In the time of the end there is no longer room for the desire to go on living. The time of the end is the time when men call upon the mountains to fall upon them, because they wish they did not exit.

Why? Because they are part of a proliferation of life that is not fully alive, it is programmed for death. A life that has not been chosen, and can hardly be accepted, has no more room for hope. Yet it must pretend to go on hoping. It is haunted by the demon of emptiness. And out of this unutterable void come the armies, the missiles, the weapons, the bombs, the concentration camps, the race riots, the racist murders, and all the other crimes of mass society.

Is this pessimism? Is this the unforgivable sin of admitting what everybody really feels? Is it pessimism to diagnose cancer as cancer? Or should one simply go on pretending that everything is getting better every day, because the time of the end is also – for some at any rate – the time of great prosperity? “The kings of the earth have joined in her idolatry, and the traders of the earth have grown rich from her excessive luxury” (Revelation 18:3).

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for

him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it – because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it – his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst. For them, there is no escape even in imagination. They cannot identify with the power structure of a crowded humanity which seeks to project itself outward, anywhere, in a centrifugal flight into the void, to get out there where there is no God, no man, no name, no identity, no weight, no self, nothing but the bright, self-directed, perfectly obedient and infinitely expensive machine.

For those who are stubborn enough, devoted enough to power, there remains this last apocalyptic myth of machinery propagating its own kind in the eschatological wilderness of space – while on earth the bomb make room!

But the others: they remain imprisoned in other hopes, and in more pedestrian despairs, despairs and hopes which are held down to earth, down to street level, and to the pavement only: desire to be at least half-human, to taste a little human joy, to do a fairly decent job of productive work, to come home to the family... desires for which there is no room. It is in these that He hides himself, for whom there is no room.

The time of the end? All right: when?

That is not the question.

To say that it is the time of the end is to answer all the questions, for if it is the time of the end, and of great tribulation, then it is certainly and above all the time of the Great Joy. It is the time to “lift up your heads for your redemption is at hand.” It is the time when the promise will be manifestly fulfilled, and no longer kept secret from anyone. It is the time for the joy that is given not as the world gives, and that no man can take away.

For the true eschatological banquet is not that of the birds on the bodies of the slain. It is the feast of the living, the wedding banquet of the Lamb. The true eschatological convocation is not the crowding of armies on the field of battle, but the summons of the Great Joy, the cry of deliverance: “Come out of her, my people, that you may not share in her sins and suffer from her plagues!” (Revelation 18:4). The cry of the time of the end was uttered also in the beginning by Lot in Sodom, to his sons-in-law: “Come, get out of this city, for the Lord will destroy it. But he seems to them to be jesting (Genesis 19:14).

To leave the city of death and imprisonment is surely not bad news except to those who have so identified themselves with their captivity that they can conceive no other reality and no other condition. In such a case, there is nothing but tribulation: for while to stay in captivity is tragic, to break away from it is unthinkable – and so more tragic still.

What is needed then is the grace and courage to see that “the Great Tribulation” and “the Great Joy” are really inseparable, and that the “Tribulation” becomes “Joy” when it is seen as the victory of life over death.

True, there is a sense in which there is no room for joy in this tribulation. To say there is “no room” for the Great Joy in the tribulation of “the end” is to say that the evangelical joy must not be confused with the joys proposed by the world in the time of the end – and, we must admit it, these are no longer convincing as joys. They become now stoic duties and sacrifices to be offered without question for ends that cannot be described just now, since there is too much smoke and the visibility is rather poor. In the last analysis, the “joy” proposed by the time of the end is simply the satisfaction and the relief of getting it all over with...

That is the demonic temptation of the “end.” For eschatology is not finis and punishment, the winding up of accounts and the closing of books: it is the final beginning, the definitive birth into a new creation. It is not the last gasp of exhausted possibilities but the first taste of all that is beyond conceiving as actual.

But can we believe it? (“He seems to them to be jesting!”)



# Advent Notes