

ENCOURAGEMENT FOR *Real Life*

20. Merry Christmas 2021! My Gift to You

You are listening to episode 20 of the Encouragement for Real Life podcast. Merry Christmas! We've discussed much in the last three weeks about Christmas and this season. How to keep it simple and special, what do we do when it is not the most wonderful time of the year, and ways to have a stress-free Christmas. I pray these episodes have helped us all keep the main thing the main thing this Christmas season. And here we are. Just a few days before we celebrate the birth of our Savior. In this episode I offer you a gift, and it's one I hope you accept and open. Because I think it may be just the thing to help keep our focus on the true meaning of Christmas this week. Because who of us couldn't use a little help with that?? Let's get into this week's episode.

So, are you ready for Christmas? Has anyone asked you that lately? Or maybe I should rephrase that and ask you how many times you've been asked that question lately? Because it's certainly a common one this time of year, especially this week. So, are you ready? What do we think about when we answer? Maybe we think of the shopping, the baking, the decorating we've done, or haven't done. Or maybe we think about what's left on our lists and all we have yet to do. Maybe we realize we're really not ready after all. There's still so much to do before Christmas!

I get it. We host my extended family here in our home in two days. The house isn't ready, the food isn't prepared. But I've learned no matter what doesn't get done, the most important thing to me is spending time with those I love. It's not stressing about what I don't have done.

But let's think about this question, "are you ready for Christmas?" differently.

What if our answer took none of this kind of stuff into consideration? What if our answers were based on something else? The real meaning of Christmas, instead? What if we thought of Jesus' birth, rather than what the world says we're to focus on? Are we ready for Christmas? For Jesus' birth? I have a hunch our answers would be full of resounding yeses! We are all ready for Jesus' birth, aren't we?!

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Luke 2:6-7 NRSV

Cue the heavenly chorus... *Hallelujah!* Can you imagine how the heavens rejoiced in that very moment? Or was heaven filled with wonderous awe and hushed silence? I can't imagine it all.

I think of the possible emotions Mary and Joseph experienced in that moment, holding not only the Savior of the world, but the Savior of their very own souls. Could they truly comprehend what was taking place right before their eyes? I wonder. I also wonder and marvel at even though they had no place to stay, but a lowly stable, they weren't found hustling and bustling and getting ready for

Christmas. They were ready for Christmas. Like it or not, in a stable. They welcomed their baby into this world in the best that was available for them in the moment.

It may be just me, but I don't believe a manger is fitting for the birth of our Savior. Shouldn't He have been born in a palace with all comforts and means of such a place? He deserved to be, but even if it doesn't make sense to us, that wasn't God's plan. God brought His son into the world in such a lowly way that it causes our hearts to be drawn to this manger miracle. Because Jesus understands how it feels to be an outsider, or an outcast. He gets how difficult it may be to not have an easy life. He knows what it's like to be forgotten or unnoticed.

And instead of a nice, warm, place to lay his head, his first bed was where horses and cattle dined.

Imagine the dirt and filth that must have been present. Or the smells! Think about the smells that accompanied the stable and manger! That alone makes me cringe. Between you and me, the smell inside of barns is one of my least favorite smells. It almost takes me to the point where I can't breathe. And, what about the animals that were near Jesus and his parents? Was it noisy or were the animals silent? We don't know, but we wonder such things.

Even though Jesus' birth was a lowly one, His beginning does not determine His worth. His beginning gives us hope. Maybe your beginning wasn't that great either, but the beginning does not determine the journey, nor the destination.

Because Jesus is Immanuel, meaning God with us. Think about that for a moment. God with us. Not for His sake, but for ours. He came in the form of a baby, just like us. He lived on this earth, just like us, and He experienced all we have experienced. And, because He was sinless, He took our sins to the cross with Him and paid the price for us. Because of His birth, His death, and resurrection, we are given the opportunity to live forever with Him.

Friend, this is Christmas. This is what we celebrate in just a few days. Hope is alive this Christmas, and I say we all could use a good shot of hope right about now. No matter what you and I are walking through today or what we have experienced this year or are currently experiencing, Christmas reminds us that God is with us. Always. He is Immanuel. He is our hope, our security, and our peace. In this weary world and in eternity.

One of my favorite parts of the Christmas story is the shepherds.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Luke 2:10-12 NRSV

God could have chosen anyone to be the first to receive the news of Jesus's birth. We might think He'd choose kings of the land. Important and influential people. Rulers, diplomats, the prestigious. But He didn't send the angel to any of these.

