

Carol Service 2025

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Preacher: Donald Smith

[0 : 00] What is the strangest present that you have ever received?! Because of that bafflement, sometimes intentionally, often not, I was recently reminded that I went through a phase of giving my mum an increasingly random assortment of One Direction memorabilia.

I've not really got an explanation for it, I can't say she's a fan, but if you are interested in a bedside table lamp in the shape of a boy band branded shoe, then feel free to ask my mum, I'm sure she wouldn't be that sad to see it go.

Some presents can be a bit odd, can't they? But I'm not sure anything would have been quite as unexpected as what a bunch of unsuspecting shepherds received 2,000 years ago.

They were minding their own business in the middle of the night. They were tending their sheep as they wandered through the remote hills of a far-flung Roman province.

When someone arrived, out of nowhere, to give them what at first looks like an exceptionally strange present.

[1 : 43] Of all the peculiar presents you might have received, I suspect none of them have taken the form of someone you've never met, coming to you in the middle of the night to tell you that a baby has been born of a woman that you do not know.

And then to round it all off, telling you that that baby is for you. As strange as that might seem, that is basically what happens to these shepherds.

We just read from Luke 2, let me just read again verse 10 for us. The angel appears out of nowhere and says to these shepherds, Fear not, for I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

Good news, great joy, a baby for you. Sky read for us earlier from the start of Luke chapter 2 where we learned that Mary and Joseph have just traveled a hundred miles from Nazareth down to Bethlehem.

[3 : 06] These shepherds would have had no idea who they were. And yet, here is the gift that they received on that first Christmas morning. But as strange as it might have seemed, it really is good news of great joy.

We are surrounded by news, aren't we? About good and joyful is probably not how we would describe most of it. I was in line in the pharmacy yesterday behind a woman who was buying a paper.

I didn't actually know you could buy papers in the pharmacy, but there you go. On the front page, covering the front page of the paper, was a picture of a man convicted of a horrible crime. And out of the blue, unprompted, she turned to me and simply said, Will we ever get some good news? Hindsight is a wonderful thing. I should have invited her to our carol service this evening. Because strange as this present might have seemed, good news is exactly what this angel brings.

And it is good news because of who this baby is. Did you notice it there in those verses we just read again? Not normally when we announce the birth of a new baby.

[4 : 30] We share a few details, don't we? The name, the date, sometimes maybe the time and the weight. But on this baby's little postcard is not names and numbers, it is titles.

Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ, the Lord. A king, a rescuer, a promised deliverer, God himself.

That is who this baby is. That is why his birth is good news of great joy. Not just for Mary and Joseph.

Not just for the shepherds tending their sheep outside of Bethlehem. But as the angel says, for all people. Perhaps this evening is your first time in church.

It is wonderful to have you here. Perhaps you've never even heard the Christmas story before. You probably didn't expect to receive a baby as a present. And yet here he is. This little baby, born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, was born for you.

[5 : 42] Whoever you are, wherever you have come from, unto you is born this child.

A Savior who is Christ the Lord. He has come for you not because of how you know him, but because of what he has come to do for you.

A promised king, God himself, come to save you. Now I wonder, what do you picture when you think of salvation arriving?

What do you imagine when you think of someone announcing that rescue has arrived? I'll be honest, when I was thinking about the angel announcing the arrival of someone coming to save people, the first image that came into my head was from Lord of the Rings.

Specifically, the armies of Rohan arriving on the edge of the Pelennor fields. In the return of the king. Now I realize I might have just lost a few of you. I might have earned a little bit of credit with three or four of you.

[6 : 51] The rest of you are thinking, hmm, not sure about this guy. But just come back to me for a moment and let me paint the picture for you. The city of Minas Tirith, a towering fortress, is under siege from what seems like an unstoppable enemy.

The people of the city have resisted valiantly for as long as they could. But eventually, the defenses have been breached. The enemy is pouring into the city. The soldiers are retreating back up into the citadel.

