

What the Good News Is

So good to see you all this morning. If you have a bible, turn with me to the book of **Luke, chapter 2**. This morning we are starting a new teaching series called *Good News for All People*. Which, as you may have already guessed, is our **Christmas series**. Now, normally we don't start a Christmas series *six whole weeks out* from Christmas like this—I realize that feels a little early to some of us. But then again, the past two years have not been normal kinds of years. So if we want to start celebrating Christmas six weeks out this year, who's gonna stop us—am I right? I feel like somehow, someway, we've earned it.

I've felt this in **my personal life** too. On a typical year, I have the slightest of Grinch tendencies in me. I'm more of the one-holiday-at-a-time, let's-not-get-ahead-of-ourselves, type of person. But this year, all that got tossed out the window. Our tree is out, our lights are up—Christmas music is playing on Spotify at nearly all times of the day. So if anybody wants to come celebrate Christmas for the next month and a half, and probably well into March or so: come on over. I'm here for it. This is the year to do it.

But with all that, we are also starting our **Christmas series** as a church. And if you're still holding out and not quite in the Christmas mood as of yet, that's totally fine. Because today actually isn't going to be all that Christmasy in its entirety. And this series in many ways is going to be a very different *kind* of Christmas series. But we are going to at least *kick things off* with a traditional **Christmas passage**, and use it to frame up the rest of our time. So take a look with me at **Luke 2**, starting in v. 8:

[8] And there were *shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.*

So real quick: we did some work on the idea of **shepherds** a couple weeks back in our *Question Everything* series. If you *weren't* here for that, feel free to go back and grab the **podcast**. But as the passage today alludes to, shepherds back then often *lived* out in the fields. Shepherding wasn't so much a clock-in, clock-out type of job as it was a *lifestyle*. Their job was to protect and look after the sheep at all times. And *nighttime* was one of the most likely times for their sheep to be attacked, stolen, or lost. So shepherds lived and slept out in the fields *with* their sheep to help make sure that didn't happen.

And because of that responsibility, shepherds **weren't the, uh, cleanest** or *noblest* of people. So think less of the airbrushed painting at your grandma's house of shepherds smiling out in a field, and think more of the crowd you would find hanging out in the

middle of the night at your local truck stop. *That's* the type of crew we're talking about here. And yet, *this* is the crowd that God chooses to first announce the arrival of the messiah to.

And I think that's significant. **God has incredible, world-changing, life-altering news to deliver to the world, and he chooses to announce it to the lowest and the least of these.** You would expect news like this to be announced in the middle of the day at the steps of the temple courts. Right? Where everybody would see and everybody would hear. Somewhere that *commands* attention. Instead, it's announced in the middle of the night, in the middle of a field, in the middle of the country, to no-name shepherds.

Now, **all of this points to** the type of message this good news *is*, and *who* it will be especially good news *for*. But that's getting ahead of ourselves a little. For now, **keep reading** with me in v. 9:

[9] An **angel** of the Lord appeared to them, and the **glory** of the Lord shone **around** them, and they were **terrified**. [10] But the angel said to them, "**Do not be afraid** (to which the shepherds are thinking, "okay, minor adjustment, since 'afraid' was pretty much the only direction we were going with it." Then the angel says...) **I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people** [there's our language—good news, all people]. [11] **Today** in the town of David (in other words, Bethlehem) a **Savior** has been born to **you**; he is the **Messiah**, the Lord. [12] **This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.**"

So this **angel says** that there is a baby, wrapped in cloths, lying in a manger, somewhere near the city of Bethlehem. And then says that all of this is *good news*, for *all people*. *That*, strictly speaking—what we just read—is the *original message* of Christmas: *good news, for all people*. That phrase "good news" in the Greek language is the word *euangelion*. Sometimes it's translated "good news," and sometimes it's translated with the English word "gospel." What the angel delivered to the shepherds that night out in the fields *was a telling of the gospel*.

