

Luke 2:11 (Supplemental texts: Job 33 and Hebrews 10)

“Do not be afraid. 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 the Messiah, the Lord.”

Merry Christmas, my beloved friends in Christ! It is my honor to participate in today’s worship service celebrating the birth of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ through sharing the Christmas message. It’s my sincere hope that I can faithfully pass on to you the message I received from Luke 2, as well as Job 33 and Hebrews 10. It is a message of liberation from fear, sin, and the power of death. It is a message of confidence in our salvation through our Savior Jesus Christ. It is a message of great joy because of our hope to made holy forever. But perhaps the most important message of all is that this great news of the gospel is for all people, when we repent and believe. I am so ready to hear some good news of great joy that is for everyone, not just for the 1%, or even for just %50. How about you?

When the angel came to the shepherds living out in the fields near Bethlehem, more than 2000 years ago, his appearance was glorious, like the glory of the Lord. (Lk 2:8-9) Since it was night and the shepherds were out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks, their appearance was gross. If you’ve ever had unexpected company late at night, and went to answer the door in your pajamas or sweat pants, you still probably looked ten times better than them. Think of how embarrassed you were to answer the door like that, even if it was to welcome someone you knew. How much worse would it be if it was your boss, a TV news reporter, or a famous personality? But these shepherds were greeted by an angel, someone so beautiful, terrifying, and glorious that they dare not look up. This meeting between angels and shepherds was very awkward for the shepherds. All their inadequacies, failings, and even their sins felt exposed, and perhaps they wondered, “Is this it?”

But the angel’s message to the shepherds was very different from the one they expected. He told 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 Savior 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.”** (Lk 2:10-12) The angel had come to announce to these shepherds that a Savior, the Messiah and Lord, had been born. The Messiah had not come like the angel did, appearing fully formed as a heavenly being just visiting our neighborhood. He came like us, a helpless baby, vulnerable, needy, just hoping to get the chance to grow up. And

yet, though he had a long way to go to develop into a man, he was promised to be our Savior; anointed by God as High Priest and Lord. Because of him, we would all rejoice! This is the Christmas message, the message of good news of great joy for all people.

The angel's message to the shepherds begins with some very comforting words: **"Do not be afraid."** Of course, the angel said this because the shepherds were terrified! We are all afraid in one way or another. As an employee of the state at Western Illinois University, I've been afraid because the state has no budget. You have your own reasons for being afraid. But I bet for all of us, it wasn't long ago when we last felt afraid. One fear we have in common is one we share with the shepherds. We're afraid of being caught off guard and then in our weakness we will be judged, found wanting, and be condemned. Some people call this feeling that we are phonies about to be caught the "impostor syndrome." It's a fear that haunts us in our dreams, like the recurring dream that we show up for an exam for which we haven't studied! Some people are so overwhelmed by this fear that they become powerless and can't help themselves out of all the bad situations they've fallen into. Most people do their best to just do what it takes to avoid being exposed and ruined. But some people rise above their fears and strive to be great. Someone like Alexander Hamilton. The rewards for doing so can be awesome. Money, power, status, great wisdom, and pleasures are some of the things that can be gained by those who face up to their fears and seemingly overcome them. These kinds of people seem very different. But they're not. Whatever kind of person you or I might be, we are all afraid of being judged and found wanting. We just deal with it in our own way.

One man who strove to overcome this fear has his story told in the Old Testament book of Job. Job was a very successful man. Not only so, but he was a man of great status, with a respected and large family. Really, he was an exemplary man and no one could find fault with him. Wouldn't that be awesome, if no one could find fault with you? Much respect to Job, who worked so hard in every aspect of his life so that he and his children would be secure. I think a lot of people would like the Bible more if it would only focus on telling us how to be successful and blessed like Job. But strangely, the Bible's story about Job focuses on something unexpected. For one day, this man who had done his best to be righteous in every way was beset by one evil after another. He lost his children. He lost all his wealth. He lost his health. This happened so suddenly! Everyone who knew Job was shocked and shaken to the core. Three of his close friends sat in silence with him for seven days. Then Job confessed to them: **"What I feared has come upon me; what I dreaded has happened to me. I have no peace, no**

quietness; **I have no rest, but only turmoil.**” (Job 3:25-26) Then the friends began to speak. And what his three friends said was that Job must have committed some sin for which he was being punished. But Job protested. No, he hadn't. And to prove his innocence, he was ready to stand before God's judgment and plead his case. **“If I have walked with falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit—let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless.”** (Job 31:5-6) Wow. The three friends were dumbfounded.

