

Luke 2:1-7, And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:8-20 (KJV), And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 **And**, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. 10 And the angel said unto them, ***“Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. 12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*** 13 **And** suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 ***Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, Good will toward men.***

15 **And** it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, *Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.* 16 **And** they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. 17 **And** when they had seen it, **they made known abroad the saying which was told them** concerning this child. 18 **And** all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. 20 **And** the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, **as it was told unto them.”**

It's wonderful to be with all of you on Christmas Eve. For those of you who have journeyed to Cape Cod, thanks for being here. For those who have traveled to be with family or friends and are worshiping with us online, welcome. Thank you all for sharing this special day of the year with us.

Christmas Eve has a different feel for each of us individually and for those at certain ages and stages of life. For many of us, Christmas is a wonderful time of celebration, love, family, and joy. For children, Christmas is the best. If you're a child in a place of love, abundance, and safety, it's hard to top the excitement, anticipation, and joy of being a child at Christmas. Sadly, all children are not in such a place today and that grieves our hearts, but when they are, for children, Christmas is magical and

thrilling, with Christmas trees, lights, presents, music, worship, parties, and treats as each day edges closer to Christmas Day. The waiting isn't always easy, but being a child at Christmas is special. Watching Christmas movies and programs this month, I found myself feeling nostalgic remembering what it was like to be a child at Christmas without all the responsibilities, work, tasks, and heartaches that are part of being an adult and a parent and growing older. This is the first Christmas I've experienced without either of my parents and it's our first Christmas as grandparents. Some of you are also having your first Christmas without someone dear to you, and others are having your first Christmas with the joy of a new life or a new member of your family.

I was at the bank this week and was standing at the teller's window while he was taking care of something when I noticed they had a jar of biscuits near the Drive Thru Window to give to people's dogs. What caught my attention wasn't the biscuits, it was the shape of the clear glass jar. It was the exact same size and shape as the cookie jar that we had on the counter in our kitchen when I was a boy growing up in Brookline. It was always a treat when my mom made homemade oatmeal raisin or chocolate chip cookies and you could see them in the jar. I can still recall the joy I had every time as I unscrewed the green top to reach in and take a delicious cookie. As that memory was coming to me, Christmas music was playing in the bank and the song was, *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, which includes the words, "*Here we are as in olden days, Happy golden days of yore... through the years we all will be together if the fates allow....*" And I was hit with a flood of emotion picturing my childhood home with my mom and dad and my sisters. By the time the poor teller returned to me, my eyes had welled up with tears I was trying to stifle as I thought about Christmas more than 50 years ago.

Most children can't yet understand what happened to me in the bank, and young people home from college can't relate to it either, but trust me, the older you are, you can relate to what I experienced remembering Christmas past and my parents who thankfully taught me about the meaning of Christmas.

For those of you who are visiting, we've spent the last four weeks in worship, reflecting on the hope, peace, joy, and love that Jesus' earthly birth gives us and how those virtues, behaviors, and perspectives help us counter and overcome fear.

In the traditional Christmas story in Luke 2, the first spoken words are, **Fear Not** or **Do not be afraid**, these words are the beginning of the good news of great joy delivered by the angels to the shepherds. It's a message shared with Mary and Joseph, by the shepherds, and one Mary likely shared with Luke who included it in his Gospel. **Fear not, good news, great joy, for all people, a Savior, Christ the Lord.** These words and phrases are at the heart of celebrating Christmas, following Jesus, and living with him and for him. We're people of good news of great joy for all people which needs to be shared and celebrated! On Christmas Eve we celebrate the truth that we're not people who live in the grip of fear because Christ has come to earth.

Yet even on Christmas Eve we know there are many situations we may have to face in life that can cause us to be fearful, afraid, or to doubt God's compassion, love, mercy, faithfulness or even God's existence. There are many scriptures that offer examples of such times including Psalm 30 which is a prayer of someone who is

seriously ill or coping with a physical problem. There's a book in the Bible called Lamentations which speaks especially to those who are grieving and coping with loss which is true for many of our families. In addition to those who are grieving, there are those who have serious medical issues, people whose bodies and minds are breaking down, those who are struggling with key relationships, others are facing the challenges of getting older or experiencing depression. There are those who have serious financial problems. Some folks are struggling with several of these at once. All of us can benefit from the words of faith, hope, and love in **Lamentations 3:21-26**: ***"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.***

***"The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "therefore I will hope in him."
The Lord is good to those who wait for him, to the soul that seeks him.
It is good that one should wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord."***

These few verses in this little-read book of the Bible offer good advice for how to cope in life's most difficult moments. I wonder if Mary and Joseph were thinking about them that night. After all, they were coping with an awful lot. Most likely alienation from their family and friends, being on the road, not having a place to stay, having to journey a distance while ready to deliver a baby. They had a lot they had to face, and they were facing it alone with no help from family or friends. No physical or tangible assistance, no words of encouragement, in fact, almost no words at all. Mary and Joseph were undoubtedly resilient and strong.