And **this message, the gospel, is not just the central message of Christmas—it's also the message at the very center of our faith as followers of Jesus**. Right? That's really what all of *this* is about. That's what we, here at *City Church*, are all about. And that's what all of our *individual* lives should be about: the *gospel*, or the *good news*, of Jesus. That is *the message* of Christianity. *That* much, I think, at least most orthodox Christians can agree on. **They may not agree on much else ever, as many of us have noticed**. But they mostly agree on *that*: at the very center of the Christian faith is the message of the *gospel*.

But that does all raise the question: **what is the gospel?** When we use that word, what is it that we're referring to, exactly? What *is* the good news of Jesus? Now, I want to challenge you to really think about that question. Because some of us, especially those of us who have been around the Church for a while, might say to that, "oh come on, we all know what the gospel is." And maybe you do. But at the same time, if I were to go around the room with the microphone right now and just ask every single one of you to explain the *gospel*, my guess is that I would get a *variety* of different answers. Now some of that would just be that we all articulate it slightly differently and are putting it in the language that makes the most sense to us. But some of it too might be that some of us have very different *conceptions* of what the gospel *is*.

- Is the gospel a **formula**: a prayer we recite by which we can go to heaven when we die?
- Is the gospel a **promise** about God meeting all of our needs and/or wants?
- Is the gospel a **moment** on the cross where Jesus died in order to forgive us for our sins?
- Is the gospel a "get out of hell free" card? Is it glorified fire insurance?
- Is the gospel a **process** by which Jesus is dismantling the evil power structures and systems of the world?
- Is it **all** of those? Is it **none** of those? Is it something **altogether different** entirely?

I'm just trying to help you see the importance of the question. You see, it *matters* how we *perceive* of this message of good news. It makes a difference in what we say and how we live and what we communicate to others. You see, **while to some of us, "what is the gospel?" may sound like an extremely elementary question, I think it is an absolutely necessary question to ask.** Because if we get the answer to *that question* wrong, we can't get a whole lot else about our faith *right*. Would you agree? Because this message is behind it all. **To understand Christmas, and to understand our lives in general as followers of Jesus, we need to understand what the gospel is.**

So **this morning**, that's what I want to try and help us do. I want to try and help us answer that question: **what is the gospel?** What *was* it exactly that the angel was announcing to the shepherds out in the field, and what did it *mean*? And with that, what did it mean that it was good news *for all people*? So I think we've got our work cut out for us this morning.

Now, here's **how I want to try and go about it**. I want us to follow the *idea* of good news through some of the bible. Doing it this way is often called *biblical* theology, or sometimes *canonical* theology: where you trace the development of a word or concept

through the *bible*, to discover more fully what it means. And while we won't be able to cover every passage in the bible where the word *gospel* comes up (I don't think you guys were planning to be here for that long this morning), we're at least going to hit some of the *highlights*. So I hope you're ready. Are you ready? (...)

We're going to look at **three or four separate passages** that help us develop an understanding of the good news—the *gospel*—of Jesus. (Because we're covering so many of them, we'll put the passages in their entirety up on the screen. But if you're an expert level bible-flipper and just want a challenge, you're certainly welcome to turn to each passage with us. Kudos to you.)

First, we need to look at **one of the first times** this idea comes up, and that's in the Old Testament prophetic book, *Isaiah*. Isaiah is actually really crucial to our understanding of the gospel. **One New Testament professor actually goes so far as to say “it's nearly impossible to explain the term gospel without referring to Isaiah.”**¹ It's a massively important book for understanding this idea. So let's kick things off there, by looking specifically at **Isaiah 52**. Let's look, starting in **v. 7**:

How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news [there's our language], who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” Listen! Your watchmen lift up their voices; together they shout for joy. When the Lord returns to Zion, they will see it with their own eyes. Burst into songs of joy together, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord will lay bare his holy arm in the sight of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

