

Christmas Eve, '10
Luke 2:10

“FOUR MORE LITTLE WORDS”

A PASTOR & HIS FAMILY WERE PREPARING TO LEAVE FOR THE CHRISTMAS EVE CANDLELIGHT SERVICE & HIS TWO SONS WERE TALKING VERY INTENTLY ABOUT SOMETHING.

HE ASKED THEM WHAT THEIR CONVERSATION WAS ABOUT & FINALLY ONE OF THEM SAID, “DAD, ARE YOU GOING TO LET US ENJOY THE CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE OR ARE YOU GOING TO TRY TO EXPLAIN IT TO EVERYBODY?”

THAT DIDN'T HAPPEN TO ME, BUT IT *COULD* HAVE.

IT'S A DILEMMA THAT PASTORS FACE EVERY YEAR AT THIS TIME.

I AM UNDER NO ILLUSIONS THAT ANYONE HERE WILL REMEMBER ANYTHING I SAY TONIGHT OR THAT EVEN A FRACTION OF YOU WILL EVEN *LISTEN* TO WHAT I SAY TONIGHT.

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE ELSEWHERE.

YOUR THOUGHTS ARE ON OTHER THINGS - THE REMAINDER OF YOUR EVENING ONCE YOU LEAVE HERE, YOUR PLANS FOR TOMORROW, THE GIFTS YOU BOUGHT & THOSE YOU'LL RECEIVE.

FOR THE MOST PART, THOUGH, TONIGHT IS A “WHEW” NIGHT.

FOR THE MOST PART, IT'S OVER.

ALL THE HUSTLE-BUSTLE, THE STRESS, THE PARTIES, THE DECORATING, THE SHOPPING, THE WRAPPING – THEY'RE OVER.

NOW I KNOW THIS IS GOING TO BE A REALLY SEXIST THING TO SAY & I APOLOGIZE IN ADVANCE TO ANYONE I MIGHT OFFEND BY SAYING IT, BUT I THINK IF YOU HAD A WOMAN PASTOR, YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T HEAR HER SAY THAT.

BECAUSE – AND LET'S FACE IT, GUYS – WHAT I JUST SAID PROBABLY ISN'T AS TRUE FOR THE WOMEN AMONG US AS IT IS FOR THE MEN.

FOR MANY OF THE WOMEN, THERE'S STILL A TON OF WORK TO BE DONE, EVEN ON CHRISTMAS EVE & INTO CHRISTMAS.

BUT THIS IS STILL – TO A CERTAIN EXTENT – FOR ALL OF US, A BIT OF A “WHEW” NIGHT.

BUT I WILL TRY TO HEED THE ADMONITION OF THAT LITTLE BOY & ATTEMPT NOT TO RUIN THIS EVENING FOR YOU BY TRYING TO EXPLAIN CHRISTMAS.

BUT, TO BE HONEST, I COULDN'T EVEN IF I *DID* TRY.

THE INCARNATION – GOD WITH US – SIMPLY DEFIES HUMAN EXPLANATION OR COMPREHENSION.

LAST SUNDAY, IN OUR 10:30 SERVICE, IN THE PART OF THE SERMON THAT I SHARED WITH THE CHILDREN THAT WASN'T FROM HENRY VAN DYKE, I SUGGESTED “*FOUR LITTLE WORDS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING.*”

THOSE 4 LITTLE WORDS WERE “*THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS.*”

I SUGGESTED THOSE 4 LITTLE WORDS CHANGE EVERYTHING BECAUSE IF MATTHEW HADN'T INCLUDED THEM IN HIS GOSPEL, OUR ENTIRE TRADITION OF CHRISTMAS GIFT-GIVING MIGHT NOT EXIST.

THIS EVENING – ON CHRISTMAS EVE – I’D LIKE TO SUGGEST TO YOU “4 MORE LITTLE WORDS” & THESE FOUR WORDS WOULD CHANGE EVERYTHING ASTRONOMICALLY MORE THAN *THOSE* WORDS.

I ALWAYS ENJOY TRYING TO PULL OUT OF A PASSAGE OF SCRIPTURE A SPECIFIC WORD OR PHRASE THAT CAN REALLY BE TAKEN APART & ZEROED IN ON DURING A SERMON.