An interesting thing to note about the Luke 2 passage is how filled with silence it is. The only people who speak are the shepherds. Joseph doesn't say a word; indeed, we don't have a single word attributed to Joseph in any of the Gospels. Mary doesn't say a word, she ponders the shepherds' words in her heart. Some of you who were here earlier today, heard me share that the angel Gabriel was sent to Zechariah, who was a priest and the husband of Elizabeth, and then six months later Gabriel was sent to young Mary. Because Zechariah doubted Gabriel's message that he and his wife would bear a son in their old age, he was silent and unable to speak for all nine months of his wife Elizabeth's pregnancy. There's a lot of silence around the birth of Jesus, which is ironic because Christmas can be a noisy, loud, even boisterous holiday. You know what song is far and away the most popular Christmas song in terms of recordings and plays? It's not by Mariah Carey. It's Silent Night. All the silence on the part of people in Luke 2 is fitting because what's happening is God's doing. God is the one in charge.

If you think about it, much of our speaking can be an attempt to control, manage, or explain ourselves or our actions, or even to control or manage someone else. But in the face of the angel's message, there isn't much to be said. There is good news of great joy and it's for all people. This day a baby is born, and this is how you'll know he's the one. And the Shepherds in the one spoken line, say, *Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.* And off they went.

While the shepherds are walking to Bethlehem consider this, Mary and Joseph have had nine months to think, talk, pray, and imagine what might happen. And, yes, Mary did know a lot about the baby growing inside of her because Gabriel told her, but, still, this is an unprecedented situation. I think it's a good thing we have nine months to prepare for a baby and all the changes and responsibilities that come with it. Can you imagine if you only had a couple weeks? Mary and Joseph had nine months and I wonder if at least once one of them said, *"What if it's a girl?"* It must have been a relief to them when Jesus was born, and they had a son as the angel had told Mary she would. It must have been a greater relief when the shepherds arrived and shared the message of the angel that confirmed what Gabriel had told Mary nine months before.

Fear not. Good news. Great joy. All People. A Savior which is Christ the Lord. And the sign is a baby. That's something anyone can remember, even a shepherd, even you and me. That's the message of Christmas. And why a baby? Well, who doesn't love a baby? Who is more vulnerable than a baby? Who naturally draws our love and concern like a baby? A mother shared the following experience.

We were the only family with children in the restaurant. I sat Erik in a highchair and noticed everyone was quietly eating and talking. Suddenly, Erik squealed with glee as he pounded his fat baby hands on the big chair tray. His eyes were crinkled in laughter and excitement and his mouth showed a toothless grin, as he wriggled and giggled with joy. I looked around and saw the source of his merriment. It was a man whose pants were baggy, and whose toes poked out of worn-out shoes. His shirt was dirty, and his hair was uncombed and unwashed. We were too far from him to smell, but I was sure he smelled. *"Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster,"* the man said to Erik. My husband and I exchanged looks, *"What do we do?"* Erik continued to laugh and answer, *"Hi, hi there."*

Everyone in the restaurant noticed and looked at us and then at the man. Our meal came and the man began shouting from across the room; *"Do ya patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey, look, he knows peek-a-boo."* Nobody, especially my husband and I thought it was cute. He was obviously a bum and a drunk. My husband and I were embarrassed. We ate in silence; all except for Erik, who was running through his repertoire for the admiring man, who in turn, answered his cute comments.

We got through the meal and headed for the door. My husband went to pay the check and told me to meet him in the parking lot. The old man sat poised between me and the door. *"Lord, just let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik,"* I prayed. As I drew closer to the man, I turned my back trying to sidestep him and avoid any air he might be breathing. As I did, Erik leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby's "pick-me-up" position. Before I could stop him, Erik had propelled himself from my arms to the man's. Erik in an act of trust and love, laid his tiny head on the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed, and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands full of grime, pain, and hard labor, cradled my baby and stroked his back with a gentle love I could not describe, but felt in my soul.

I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms and his eyes opened and set squarely on mine. He said in a firm commanding voice, *"You take care of this baby."* Somehow, I managed, *"I will."* The old man pried Erik from his chest

unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain, and handed him to me. I received my baby, and the man said, *"God bless you, ma'am, you've given me my Christmas gift."* I said nothing more than a muttered *"thanks."*

With Erik in my arms, I ran to the car. My husband was wondering why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly, and why I was saying, *"My God, my God, forgive me"* over and over. I had just witnessed Christ's love shown through the innocence of a tiny child who saw no sin, who made no judgment; a child who saw a soul, and a mother who saw old clothes. I was a Christian who was blind, holding a child who was not. I felt as if God asked, *"Are you willing to share your son for a moment?"* And I remembered that God shared His for all eternity.

In these unpredictable and volatile times, it may be hard to see love in a world that has little peace. Yet, it's our relationship with Jesus that brings light in the darkness and allows us to celebrate his gifts of eternal hope, divine peace, the joy of new life and God's unwavering love for humanity even during troubled times.

Fear not. Good news. Great joy. All People. A Savior which is Christ the Lord. And the sign is a baby. The greatest gift at Christmas is having a growing relationship with Jesus that provides hope, peace, joy, love, meaning, purpose, and identity. Being a child of God is the only identity that's **received and not achieved, it's a gift, and it's offered to all of us in the baby born in Bethlehem.**

I hope that gift is yours this Christmas, that you will welcome and receive Christ, and all he offers, and that you will live with him and for him for the rest of your life so you will have growing and lasting hope, peace, joy, and love.