Okay so **a couple things** worth noting here. First, notice the three major components of this passage. There is *good news announced* (v. 7), that leads to *joy* (v. 8-9), and it's news that is *for*, or available to “*all the nations* (v. 10).” Now, remember that *generally*, in the Old Testament, the word “nations” doesn't refer to plot lines on a map, but rather to different ethnicities of *people*. Which *means* Isaiah 52 describes, in order, *good news*, of *great joy*, for *all people*. Does that sound familiar? Yeah—it **wouldn't be a stretch at all to say that the angel's message to the shepherds in Luke is a summarized version of this passage from Isaiah 52.**

But I also want us to **focus in on v. 7** for a minute. There it says “how beautiful are the feet of those who *bring* good news.” What's *that* all about? To understand *that*, you need

¹ Patrick Schreiner, summarizing Rikki Watts, [here](#).

to understand the original meaning of the phrase “good news.” Believe it or not, that term isn’t original to the bible—it was actually *political* and *military* terminology. If you lived in the ancient world, and your nation went to war and *won*, there was no printing press or cable news outlets or social media to tell you that. You couldn’t just whip out your iPhone and Google who won the war.

Instead, what would happen is that a member of the military, who was there in person for victory, would have to come back on foot, and *tell* you that your nation won. As soon as the battle was over, they would immediately travel back to the town or village, as fast as they could. And upon their return, they would *announce* the *good news* to the people of your village or nation.

The people of the village would wait with anxious anticipation as that person said something like “the battle has been won. And because the battle has been won, we are no longer enslaved. Or we don’t *have* to live in *fear* of being enslaved in the future.” Or any number of other positive implications. That’s the *experience* Isaiah is referring to here, when he says “beautiful are the *feet* of he who comes delivering *good news*.” If your nation was at war, and you heard the sound of someone’s feet returning off in the distance, that was generally a good sign. Because that meant they came *bearing good news*.

So “good news” in Isaiah’s world was an *announcement*, about something *good* that had been accomplished on your behalf, the result of which your *life* and your *world* were profoundly different.²

In fact, that word *euaggelion* in the *New Testament* is actually made up of two words: *eu*, meaning “good” and *aggelos*, meaning to “herald” or “announce” something. *Aggelos* is also where we get the English word “angel.” As in, the *angel* that appeared to the shepherds in Luke 2 and delivered the news to *them*. So when this angel showed up to the shepherds and used words like “I come to bring good news,” the *shepherds* would’ve heard it as precisely that: **an announcement, about something that had been accomplished on their behalf, the result of which their *life* and their *world* would be substantially different.** Everybody following so far?

Now, right after all this in Isaiah 52, Isaiah 53 transitions into *how* some of this will come about. And it’s kind of an *odd transition*. Because it goes from all this language about God being *king* and God ruling with a *mighty arm*, to a full chapter about a figure called the *suffering servant*. Somehow, this announcement about God reigning as king in a

² This wording is borrowed and tweaked slightly from N.T. Wright in his book *Simply Good News*.

mighty sort of way is related to this other figure *suffering*: being hated, despised, rejected, and mistreated. Which—let’s just be honest—is an odd pairing. When you think about God’s “mighty arm” being revealed and a royal announcement of good news, you don’t normally associate it with suffering and rejection. But apparently in the bible, those two things go hand-in-hand. Interesting.

Let’s go next to **Isaiah 61**. Here we see the next significant mention of this “good news,” and *it* starts to clue us in on what it means that this good news is *for all people*. Look with me at v. 1-2:

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom to the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and the day of vengeance of our God, to comfort all who mourn...

So here, we get some more **detail about the intended audience** of this good news. According to Isaiah, this good news contains a special focus on people like the *poor*, the brokenhearted, the *captives*, and those who are victims of injustice. Whatever this good news is, it is especially good news for *those* types of people. **And I bring that up because I don’t know that the good news of Jesus has always come across that way in our modern world. I’ll just ask you: do you think that when the average person in America hears the message of Jesus, or thinks of the people who embody that good news: do they think it sounds like “good news to the poor”? Does it sound to them like good news to the brokenhearted, or to the oppressed, or to the imprisoned?**

I think, at least at times, we **may not have done the best job** communicating that *aspect* of the gospel. And **at times, I think we may have communicated just the opposite of that. I think at times, we may have taken this good news to the poor, and the broken, and the marginalized, and reduced it all down to just some sort of spiritual experience by which people can live a more fulfilled life.** But here’s the thing: we can’t do that and still call it a biblical “gospel.”