Then a younger man named Elihu spoke up. He didn't know Job well, but he was deeply disturbed by what Job and the three friends had been saying. In effect they were debating who was more righteous, and despite his circumstances Job would not accede. In truth, Job was probably right! However, Elihu understood that Job, for all his carefulness in living a pure and noble life, had mistakenly put his trust in his own efforts. They were enough to make him righteous before men, but not before God. Elihu started his message to Job with a simple assurance, **“I am the same as you in God's sight; I too am a piece of clay. No fear of me should alarm you, nor should my hand be heavy on you.”** (Job 33:6-11) We can learn a lot from Elihu here. Heavy handed preaching doesn't work. God's hand was heavy on Job, however. Why? Job imagined that God was afraid to hear his case. But Elihu challenged Job to realize that he was already standing before God's judgment seat, and had been found wanting. He was not suffering because of some secret sin. He was guilty of pride. A pride that had made him deaf and blind to God's ever present voice, and which had made his prayers earthbound instead of heaven sent. Job's suffering was not in punishment for his sin. It was permitted in his life to reveal his sin, so that he might be set free. (Job 33:12-18)

Unlike the three older friends who had come to judge Job, Elihu came to vindicate him! But for that to happen, Job needed to understand something about God's salvation. Job had trusted in his own righteousness, but now, he was facing the pit. His righteous deeds were useless. Elihu counseled him that his only hope was if God's angel were to come and intervene, bringing a ransom sufficient to pay off all of Job's spiritual debt. How likely was that? Elihu estimated **“one in a thousand.”** (Job 33:23-26) In fact, that was quite generous. Even for Job, the ransom required for his sins was astronomical. And yet, it could happen because God wanted it to happen. The angel would speak on Job's behalf to restore him to God's favor, and would counsel Job to turn to God in prayer and seek his face. Were Job to realize his salvation and hope was in God's grace alone, he could repent his pride and with real joy acknowledge God's grace in his life. Was Elihu Job's angel? Perhaps. He prompted Job, **“...say, ‘I have sinned, I have perverted what is right, but I did not get what I deserved. God has delivered me from**

going down to the pit, and I shall live to enjoy the light of life.” (Job 33:27-28)
Job finally acknowledged his pride and went on to enjoy the light of life.

Job’s story makes a lot of people angry. We don’t like to hear that such a good man had to suffer so much, finally repenting in dust and ashes. It doesn’t seem fair. And if he, one of the overcomers, had to suffer like that, what does that mean for us? But the message of Job isn’t that there’s a hierarchy of suffering for sinners – a lot for the best of us, and an unimaginable amount for the rest! Rather, through Elihu God teaches us that we are all the same, every one of us incapable of maintaining a right relationship with our Creator – every one of us in need of a Savior who pays the ransom we can never pay. We are all facing the same pit. More than that, he teaches us that God is speaking to each of us, through his word, of course, but also through our dreams, through our circumstances, perhaps simply through a friend or some other “angel”. His greatest desire, one that he works toward multiple times and in multiple ways, is that we turn away from the pit and restore our relationship with him. But how can we know that his desire is to save us? Our fears of judgment and falling into that pit are so real! And because of that fear we easily fall into despair, seek to hide, or cling to our useless pride.

