

Rev. Dan Welch Sunday School Christmas Service 12.17.23 Text- (Luke 2: 10-11).

This morning the children are helping us get to the heart of Christmas, what it's really all about. They will do this through the reading and reciting for us of God's Word, singing with us some familiar hymns, and sharing with us some of their heart-warming Christmas songs. Our service is called "Symbols of Salvation" and it's all about the plan of God's salvation for us put into effect through the birth of His Son, Jesus in Bethlehem.

The night of that first Christmas in that little town, so long ago, must have seemed like any other night to those shepherds who were keeping busy doing their job on the hillsides of Judea, just outside Bethlehem. All the sheep had been gathered in and there was nothing left to do except to keep watch, chat with one another, and stay warm. That quiet routine, however, was shattered when an angel of the Lord burst onto the scene with the bright light of God's glory. Unmasked and unexpected, that's how the angels arrived just as God continues to enter into hearts today. How did the shepherds react to the heavenly invasion? They were terrified! That's not surprising, is it? What's your first reaction when your phone goes off in the middle of the night? If you're like me, you fear the worst. It could be the police calling to tell you that your son or daughter was in an accident, or Grandma to say that Grandpa is in the hospital and not doing well. In the same sort of way, the shepherds must have feared the worst when they saw God's messenger standing before them. Had he come to announce that it was Judgment Day? If so, were they ready to be judged by the righteous God?

But that's not why the angel had come. "Do not be afraid." The angel said. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord." That's Luke chapter 2, verses 10 and 11.

Just by listening to this message, the attitude of the shepherds changed. Their fear was replaced with **joy**. The Savior had been born in Bethlehem just as the Old Testament prophets said He would be. By listening and taking to heart this message the shepherds learned that the Bible **could** be trusted. They also learned that this Child was not just human; He was God and He was called "the Lord." But most of all the shepherds were overjoyed because this Savior had not just come to save a select group of people. The angels said this news for "all people." No, there had been no tree, no treats, and no turkey, but the shepherds were happy. What made that first Christmas such a merry one? Listening to the angel's message.

In the same way our Christmas really will be merry if we celebrate like the shepherds did by listening and taking to heart the angel's message. Jesus has come to bring peace and salvation to all. He did that by dying on the cross and forgiving all of our sins- sins of unfaithfulness, selfishness, laziness, anything we do, think, or say to show that we care more about ourselves more than we care about God and others. God's forgiveness plan is like no other.

God does not forgive only after we've learned to "straighten up and fly right." No. Unasked and unexpected, God stepped into history to forgive us and give us the promise of eternal life in heaven through faith in Jesus: God's forgiveness gives us the reason to change our life. He helps us to live our life the way that's best for us. (Pause)

The shepherds weren't content just to **hear** the message, they wanted to learn more about this Savior and so without a second to lose they hurried off to Bethlehem. It's interesting, isn't it? They didn't debate whether or not they had time to go, or whether it was convenient for them. They didn't even worry about who would watch the sheep. They rushed to find out more about their Savior.

The same should go for us. We too shouldn't be content just to **hear** about the Savior, but hurry to receive Him where He promises to come to us in our lives in special and very important ways. Sunday School Christmas services like this are beautiful and wonderful, (and entertaining, too!) but let's never be satisfied just to make note of Jesus once a year in the Christmas carols and in special Christmas services but come often to God's house and learn about Him and receive His love and forgiveness through God's Word and Means of Grace. God's plan of salvation is awesome and has so much depth and meaning in so many ways for us. The more you listen to it and learn about it, the more **joy** it brings into your life and will prepare you to deal with any kind of difficulty you may have to face. His Word will give you peace, real peace, lasting peace, knowing your whole life is safe in God's loving hands.

For this morning, though, let's continue to enjoy **this** service and celebrate together the great news of God's love for us in the Christ-child as the children share with us "Symbols of Salvation".

We begin by singing "Of the Father's Love Begotten", stanzas 1 and 3, as the offering plates are brought forward. If you did not get a chance to place your offering in the offering plates at one of the entrances on your way in this morning, you may do so on your way out. We sing hymn #384, stanzas 1 and 3.