

Getting the Message

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[0 : 00] In our sixth reading, which you can find in your service sheet, Luke lifts our gaze from the Messiah laid in a manger to the shepherds and angels nearby. Luke chapter 2, continuing from verse 8.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Saviour has been born to you. He is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

[1 : 14] So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Thanks, Amy, very much. Let me add my welcome to Martin's. It's great to be here. What a joy to be singing carols together. We're thinking now about the Christmas message.

Do we get the Christmas message? Every day, each and every day, each one of us is bombarded by commercial messages, vying for your attention, and all the more so at this time of year.

Nielsen Research found that the average UK person is exposed to 2,200 messages every single day.

[2 : 32] 2,200 marketing messages every day. That's a lot of messages for us to deal with. 24 hours later, Nielsen Research found that it was only eight of those 2,200 messages that had hit their target.

Only eight out of 2,200 messages. The click rate for banner ads is just eight in 10,000.

Eight in 10,000. And consumer engagement with X, formerly Twitter posts, is even worse. Only three in 10,000. Getting your message across isn't easy.

If you've got something important to say, how do you get it across? How do you get it to stand out from the crowd? Well, effective messaging does three things.

Firstly, it gets your audience to notice it. For a message to be effective, it has to grab your attention. Secondly, it gets your audience to engage with its content.

[3 : 40] It needs to be relevant and speak to the needs of the audience. Thirdly, it gets them to do what you want them to do. And it's only effective if it accomplishes these three things.

You need to notice it. You need to engage with the content of a message. And you need to interact with it and do something about it. Well, 2,000 years ago, an angel spoke to some shepherds on the first Christmas morning and gave them a message.

Just hours earlier, a baby has been born in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus born to Mary in unusual circumstances, in a manger, not in a cradle.

But what is the significance of this event? What's the meaning of it? What's it got to do with us? So along comes this angel and announces the birth to the shepherds and explains the significance of

that birth.

And it's good news, a good news message that excites great joy. It is the message of Christmas. Now remember, an effective message does three things.

[4 : 56] It gets your audience to notice it, to engage with its content, and to do something about it. And by this metric, as we're going to see the Christmas message that the angel delivered to the shepherds is an effective message, certainly as far as the shepherds are concerned.

It's an effective message. So let's start with getting noticed. One of the best ways to get everyone's attention is to shout out, to just yell at the top of your voice, I have an announcement.

You could be in a crowded room. You could be in a hushed examination hall. You could be on a number 46 bus. But the tactic is effective.

It works. So why not try that yourselves this evening, preferably after this carol service. See how you get on in one of the bars or restaurants around here.

I have an announcement to make. See how you get on on the subway on your way home. And see how you get on with that. In the nativity narrative, the angel has an announcement.

[6 : 11] A message that's out of this world, unmissable. Just imagine you're there with the shepherds out there under the night sky that night.

And just some regular guys, you know. These shepherds just doing their usual thing, tending their flocks, keeping watch over the sheep. And then completely out of the blue, an angel shows up.

An angel of the Lord, it says, appeared to them. And he's got something important to say. And he gets their attention with his presence.

So let's face it. It's not something you're going to expect to see every night. An angel appearing out of the sky. And he gets their attention with his presence.

And he gets their attention also with the presence of the glory of the Lord shining all around them. So all of a sudden, in the dark night sky, it's all lit up.

[7 : 10] The shepherds, walking in darkness, see a great light. And he's grabbed their attention. There's no doubt about that. And they were afraid. They were terrified, it says.

And were no wonder. So the angels got their attention. Well done, angel. But really, that's just the start. For the message to be effective, he needs to get the shepherds to engage with the content of the message.

He does this by showing them how they are invested in the story. And by the way, we're invested in the Christmas story too. So let's think about that message itself then.

The angel comes with a clear, compelling, and concise message. The angel said to them, How does it begin?

Do not be afraid. Don't be afraid. They reckon that the most effective straplines or headlines are composed of no more than just a few carefully chosen words.