I FIND THAT HELPFUL & I THINK THE MORE FAMILIAR THE PASSAGE, THE MORE IMPORTANT IT IS.

THAT’S PARTICULARLY TRUE OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY.

IT’S ALMOST *TOO* FAMILIAR TO US TO PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO WHAT’S BEING SAID.

THERE ARE ANY NUMBER OF WORDS & PHRASES, THOUGH, THAT – WHEN TAKEN BY THEMSELVES – PROVIDE US WITH A GLIMPSE INTO THE MEANING OF THE INCARNATION.

THE FOUR MORE LITTLE WORDS I’D LIKE US TO CENTER ON THIS EVENING – FOUR MORE LITTLE WORDS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING – ARE WORDS INCLUDED IN THE MESSAGE OF THE ANGELS TO THE SHEPHERDS.

THEY’RE FOUND IN THE 10TH VERSE OF LUKE’S 2ND CHAPTER:

“BUT THE ANGEL SAID TO THEM, ‘DO NOT BE AFRAID, FOR SEE – I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY...’”

AND NOW – DRUM ROLL PLEASE – BECAUSE, HERE THEY ARE – *“FOR ALL THE PEOPLE.”*

THIS GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY – THIS GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY THAT WILL DISPEL OUR FEARS – IS *“FOR ALL THE PEOPLE.”*

IT’S FOR EVERYONE & THOSE FOUR LITTLE WORDS CHANGE EVERYTHING.

LIKE THOSE OTHER 4 LITTLE WORDS – *“THEY GAVE HIM GIFTS”* - WHAT IF THESE WORDS WEREN’T THERE?

WHAT IF, IN LUKE, THE ANGEL SAID, *“I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR SOME OF THE PEOPLE.”*

WHAT IF IT WAS GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR THE RICH PEOPLE OR THE SMART PEOPLE OR THE RELIGIOUS PEOPLE OR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE?

WHAT IF IT WAS FOR THE GOOD PEOPLE OR THE SUCCESSFUL PEOPLE OR THE HAPPY PEOPLE?

WHAT IF THIS GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY WAS FOR MEN BUT NOT WOMEN, OLD BUT NOT YOUNG, PROTESTANTS BUT NOT CATHOLICS, OR EVEN CHRISTIANS BUT NOT ATHEISTS?

IN ESSENCE, WHAT IF THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS WAS FOR SOMEONE ELSE, BUT NOT YOU?

WHAT IF YOU WERE ONE OF THOSE NOT INCLUDED IN THE ANNOUNCEMENT?

YOU SEE, THAT’S WHY THESE 4 LITTLE WORDS – *“FOR ALL THE PEOPLE”* – CHANGE EVERYTHING.

HAVE YOU EVER FELT LEFT OUT OF SOMETHING – LIKE YOU WERE FORGOTTEN OR DIDN’T MATTER?

I REMEMBER AN ELDERLY GENTLEMAN IN A FORMER CHURCH TELLING ME ABOUT A TIME HE AND HIS WIFE WERE TAKING A LONG TRIP TO VISIT FAMILY.

THEY INVITED HIS BROTHER TO JOIN THEM & AFTER ABOUT 200 MILES OF DRIVING, THEY STOPPED FOR GAS & LUNCH.

THEY GOT BACK IN THE CAR & RESUMED THE TRIP, WITH THE MAN & HIS BROTHER CARRYING ON A NON-STOP CONVERSATION IN THE FRONT SEAT.

AFTER DRIVING ABOUT 50 MILES, THE MAN SAW A STATE POLICE CAR APPROACHING IN HIS REAR VIEW MIRROR, LIGHTS FLASHING & SIREN BLARING.

THE MAN PULLED OVER TO THE SIDE OF THE ROAD TO LET HIM PASS BUT THE PATROLMAN PULLED IN BEHIND HIM.

HE KNEW HE HADN'T BEEN SPEEDING & COULDN'T, FOR THE LIFE OF HIM, FIGURE OUT WHY HE WAS BEING STOPPED.