Let me read you a quote from a woman named **Beth Moore**. If you’ve never read or listened to her, let me just tell you she is fantastic. Engaging, funny, and incredibly knowledgeable when it comes to the bible. I’m pretty sure she’s *written* more bible studies than I’ve even *read*. She put it like this once:

When the gospel has become bad news to the poor, to the oppressed, to the broken-hearted and imprisoned, and good news to the proud, self-righteous and privileged instead, it is no longer the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I think she's got a valid point. **If there is nothing about the good news we're proclaiming that is good news to those types of people specifically, I think we need to consider whether or not we are proclaiming the same good news that we find in the Scriptures.** Because the good news that Isaiah proclaims was good news—not just to middle-to-upper class, semi-well-off, put-together people. **Not just to the people that are doing pretty good but need an extra spiritual shot in the arm every once in a while to help them feel better about themselves.** It was good news to the poor and the broken and the down and out. To the forgotten about and the left out and the looked over. **The message Isaiah proclaimed was that those people—even and especially to those people—were invited and welcome in the kingdom of God. And that the kingdom of God was a place where they could experience life as it was meant to be.**

And **just a couple chapters after the story about the shepherds** in Luke, Jesus actually quotes this very passage in Isaiah; he uses it as a sort of *introduction* to his public ministry. He says, in no uncertain terms, that *he* is the one God has anointed to proclaim this good news to these types of people. *That's* what his ministry is all about. **And if you read through the gospels, they would all seem to confirm that.** His entire ministry is among and for those groups of people. Nearly every miracle he performs is for someone who fits in those categories: the poor, the oppressed, the hurting, the weak. Or bare minimum, someone who is socially ostracized in some way. If you were to cut out all the parts of the gospels where Jesus interacts with, heals, helps those types of people, you would be left with *shambles*. It is *undeniable* that this was a central focus of Jesus' ministry. Because that was the essence of the good news he came to announce. This was *his* gospel.

And **then finally**, I do want us to look at one example of the apostle *Paul* unpacking the gospel. Because while the good news doesn't *originate* with the New Testament or with Paul, his letters do frequently *reference* it. So take a look with me at one of the more explicit examples of that: **1 Corinthians 15**. Starting in v. 1, it says this:

Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel [the good news] I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. For what I received [i.e. the gospel] I passed on to you as of first importance [this is what matters most]: that Christ

died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.

So notice that according to this passage, **“Jesus dying for our sins”** is **massively important to how we understand the gospel**. It’s absolutely central to the whole thing. Without Jesus dying for our sins, we don’t *have* the gospel at all. We don’t have the rescue we need from all that plagues us and all that plagues our world. The cross is where Jesus took on the sins of the world, and gave us a way to walk in freedom from those sins. It’s where all of that *happened*. **Without that phrase, “Jesus died for our sins,” and “Jesus was raised on the third day,” you no longer have the gospel proclaimed in the bible.**

But notice, **there’s another important phrase** in that passage too. It comes right after that part and then gets repeated. And it’s that Jesus died for our sins **“according to the Scriptures.”** “Jesus died...*according to the Scriptures.*” “Jesus was raised from the dead...*according to the Scriptures.*” So why does Paul include that phrase? You don’t need the rest of the Scriptures to unpack the idea of *death*—or of *resurrection*, for that matter. So why does it matter that these things happened...*according to the Scriptures*?

It’s because **Paul is connecting this part of the story about Jesus’ life, death and resurrection to the rest of the story we find throughout the bible**. This gospel that Paul is preaching is not a new version of the story, but the fulfillment *of* the story the entire bible was telling. This Jesus is the Messiah that Isaiah was pointing to. *He is* the suffering servant. *He is* the one that has been anointed to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the oppressed, freedom to the captives. And his life, death, and resurrection are central to all of that.