[8 : 26] So, for example, Nike, just do it. L'Oreal Paris, because you're worth it. Apple, think different.

Apparently, Apple's two-word slogan took months to formulate. And at its first presentation, Steve Jobs rejected it. This is the angel's headline.

Don't be afraid. Just three or four words there. If you prefer it to be refined down to just two words, as a two-word headline, you can distill it down to this, as some translations do.

Fear not. Fear not. It's short. It's punchy. It's memorable. Immediately, it addresses the shepherd's great fear and sets them at ease.

Don't be afraid. Why not? Because the message isn't bad news. It's very good news.

[9 : 26] News that brings joy. So what's the content of this announcement? Why is it good news? Well, notice in the very next verse, Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. This is a remarkable claim. The content of the Christmas message is a person. The content of the Christmas message is this person, Jesus.

And we learn in that very same verse, two things about Jesus that tell us why he is such good news. We're told something about the identity of Jesus, who he is.

And we're told something about the mission of Jesus, what he's come to do. So to get to the heart of the Christmas message, we need to engage with these two things.

So let's think about his identity. Fear not. The message is good news because of who this baby is. He is, we're told, the Messiah or the Christ, a title meaning the anointed one, the promised king in the line of David has come.

[10:38] And it's in Bethlehem, the city of David, that he appears as prophesied in Micah in our first reading. The king is here. Jesus is royalty.

And the angel's message tells us that he's the king of kings. He is, however, not only royalty, but he is actually deity.

He's divine for he is also Lord. Now this is a term that's been used almost 20 times in Luke's gospel already up to this point of the Lord God of Israel himself.

But used here also of Jesus, a declaration that he is God. Now that's quite a statement.

The little one born at Christmastime in Bethlehem is none other than God himself. God in a human body. So isn't this an extraordinary picture?

[11:39] Right at the heart of the Christmas message, you have a divine king wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a feeding trough. And then just a few hours after he's been born, the shepherds know exactly where to find him, to come and find him, because the angel had given them a clear sign that they'd find this baby lying in a manger for feeding animals, not a cradle.

This is an unusual sign that points to a truth more extraordinary still, that this baby is in fact the king of kings who is God himself.

That's who he is, that's his identity, but what has he come to do? And what's his mission? It's this. Fear not, because the Christmas message is good news.

Not only because of who Jesus is, but secondly because of what he came to do. Jesus, the divine king, has come to rescue the world.

Listen again to that great announcement. Today in the town of David, a saviour has been born to you. God's Christmas present to you is a baby, a person, a saviour.

[13:07] He gave you a saviour. He's come to save you. He's come on a rescue mission because he loves you. So why would you need a saviour?

And what do you need to be saved from? Well, this past Friday, the fairy tale of New York blared across the streets of Dublin as thousands of mourners gathered on the streets and lined the streets to say goodbye to the Irish punk icon and Pogue's frontman, Shane McGowan.

According to one newspaper headline, this was a final farewell for the man who summed up the real spirit of Christmas. A final farewell for the man who summed up the real spirit of Christmas.

Now, you might want to take that with a pinch of salt, the real spirit of Christmas. But there's something about the fairy tale of New York that resonates with people at this time of year.

The song's actually quite dark. I'm sure most of you will know it. Surely one of the most unlikely of Christmas classics. And a reverent, foul-mouthed rant back and forth between a New York couple as they navigate their toxic, codependent relationship.

[14:24] But despite their differences and intense life regrets, out of the darkness of their existence, the couple still hear the beauty in the bells that are ringing out at Christmas and Christmas Day.

A sign that even in life's darkest moments, there's something about Christmas that offers real hope. This hope, according to the message of the angel in our passage, is grounded on the gift of a saviour who brings peace on earth by offering forgiveness of sins and restoring our relationship to God.

So think about the shepherds in the field and their initial response as they come face to face with the glory of the Lord as they were confronted by God's holy presence.