THE OFFICER WALKED TO THE CAR & SAID, "*DID YOU STOP AT A RESTAURANT ABOUT 50 MILES BACK?*"

"*YES, I DID,*" THE MAN SAID, "*BUT I DIDN'T FORGET TO PAY MY BILL.*"

THE OFFICER SAID, "*WELL, YOU'D BE IN A LOT LESS TROUBLE IF WHAT YOU'D FORGOTTEN WAS YOUR BILL INSTEAD OF YOUR WIFE!*"

SURE ENOUGH, WHILE HIS WIFE WENT TO THE REST ROOM, HE & HIS BROTHER JUST JUMPED BACK IN THE CAR & STARTED DRIVING, COMPLETELY OBLIVIOUS TO HER ABSENCE IN THE BACK SEAT!

IT'S A VERY PAINFUL THING TO BE LEFT OUT, NEGLECTED OR FORGOTTEN.

THAT'S WHY THESE WORDS OF THE ANGEL CHANGE EVERYTHING.

THE GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY OF THE SAVIOR'S BIRTH IS "*FOR ALL THE PEOPLE.*"

THE GREAT THEOLOGIAN KARL BARTH WAS ACCUSTOMED TO PREACHING TO PRISONERS IN THE JAIL IN BASEL, SWITZERLAND.

ONE OF HIS SERMONS WAS SIMPLY ENTITLED, "ALL."

HE BASED IT ON A BRIEF VERSE IN ROMANS WHERE PAUL SAYS, "*FOR GOD HAS IMPRISONED ALL IN DISOBEDIENCE S THAT HE MAY BE MERCIFUL TO ALL.*"

WITHIN THAT SERMON, BARTH SAID, "*ALL IS WITHOUT QUALIFICATION – GENTILES, ATHEISTS, BELIEVERS, NONBELIEVERS, THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN FORMALLY INCARCERATED & THOSE WHO SIT IN JUDGMENT UPON THEM – ALL.*"

I LOVE THE THOUGHT THAT THE "GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY" THAT WAS ANNOUNCED BY THE ANGEL WAS "FOR ALL THE PEOPLE."

I LOVE THE THOUGHT THAT IT MEANS WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.

IT DOESN'T MATTER WHAT YOUR CHRISTMAS SEASON HAS BEEN LIKE THIS YEAR.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'VE BEEN HAPPY OR SAD ABOUT IT.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'VE BEEN NAUGHTY OR NICE.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'VE EXPERIENCED THE SORROW OF LOSS – A LOST JOB, A LOST LOVED ONE, A LOST RELATIONSHIP.

IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE YOUNG OR OLD, RICH OR POOR, SMART OR SLOW.

NONE OF THOSE THINGS MATTER BECAUSE THE "GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY" IS FOR ALL PEOPLE.

IT'S FOR YOU.

THAT'S HOW THE VERY NEXT VERSE IN LUKE BEGINS & IT'S ANOTHER 4 LITTLE WORDS THAT CHANGE EVERYTHING – “TO YOU IS BORN...”

THE “YOU” IN THAT PHRASE IS SINGULAR.

JESUS WAS BORN FOR “YOU.”

I DON'T KNOW IF YOU SAW THE 3-PAGE SPREAD IN THE NEWSPAPER LAST WEEK OF CHURCH CHRISTMAS ADS, BUT THERE WAS ONE IN PARTICULAR THAT GRABBED MY ATTENTION.

THE CHURCH WASN'T TOUTING ALL KINDS OF BIG, ELABORATE PROGRAMS TO DRAW PEOPLE IN.

IT JUST INCLUDED A GRAPHIC OF A LITTLE SHEPHERD BOY & HE SAYS, “HI. I'M A CHURCH CHRISTMAS AD – SURROUNDED BY OTHER CHURCH CHRISTMAS ADS. WE ALL – (NOTICE THAT WORD – ALL) HAVE GREAT THINGS TO OFFER YOU DURING THIS SEASON. PLEASE – JOIN ONE OF US TO HELP YOU FIND THE REAL JOY OF CHRIST'S BIRTH!”

I LIKE THAT BECAUSE IT'S SAYING WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER.

IT'S LIKE “MIRACLE ON 34TH STREET” WHERE THE GOAL WASN'T TO GET MORE PEOPLE INTO YOUR OWN STORE.

THE GOAL WAS TO HELP PEOPLE FIND JOY AT CHRISTMAS.

THAT'S WHAT THAT AD SAYS TO ME.

THE “GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY” IS “FOR ALL THE PEOPLE” – AND THAT MEANS YOU. AMEN.

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