They keep on fighting, but the battle is as good as lost. They need saved. They need rescued. And just when it seems that all hope has been lost, the sound of battle horns fills the air.

The people of Gondor look through the breached walls, and there, arriving on the horizon, is an army that stretches as far as the eye can see. Mounted on horseback, filling the landscape. Salvation has arrived because look, look at the strength of this army. The might, the power. This vast army has arrived. But what, I wonder, would you think, if the trumpet sounded, the horns blared, the hoped-for salvation was declared to have arrived, and the people looked over the wall and saw nothing.

[8 : 31] Or at least nothing at first, but after looking a little more closely, they do see, they see a little speck on the horizon. They get out the binoculars, and in the middle of the vast open plains, they can just about make out a small feeding trough.

But instead of being filled with animal feeds, there in the trough is a bundle of cloth, tightly wrapped around a newborn baby. Here is your rescuer.

What would you think? You'd think, would you, what help is this? We need an army. We need strength and power. We need someone to come and help us, not someone who needs to be helped by us.

The angels announced to the shepherds the most incredible thing. God is coming as the promised deliverer who will rescue his people, and then he says this.

This will be the sign for you. You won't find an army. You will find a baby. A baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in a manger.

[9 : 49] A newborn baby, completely helpless. We expect, don't we, to see a picture of incredible strength, and yet the sign that the angel gives is a picture of absolute weakness.

A newborn baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, he can't even move himself. Laying in a manger. The place where the cows go for their dinner.

Weak. Helpless. Impoverished. There is your Savior. There is the child that had been born for your salvation.

This is the good news of great joy. It might seem like something has gone wrong. Like Amazon have got their deliveries mixed up and sent the wrong package.

Surely this isn't it. But the weakness of the baby lying in a manger is not just a sign for the shepherds.

[10 : 53] It is a sign for how this Savior would bring salvation. Because this little baby will not save through strength, but through weakness.

That first Christmas morning would not be the last time that Jesus' body was wrapped in cloth and laid down by someone else.

He was born in weakness so that he could die in weakness. What kind of Savior is that?

It is the Savior we most need. Because Jesus came to save us not from what is happening out in the world, but from what is happening in our very hearts.

The angel who appeared to the shepherd was soon joined by a host from heaven who together declared glory to God in the highest and peace among those with whom he is well pleased.

[12 : 06] Jesus came to save us by bringing us peace, peace with God. Let me be so bold as to ask you this evening, do you have peace with God?

Are you confident that when God looks at your life he will see a clean slate? is there a troubled conscience?

Is there a fear of what might be uncovered were everything to be brought out into the light? The reality is that for every one of us, whether you have spent your whole life in church, coming to church, or you have never been in one before, every one of us have a long list of thoughts we hope are never exposed, never come out into the open, actions we hope are never seen, words we hope no one ever hears.

We have done what we know to be wrong, and so we do not have peace with a perfect God. But that is why he sent Jesus.

Not to save us from an enemy out there, but to save us from the sin that is in here. Jesus came to save you by making himself weak, taking the pain and the punishments that you and I deserve by being nailed to a cross and left to die so that he would be wrapped in a cloth once more, and this time laid in a tomb.

[13 : 58] He came as a baby to die on a cross so that we might have peace with God forever. That is the gift, the good gift, that is the good news of great joy that is given to these shepherds, and to me, and to you, a saviour who has come to be born in weakness, that we might have peace with God.

It really is good news of great joy. But how can this salvation become ours?

How can we be saved from our sin and filled with the great joy that the angel speaks of? I think I might have mentioned this from here before, but I used to do a lot of cycling without ever having the wisdom to protect my head.

And so for year after year, whenever the time came to unwrap the presents, there was almost always a bike helmet in there. While I was giving my mum One Direction posters, she was trying to save my life.