They were terrified, scared to death. And that's the natural response of sinners when they meet their maker and are confronted with the holiness of God, knowing that they're in desperate need of forgiveness.

Friends, Jesus came to take care of this. The baby born in Bethlehem will grow into a man who will be crucified outside Jerusalem.

[15:47] Jesus, the descendant of David, will bear the sins of those who call him Lord. Standing in our place, he will suffer the consequences of our rebellion.

He came to rescue us from the penalty of our sins. This is our greatest need. He lived a perfect life and died in our stead. He died the death that we deserved.

His life and death were for you and I. What a great Christmas gift. This is a reason for us to be joyful. His rescue mission means that we can be forgiven and enjoy God's presence, stand before a holy God with a clear conscience.

Now, whatever else we may say or think about Shane McGowan, it seems that he got this much at least right about the Christmas message. He understood something of the importance of remorse, something of the importance of forgiveness.

In his widow's eulogy on Friday, she told the packed church there in Dublin how he genuinely believed in forgiveness. So that's the content of the Christmas message and it's as relevant to us today as it was for the shepherds back then.

[17 : 11] But for a message to be effective, if you recall, it requires one final ingredient. An effective message gets your audience to notice it, it gets them to engage with its content and finally, it gets them to do something about it.

The message was certainly effective as far as the shepherds were concerned. They didn't waste any time acting upon it. But though the angel appeared to the shepherds that first Christmas, this message of Christmas was recorded for us by the gospel writer Luke.

See, the message of Christmas is for all of us here. It's not just a clever marketing message that you can dismiss or ignore or delete to spam. It's far too important for that.

Don't miss the message of Christmas. The message of Christmas is a message for life, not just for Christmas. So how are we to respond? How are we to respond to the good news that a saviour is born unto us, a divine king?

How do we respond to this message? Very briefly, we're shown three ways here in the passage that Amy read. Firstly, the response of the angels, verse 13.

[18 : 36] Suddenly, the one angel is joined by a heavenly flash mob. Loads of angels praising God and saying, glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to those on whom his favour rests.

The angels get the message. They get the significance of it. Many of us here, we'd call ourselves Christians. Many of us here, this evening, have Jesus as our saviour.

You get the message, you understand something of the significance of it. The right response for us, therefore, is to join with the heavenly choir of angels and rejoice, worship and enjoy and sing joyful praise to God.

God. In Mary, we see a second response. Mary's response to the message is more reflective. We're told in verse 19, she treasured up these things and pondered them in her hearts.

So Mary meditates on what's happened and what the shepherds have related to her and turns that over in her mind and in her heart. Maybe this Christmas, that's you.

[19 : 47] Maybe you want to spend some time reflecting on this message of Christmas and its significance for your own life. Perhaps you could pray and ask God to show you more of his love for you and why you need the Lord Jesus as your saviour.

And then finally, we see in the shepherds a third response. If Mary's response is reflective, active, then the shepherds is active. They hear the message and they go check it out for themselves straight away.

So verse 15, after the angels left them, the shepherds said to one another, let's go and see this thing that's happened, which the Lord told us about. They want to examine the evidence for themselves and see if this Christmas message checks out.

If that's you this evening, if something about this Christmas message has resonated or struck you fresh, let me encourage you to come check out the evidence for yourself.

Why not come to the life course that we run and explore the Christian hope for yourself and experience the Christian joy for yourself. Whichever way you choose to respond, the Christmas message is simply too important to ignore until Christmas comes around again next year.

[21 : 16] This Christmas, don't miss the unmissable message of Christmas. Let's pray now and then I'll hand over to Greg and the band who lead us in our next carol.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for the message of Christmas, a message of hope and joy for sinners like us. We pray that the Holy Spirit would make this message effective in each of us here and cause great joy in our hearts as we submit our lives to the King of Kings, our promised Saviour, the Lord Jesus.

For we ask it in his name. Amen. Amen.