

"GOOD TIDINGS OF GREAT JOY
Christmas Eve, 1989

TEXT: Luke 2:10 "And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people.'"

A few moments ago we heard what has often been called "The Christmas Gospel." And what an appropriate title that is! For the word, Gospel, means "Good News." And that is just what this passage is about. It tells how the angel appeared, on the night of Christ's birth, and said to the shepherds, "Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news" And ever since, the story of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection, has been called Good News, the Gospel.

But just what is this "Good News" of which the angel spoke? And why should it be "a great joy . . . to all the people"? Why is it that we sing "Joy to the World" and wish each other a "Merry Christmas"? What is there at the very heart of Christmas that brings Good News to an otherwise jaded and often cynical world? A great many volumes have been written in answer to those questions, and no one sermon can begin to do them justice. But, just the same, as we gather to welcome another Christmas, perhaps, for a few moments, we ought to think about this Good News, this Gospel, which begins at Christmas, but whose full meaning we comprehend only on Easter.

For one thing, it is Good News because it tells us that God loves us. We have heard that so often that perhaps its meaning has become somewhat diluted, but it is Good News indeed. All of us want to be loved. All of us need to be loved. We know that without love human beings are not only miserable, but they may even die. That is why some of us do such silly, even self-defeating, things. We may go about it the wrong way, but we are looking for attention, for approval, for love. My mother used to say that I would rather take a licking than be ignored. I suspect that, down deep, most of us are like that.

And the Good News tells us that we need look no further. We are loved already. God, Himself, loves us enough to die for us. So we are no longer dependant on other, sometimes fickle, people for that most precious of life's necessities. We are loved. With the most wonderful, the most glorious, the most powerful love there can be. No matter how many, or how few, friends we

have; no matter how much, or how little, money we have; no matter how important, or how unimportant, we seem in the eyes of the world; God loves us. Whether we deserve it or not. Loves us in spite of everything. And nothing we can do, or fail to do, will ever change that. No wonder the angel said, "Be not afraid!" Our deepest human need is already met. Met in God's inalienable love and grace.

The Good News also tells us not to fear the world in which we live. It was created by, and operates under, the God of love. Matthew writes that nature, itself, in the form of the Christmas star, proclaimed Messiah's birth. We need never feel out of place or afraid. The universe in which we live is neither hostile nor indifferent. Its challenges are meant not to harm us, but to make us grow. The God, who loves us, has made it the kind of universe where goodness, decency, and moral character are encouraged and sustained. A universe in which our highest and best instincts are valued and supported. A world which, at its best, offers peace with nature as well as men. It might not always seem that way, especially in the short run, but it was made for us and our best interests. And that is Good News, too.

Thirdly, the Good News is "We are not alone." It is not "every man for himself and devil take the hindmost." The angel spoke a "great joy which will come to all the people." And, some years later, Jesus taught us to pray, "Our Father who art in heaven." The divisiveness we so often experience --between nations, races, classes, and groups-- is not the way life has to be. It is an aberration, a distortion of reality.

The God of all creation actively works to abolish artificial divisions that we may all, indeed, be one. Creative tension has a rightful place in God's world. Destructive conflict does not. "Peace on earth, good will toward men" is not just a hopeless dream; it is the will and active intention of God.

And, finally, the Good News tells us that human beings are capable of change, if we receive, accept, and believe in the Spirit and Power of God. How desperately we need to hear that. When we read the morning headlines, when we look at those around us, and perhaps especially when we take a careful look at ourselves, we may sometimes doubt that. We may be tempted to give up --on ourselves as well as others.

The Good News is that God does not give up. On the contrary, He risked the most precious thing He had, His own Son, in the belief that we human beings are both saveable and worth saving. At times we can be a pretty tough lot, but we are not hopeless.

If we accept God's Son, not only as our Savior, but also as the Lord of our lives, the redemption of the world is not only possible; it is inevitable. At times we may find ourselves living more like animals than like children of God. But most of us do not want to live like that. And the Good News of Christmas

is "We do not have to." "For behold I bring you good tidings of a great joy which will come to all the people." "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." "Joy to the world; the Lord is come."