Well, those bike helmets were good gifts, weren't they? But for a long time, those good gifts were of no benefit to me whatsoever.

[15 : 25] They were good gifts given to me by people that cared about me, that loved me. But instead of accepting them, I put them aside. At one point, there were generally five unused bike helmets lying under my bed.

A good gift given. But in order to benefit from it, we need to receive it, accept it, embrace it.

Unto you, a saviour is born. He has come for you, whoever you are here this evening. Jesus came for you.

But in order to be saved by him, you need to receive him. What does that look like?

Well, I think it looks like receiving the news of the saviour in the same way that the shepherds did that night outside of Bethlehem. When they heard the testimony of the angel, when they heard the angel tell them of who Jesus was, they believed it.

[16 : 42] They trusted it. We have an even better testimony before us. You have an even better testimony under the chair in front of you right now.

We have all of Luke's gospel. Not just a few words from an angel, but the whole story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. A whole Bible telling us exactly who he is.

What he came to do. How we can have peace with God through him. You might think an angel, a visit from an angel would be more convincing. Let me tell you, a whole Bible that God himself speaks through is even better still.

If you're not convinced by that, come and ask me about it after the service. But for now, see how the shepherds heard the testimony of who Jesus was and believed.

That is how this good gift, the greatest gift of all, is received. Through faith. Not through trying to make ourselves better people.

[17 : 50] not by trying to outweigh our bad with our good, but simply by putting our faith, our trust in Jesus Christ. The baby who was born in Bethlehem for us and for our salvation.

And we need saved. So it really does matter whether you accept this gift or not. In fact, there is nothing more important.

There is nothing more important than what you decide to do with Jesus. When my friends and family kept on telling me to wear a helmet, there were times I got a little frustrated.

I just wanted to be left alone and do things my way. But for years, I left the unwanted presence under my bed gathering dust in the darkness.

darkness. But thankfully, because people who cared about me, because people who loved me kept on telling me what I sometimes didn't want to hear, the message eventually got through.

[18 : 59] So that each morning before heading out the door, I would stick a helmet on my head and click the chin strap in place. And about three months after I started doing that, I was cycling down a hill in Edinburgh.

It was the middle of winter, it was cold, it was dark, it was wet. Just look outside. A car was coming in the other direction, its windows were all steamed up, and so as I was coming down the hill, he tried to turn right and I went straight into the side of him.

close to 30 miles an hour, my bike hit the front left bumper and sent me headfirst into the windscreen. Everything after that was and always will be a bit of a haze, but what I'm quite sure of is that if that accident, one which I never saw coming and never really thought would happen, if that happened a few months earlier, it would have been a very different story.

But because people who cared about me, because people who loved me kept on giving me something that I didn't really want to hear about, the only thing that got smashed that day was some poor driver's windscreen and not my head.

This evening, I am shamelessly handing you over a gift-wrapped bike helmet. Not because I know it's what you really wanted or was at the top of your Christmas list when you walked in here this evening, but because I know, I know it is what you really need.

[20 : 33] But in order for the greatest gift of all to be of any use to you, you need to receive it. You need to accept it. You need to embrace it. Hearing about Jesus isn't enough.

You need to believe in him. And the great Savior who has come in great weakness so that everyone, everyone who believes in him would have peace with God, not just now, but forever.

Will we ever get good news? We have it right here because this baby is for us, for our salvation, for our peace with God, both now and forevermore.

And I hope and pray, as does everyone who is part of our church family here, that this Christmas it would be your good news of great joy, that you would believe in the Lord Jesus Christ Christ, because he came for all people.

And that includes you. Let us pray before we sing again together. Father, we thank you so much that Jesus came to save us by making himself weak, humbling himself to be lain in a manger and then lain in a tomb.

[22 : 09] We pray that every one of us here would receive this good news of great joy, this most amazing gift wondrously given, by putting our faith and trust in Jesus and knowing peace with God through him.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.