But what the angel told the shepherds applies to all of us. **“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 Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”** The angel spoken of by Elihu had come, bringing a ransom payment, proclaiming the birth of a Savior who would be Christ and Lord. And the amazing thing is that this good news, this message of a Savior, is for all people. What had been a **“one in a thousand”** chance is now **“once for all.”** As it says in Hebrews 10:10, **“...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”** But just as Jesus came into this world as a baby and had to grow up to be our Savior, so we who put our faith in him are proclaimed ahead of time as perfect, while our sanctification is being worked out day by day in our lives. So Hebrews 10:14 declares, **“For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”** And we are not left to work out our sanctification on our own. After offering the sacrifice that ransomed the whole world, Jesus was raised again from the dead and has become our High Priest, who **“...is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”** (Hb 7:25)

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.” Christmas is the time to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah and Lord, because he is our Savior. Through Job, we could think about

how Jesus rescues us from our fears brought on by our sins of pride and self-righteousness. But it's just as important for us to consider how we should live after we've made our confession of faith in Jesus as Savior and Lord. How can we maintain a right relationship with God through our faith in Christ? This is the crucial question, really, because the world will never stop tempting us to trust in our own righteousness. And that's why I was led to focus on Hebrews 10 along with Job 33 for this message. Hebrews focuses on the question of "what's next?"

There is a 'what's next,' because of what Jesus accomplished through his sacrifice once for all and by his resurrection from the dead. Nothing, no ritual, no ceremony, no sacrifice other than his could take away sin. On the other hand, **"when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God,"** so that **"sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary."** (Hb 10:12,15-18) This is such good news! That's it. It's over. The battle against sin has been won. That is the clear promise of Scripture, not just in Hebrews, but this final victory was declared by Jesus from his cross when he prayed to God, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," and just before he breathed his last, when he declared, "It is finished."

But I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, "Wait a minute. If the battle against sin has already been won, and there is no more sacrifice for sin to be made, how is it that I am still so easily tempted, so easily angered, so easily discouraged and made afraid?" And here is the reason we must turn to Hebrews, while remembering the lessons from Job. Elihu explained that sin prevents us from hearing God's voice, and it keeps us from praying with any confidence to God. What Hebrews assures us is that sin is now powerless to quiet God's voice or shut the door against our prayers. In fact, Jesus' sacrifice once for all has done more than that. Hebrews 10:19-22 says, **"Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water."** There is a what's next. The battle against sin has been won. And we who have put our faith in God's salvation through Christ can with full assurance draw near to God and dwell with a clear conscience in his presence. That's what's next. And that is all we will ever need to overcome the world. (1 John 5:5)

Again, I can hear the voices of doubt rising in your minds, as they rise in mine. “I’m still too dirty!” “I haven’t been faithful to my mission!” “I haven’t finished studying Genesis!” Yes, it’s all true, for all of us, even for those of us who’ve taught the Bible and studied Genesis 50 times! But that’s not our problem. Our problem has always been a broken relationship with God. And our Savior Jesus, who died on the cross to make the sacrifice for sins, once for all, and who has now been seated at the right hand of God, interceding for us there as our High Priest, has made a way for us to come into God’s presence. None of our own efforts to fix ourselves up will have any effect. But if we come into God’s presence, confessing our sin, listening to his word and opening our hearts to receiving his Holy Spirit, God carries out his sanctifying work. We so easily give up. But God never gives up, and he will indeed make us holy, as he is holy. Jesus’ sacrifice is the only sacrifice we need now and forever. So let your minds and hearts be at ease, and let us all gather together as God’s people, forsaking all boasting and competition. Let’s encourage one another and spur one another on toward love and good deeds. (Hb 10:24-25) Let us rejoice, give thanks, and give all praise and glory to our Savior and Lord, who has freed us from our fears and from sin and death. And let’s trust that by his Holy Spirit, we are being made holy. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, **“But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (Ro 6:22-23)

This Christmas, let our confession be the same as that of Elihu and Job, **“I have sinned, I have perverted what is right, but I did not get what I deserved. God has delivered me from going down to the pit, and I shall live to enjoy the light of life.”** – **“[For] Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.”**