He, instead, chose a group of men who might have been the lowliest in the eyes of the world, but not in the eyes of God. No, God sent the angels to shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem.

From what I understand, shepherds weren't high in social standing. They had no voice in their communities. They stayed in the fields and tended their sheep. Were they loners? Uneducated? Non-

religious? Maybe they were lonely and missed civilization. Scripture doesn't share those answers, but their job was important. The sheep would not survive without their shepherd. I'm guessing these shepherds were ordinary people, just like you and me.

But they weren't ordinary to God. (And neither are we.)

Not only did He choose them to hear this good news first, but this news was specifically for them.

*"...to **you** is born this day, in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord..."* And this news is for us still today. As that verse plainly states he was bringing good news of great joy for *all the people*.

Can you imagine this encounter with the angel? And, then the heavenly host?

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" Luke 2:13-14
NRSV

The sounds and sights must have been glorious. Don't you wish we could have been there?

But you know? We may never fully understand why God chose these shepherds, but let's not miss some significant truths tucked inside the story.

Four truths we can learn from this part of the Christmas story:

God cares about ordinary people, just like you and me.

We don't have to be kings or rulers or have jobs that are of importance in the eyes of the world to matter to God. We matter to Him. Period. He cares about what we care about, and He cares about our lives and our futures. After all, He sent to us His Son to prove that to us.

God meets us right where we are.

Just as He did with the shepherds. In our everyday activities, at work, at school, raising our children, providing for our families God meets us. He comes to us in ways we can understand, and He encourages us in our callings. Do we look for Him in our every day?

God gives us hope through Jesus.

Does life feel a little hopeless lately? Are you discouraged with another variant of this virus popping up? Do you feel like hope in your life is slipping away? There's no better time than the week of Christmas to reclaim the hope that God extends to us through His Son, Jesus. He gives us His never-ending, spirit-reviving, life-transforming hope today and into eternity.

God wants us to glorify Him.

When the shepherds found baby Jesus, just as the angel Gabriel said, they told Mary and Joseph what they had experienced. Those around them were amazed. They returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they saw and heard. What can we specifically praise God for today?

There is much to ponder about the story of Jesus' birth. I wish we had time to dig into it all today, but if we did, we'd likely be here for a few hours! In these last few days leading up to Christmas, I pray we

pause and marvel the wonders of His birth and the hope we receive from it. His birth is worth celebrating, not only at Christmastime, but every day of our lives!

One thing about me is this: I like giving gifts to special people in my life, especially at Christmastime. Because you are special to me and in a way to thank you for your continued listening ear and support of my podcast and this ministry, I have pondered and pondered what kind of gift could I give to you. I'd love to hand you a gift today, or lovingly drop one on your doorstep. Or I wish I could mail you our family Christmas card, featuring a photo of our family together. With these options impossible, however, I think I came up with something even better. So, it may not be beautifully decorated in Christmas wrap, and even though I can't personally hand it to you, my gift to you this Christmas this: it's the full account of the Christmas story. I've adopted this from Bible Study Fellowship's children's training lesson on Christmas. The readings begin with how a Savior King is promised and continues all the way through the wise men's visit to Jesus, and Mary's, Joseph's, and Jesus' trip to Egypt.

This gift is waiting for you on my website, in my Free Resources. I invite you to either print it off or bookmark that page on my site so you can return to it. It's already broken out in sections, so you can read as much as you want, when you want to. Read it all at once or a little at a time. Read it with your family on Christmas Eve or before a Christmas meal. Reading it all at once will take you less than 15 minutes. However you use it, I'm already praying it blesses you and enhances the way you celebrate the birth of Jesus this year. Maybe it'll become a tradition for your family, too.

It contains the readings of:

Promise of a Savior King

Angel Visits Mary

Angel Visits Joseph

Trip to Bethlehem and Lodging in the Stable

Jesus Christ Is Born

Angels Visit the Shepherds

Shepherds Visit the Manger

Wise Men Travel to Jerusalem

Wise Men Worship Jesus

Trip to Egypt

You can find this gift for you in the show notes.

This week in our Encouragement for Real Life Community Facebook group we are discussing Jesus' birth and the hope we are living in because of it. I invite you over there to join the conversation. The link is in the show notes as well.

If you enjoy this podcast, please subscribe. Leaving a rating and review will help others find this podcast as well.

As we close this episode, I wish you a very merry Christmas. I pray your Christmas is filled with God's peace, presence, and provision, as you celebrate our Savior's birth. Thank you for joining me today. God bless you!

Julie Lefebvre