Paul is trying to show us that the gospel message he proclaims cannot be isolated and separated from the rest of the story. You can’t take the good news Isaiah alludes to, and the good news Paul refers to, and unhitch them from one another. They’re the same *message* in different *stages*. We can’t take a message that throughout the bible emphasizes the poor and the downtrodden and the marginalized, then read a couple passages from *Paul* and conclude that it’s just a message about how we can all go to heaven when we die. And we can’t read *Paul* about how we needed Jesus to die for our sins, and then read *Isaiah* and conclude that following Jesus is just about doing kind things for the poor and the oppressed. Both of those are *incomplete* “gospels.” We need the *full* and *complete* gospel.

So... **here's how we try to include both** ideas in how we articulate the gospel here at City Church. We put it this way: **God, through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, is reconciling all things to himself.** Now, you might word it a little differently than that, and that's fine. There's no one correct, word-for-word way to articulate it. **There are some wrong ways, but there are several right ways.** But we put it that way because each part is important. The gospel is about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It's about how those very things give us *rescue from* and *victory over* our sins. It's about how those things save us from God's wrath and the power of hell and all the other things that sin puts us on a trajectory *towards*.

And the gospel is about how by doing that, Jesus is also reconciling *all* things to himself. He's restoring things in the world to the way they were *meant* to be. **He's delivering good news to the poor and the oppressed and those who are most disproportionately impacted by the world's broken state.** He's both looking out for them, *and* at the same time slowly dismantling the sinful systems that continue to do great damage *to* them.

As followers of Jesus grounded in the biblical gospel we see in the Scriptures, we don't have to choose one of those messages over the other. They're not in competition with one another. They're in complete unison. Our rescue from sin and its effects is what *motivates* our concern for the least of these in our world. And our care and concern for the least of these is an *embodiment* of the fact that Jesus is reconciling all things to himself.

And there is **no better place to see this** embodied than in the *Christmas* story. **God announces the arrival of Jesus first to a poor peasant girl, who is engaged to be married to a poor Jewish man. He then announces the birth of Jesus to shepherds sleeping out in the countryside.** The poor, the neglected, and the marginalized are core to the story all the way through. They're a necessary part of the whole thing. Which is why I think this is the perfect thing for us to discuss during the Christmas season. Does that all make sense?

Okay. So **in light of all of that,** I want to **update you** on a little something we've been planning for this Christmas season. It's been in the works for quite some time now. We were actually going to roll it out last Christmas, but COVID-19 through it for a loop just like it did everything else. But this year, we're ready to finally announce it all to you.

Most of you who have been around for a while have heard us discuss our heart for *justice*; which is the biblical language for loving and caring for the least of these: the overlooked, marginalized, forgotten about, and under-resourced. You've heard us talk about how that is a big part of who we are and a big part of us embodying the love and

compassion of Jesus as a church family. And while we've done a good bit of that since our *conception* as a church, we haven't had any *ongoing*, year-in, year-out partnerships in it as of yet.

But **this Christmas, our plan is to change all of that. This year, we want to introduce you to five partnerships we're forming with five organizations, that help serve five specific groups of people in our city who are in need.** But before I tell you who and what they are, I wanted to share a little about *why* we chose *these* organizations.

Much of it comes out of **an idea we've mentioned here on Sundays before.** In the bible, often when it talks about "doing justice," it tends to bring up several specific groups of people. Those groups are the *widow*, the *orphan*, the *poor*, and the *immigrant*. Those groups of people come up often as people that we should especially look out for. And that's because at the time much of the bible was written, they were the most socially and economically vulnerable.

Pastor **Tim Keller**, commenting this pattern in the bible, says this:

In premodern, agrarian societies, these four groups had no social power. They lived at subsistence level and were only days from starvation if there was any famine, invasion, or even minor social unrest. Today this quartet would be expanded to include the refugee, the migrant worker, the homeless, and many single parents and elderly people.

