

" TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY "

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people." Luke 2:10.

Luke was a scholar, a master of the Greek language, and wrote with an ease and a grace unsurpassed anywhere in the New Testament. In the first chapters of the Gospel according to Luke, which Renan called "the most beautiful book that has ever been written," he told the story of the birth and boyhood of Christ Jesus. Luke, who delighted to dwell on the perfect humanity of our Lord, gives in detail the story of His birth, as well as glimpses of the phenomena attending that marvelous event.

Let us now turn back the clock of time more than nineteen hundred years, and go on the wings of our imagination to the little town of Bethlehem and its environs.

Late one afternoon Joseph and Mary arrived at the only inn which Bethlehem could claim as its own. With so many having to return to Bethlehem to be enrolled at this particular time, the inn was filled to capacity. It was urgent that Mary have a place to prepare for the birth of her child. When not even an improvised corner could be found in the inn to shelter and protect the expectant mother, the innkeeper finally told Joseph that he and Mary might stay in the stable if they desired to do so. As a last resort, Joseph and Mary entered the stable. There Mary gave birth to the Lord Jesus Christ. He was cradled in a manger "because there was no room for him in the inn." Even though He was born poor, indigence is no sign of degradation. Great hearts often throb under the clothes of poverty. Sorry hearts often beat under the clothes of fabulous wealth and the glamor of worldly prestige. Humble birthplaces have cradled the majority of the world's greatest leaders.

A hill near Bethlehem was a place of sacred associations. Centuries before Christ was born David, the shepherd boy, had pastured his flocks there until God had anointed him to be the king of Israel. On the night when Christ was born a full-orbed moon was shining down upon a scene of quietness and peace in those hills. Around a flickering camp fire a group of shepherds were seated, while near them were their flocks of sheep huddled together asleep. This tranquil scene served as the setting for one of the most important events in the history of the world. At this particular place a very impressive service was held.

The congregation at that memorable service consisted of faithful shepherds who were busy with their ordinary tasks. Shepherds have always been a meditative class of men, accustomed to the sweet silences of nature and communion with their own thoughts. They were not great men according to the standards of the world, but they were humble, working men. They were good men -- devout, God-fearing, faithful and spiritually-minded. Their interests in life were not confined to matters of money, business and commerce. The things of first importance with them were not the number of sheep in their flocks or the price of wool in the market. They were men whose hearts and minds were prepared to welcome the message which God had for them. It is noteworthy that these unknown shepherds were out on the Judean hills in the line of duty, keeping sleepless vigil through the long hours of the night, when God through His chosen messenger informed them of the greatest and most wonderful event that had ever taken place, namely, the birth of Christ the Saviour. What a mystery and what a glorious wonder! It is enough to baffle human reason and to stagger worldly wisdom. Here is a fact which will ever be a stumbling stone for those who try to set reason above revelation. Faith alone can comprehend this sublime and glorious mystery.

On all the pages of literature there is not a more fascinating story than that of the "shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks by night," when, as suddenly as the flash of a meteor:

"The angel of the Lord came down,
And glory shone around."

When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds "and the glory of the Lord shone round about them" the shepherds were frightened. Any of us would have been alarmed had such a thing happened to us. The stillness of the night, the suddenness of the apparition, the extraordinary splendor of the light and the appearance of the angel were enough to astound the shepherds and to put them in a quiver of reverential alarm. Because they were so fearful on account of the unusual things that had taken place, the angel said, "Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Strange, mysterious and even miraculous was the announcement of the angel to the shepherds. Most people would have expected this announcement to have been made to some high and mighty people. Instead, the heavenly messenger came to men of lowly origin and humble station. This message was for men as men, and not for priests or kings, or for anybody of rank and position. These humble shepherds were the representatives of the common people, the objects of God's love and care. They were engaged in the task of herding sheep, one of the most lowly and representative occupations of that day and land. It is not without significance that God thus put His benediction upon faithful attention to duty, however unpretentious it was or might be. Because of their faithfulness to duty God considered them worthy to be the first to hear about the birth of Christ.

These honest and industrious shepherds, who had the high honor and wonderful privilege of being the first to hear the news that Christ was born, were stirred profoundly when they heard the sweetest carol ever sung and the most wondrous message ever spoken. They were the only ones who heard the angels sing that night, but today the people of various nations sing,

"Hark! the herald angels sing,
'Glory to the new-born King;
Peace on earth, and mercy mild;
God and sinners reconciled.'"

The anthem of that choir of angels had only two lines,

"Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace, good will toward men."

And yet what a wonderful message it contains. It deals with two spheres -- heaven and earth; two beings -- God and man; and two blessings -- glory and peace. The birth of Jesus Christ was such a far-reaching event that it affected heaven and earth, and brought about the twofold result of glory to God and peace to men.

"The angel of the Lord" was the first preacher of "the good tidings of great joy." Clothed with glory and power, the angel was an appropriate and effective messenger of the gospel of grace. The message of the angel was clear, for it was the announcement that a Person had come, the purpose of His coming, who would be affected by His coming and how it would cause them to rejoice. No other message that was ever brought to this world had such a joyous import.

The word "tidings" in our text is not synonymous with our word "news." News indicates something that is of the nature of surprise. News is the giving forth of that which

has occurred suddenly or unexpectedly. Tidings refers to something which has been suggested or betided before. The birth of Christ had been predicted or prophesied, so the announcement of the fact that He had been born of a virgin was good tidings indeed.

The sermon which the angel delivered to the wondering shepherds was a message for all men and for all time. It was designed to meet the greatest needs of men regardless of when they might live.

One of these needs was that of assurance. The angelic minister quietened the trembling hearts of his hearers with the words, "Fear not." The gospel of Christ was designed to dispel fear from the human heart. Wherever it has been preached, heard and believed it has kindled in the soul a perfect love which has cast out fear.

Another of these needs was that of joy. Therefore, the angel delivered a message of joy saying, "I bring you good tidings of great joy." At that time the world was in the depths of despair. Its current philosophy was pessimistic. The people certainly needed a sermon of joy and hope then, and we need the same message today. The gospel of Christ is the best news that has ever come from heaven to earth.

Still another need was that of salvation. The fact is, that is the greatest need of the human heart. In every age men need to be saved from the penalty of sin, from the power of sin and, finally, from the presence of sin.

How did the shepherds respond to this message from God's messenger? They felt constrained or compelled to go at once and make inquiry about the Christ. They did not wait until daylight. Entrusting their sheep to God's care, they promptly went to see for themselves the One about Whom the angels had brought them the good tidings of great joy. The shepherds eagerly and earnestly hastened to Bethlehem and found "the Babe lying in a manger." As their eyes gazed into His face, their hearts were filled with reverential awe and joyous gratitude. Immediately they went forth as the first evangelists to tell the wonderful story of what they had heard and seen. Joy filled their souls as they did so.

If you who are not Christians will here and now receive this Christ into your heart as your personal Saviour, He will forgive your sin, save your soul and flood it with joy unspeakable.