These are the types of people groups that get especially overlooked, taken advantage of, and marginalized in our society. So when we were thinking about what groups of people we wanted to specifically focus on *helping*, we used all that as a *guide*. We took that list (and extended list), and did our best to match them up with connections we had and organizations we knew of doing great work in our city. So **beginning this year, here's the plan. We're going to be caring for single moms, foster children, the homeless, refugee families, and exploited women** in our city. And we're going to be doing all of that by partnering with *organizations* that are *already* caring for those groups really well.

And our partnerships with these organizations will have **at least three elements** to them: they'll have a *financial* component, a *LifeGroup* component, and a *Christmas* component. First...

Financial

First, we want to **put our money where our mouth is** on all of this. So we've spoken with our financial advisory team here at City Church, which is the team made up of members of our church that help us make all our budgetary decisions. And they have helped us form a plan to **start transitioning our monthly budget as a church to give financially to each of these organizations**. The goal is that over the next few years, we will transition 10% of our church budget to go straight out the door, and a large portion of that will be to organizations like these. Those of you that know anything about budgets for nonprofits know that that is a process, and will take a little time to arrive at, but we've locked that in as a goal for us, starting this year. And we've already begun giving towards it. Second...

LifeGroup

With each of these groups of people, we're wanting to **ongoingly care** for them and partner with the organizations serving them by having a LifeGroup "adopt" them. Jeff, our LifeGroups pastor, will be reaching out in the coming months about that to our LifeGroup leaders. But the goal is that once a quarter or so, each LifeGroup would do *something* oriented towards these groups of people, in partnership with these organizations. We want all of our LifeGroups to be in on the joy of helping love and serve these vulnerable populations. And then, last but not least...

Christmas

Specifically this Christmas, we're asking every one of us that can to help us meet some tangible needs these organizations have. So each week during the remainder of this series, we're encouraging you to bring one item that will meet a practical need for each of these groups of people. On your way out, you'll get a postcard with all the details on what you can bring each week. An abbreviated version will also be printed on the back of your bulletin each week. And you can find it all online at citychurchknox.com/justice.

And just in the **off-chance** that you're sometimes forgetful like I am, and you really *want* to participate in this, but think you might forget to bring it, we've tried to help as much as we can. If you get out your phone right now and **text the word REMINDER to 94000** (we'll leave this up for a bit), we will send you a reminder towards the end of the week each week during this series that reminds you of what to bring with you that Sunday. We aren't going to sell your number or text you about City Church merch deals or anything—we just want to make sure you don't forget each Sunday. We are trying to make it as easy as possible for you to get involved with us during this series. Basically, if you don't bring stuff, it's because you just said "nah, I'd rather not."

Now, all of that said, I'm gonna trust that all of us will **do what we can**. Purchasing and bringing an item every week might be challenging for some of us. Some of you might not have the *resources* to participate (or might not have the resources to participate every week), and that's *totally* okay. As we've said often around here, we want to be a church that also cares for *you*. So if that's you, let us know if *you* have a need that *we* can help meet.

Maybe you can only participate by bringing *one* item, on *one* of the weeks. That's *great*. Maybe you can bring *one* item, *each* of these weeks. Also awesome. Maybe that's a stretch, but you can pitch in with two or three other people from your LifeGroup and you can all bring one item together each week. *That's* great. Connect with a few people and have one person purchase it, and then everybody else Venmo that person (but just a reminder: do like *actually remember* to Venmo them. Don't do that thing where you say you will and then don't.

And then **for some of us, we actually have plenty of resources** to knock this out. Some of us could probably bring 2, 3, 5, 10 of these items each week and it wouldn't really affect our bottom line or standard of living much at all as a result. *Great. Do that*. I trust that all of us will do what we're able to do. But I'd love for all of us to find a way to participate, one way or another. These are practical ways to meet tangible needs in our city. And therefore ways to embody the good news of great joy for all people.

So that's all I've got. Are you guys excited about this? Man, I hope so. I'm excited. And I'm praying that through this Christmas, and continuing past this Christmas, God would use all this to grow our concern and care for the least of these in our city.

Let me pray for us to that end.