So, the good news tonight, besides Jesus being born and the Packers being in the playoffs, is that 2020 is almost over. The bad news is that unless there is a dramatic change in the next few days all of the psychoses and fissures in our society that dominated this year will still be will us in 2021. In many ways Covid was just a lantern that illumined all of the problems that are part of the fabric of our society and sadly the vaccine will not solve those problems. But tonight, is in many ways saying that there is a solution to the problem. In fact, the solution is right in front of us on Christmas Eve. And it is found in this child who was born on this night in Bethlehem of Judea. And while we all know the story it is worth reviewing not only the problem but also the solution that God provided.

When Auggie was little anytime something broke he would shout out, “fix it with tape.” In his young mind tape was the sort of secret elixir of the universe that could solve all problems. Well, we all know that tape is not the fix all, but tonight tells us that something is. You see God has solved the problem, the problem that makes this world so divided and acrimonious; the world that was so on display during much of 2020. And God’s solution to this disunity is unity, unity under his Lordship. Tonight, the angel says to the shepherds, “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.” The unity is spelled right from the beginning when the angel tells us that this news is for “all the people.” That is the unity God promises because he has sent his Son to save not just some of us but all of us. And this is indeed wonderful news, but because I am Scottish, I want to spend a little more time on the problem before we get to the joyous message. And the problem is why in the two thousand and twentyish years since Christ came, we are still having the same problems that Jesus came to solve.

G.K. Chesterton said this, “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried.” That’s the quick answer. We like to go the easy route and follow the devices and desires of our own heart creating a small god usually in the form of something like politics, wealth or ethnicity. Whatever we cook up it leaves no room for those whose beliefs or identity differ from us because what we have given ultimate allegiance to are not big enough to say that they bring a message to “all people.”

There is an interesting passage from the Old Testament that is not in the Lectionary for tonight but I want to briefly look at it because I think it sort of sums up the problem and solution that we reflect on tonight. It happens before the battle of Jericho where we read, “When Joshua was by Jericho, he lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, a man stood before him with his drawn sword in his hand; and Joshua went to him and said to him, ‘Are you for us, or for our adversaries?’ And he said, ‘No; but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.’” You notice the way the angel repudiates the question. Joshua gives the angel a binary choice – who do you like us or them? The angel instead says he is with neither but with God. And while this may sound obvious, it tells us that God is not small like us and he can be God to more than a few people.

For a little fun, I want to take a moment and think back to history class. Did you ever get to those moments were the teacher or professor was explaining why a certain war started and it did not seem to make a whole lot of sense. Think of World War I as an example. An Archduke of the Austro-Hungarian empire is assassinated by a Bosnian Serb in Sarajevo so the Germans invade France, Britain declares war on Germany and the Australians make a seaborne landing in Turkey. It seems kind of strange to us but the thing is it all made sense at the time. Young men flocked to sign up for this glorious and noble cause. That’s the thing with worshiping small gods like politics or ethnicity – it doesn’t have a very long shelf life. What seemed so important at the time is now hard to grasp let alone understand how it ever got anyone so worked up. But before we get too excited and pat ourselves on the back for not being like the rubes who started the First World War, we need to realize that we are caught up in the same silliness. Certainly, the names and places are different but fifty years from now many of the fights and squabbles we are currently having will look ridiculous. I don’t think the great facemask wars of 2020, where the tribe of the mask wearers squared off against the non-wearers is going to show up in any annals of glory. Every generation of humans forgets the good news of great joy for all the people and instead want good news for some people.

Pseudo Macarius, a fourth century Syrian monk explained the Christian life like this, “A sick person is not necessarily sick all over. Certain organs may be perfectly healthy. One may be desperately ill and still have good eyesight. While some bodily members may be weak, others are very strong. It is the same way in the spiritual life. One may be healthy in this and that area, but not in another. There is always some imperfection. For this reason, Christians are instructed by their Lord not to be judgmental of others. Regardless of who or what they are, the rule applies….Christians will have an attitude that is simply different from secular people. There minds work another way. They belong to another world.”

Do you see what the difference is for Christians as opposed to any other group? We are called to be set apart, to be as Pseudo Macarius says, “different from secular people,” but this difference is expressed in a lack of judgment on other people. The call of the Christian is to love the world the way God loves the world, the way the angel tells the shepherds that he wants this for all the people. If God wants it for all the people, we cannot decide that others are worthy of our contempt. That is the wonderful scandalous news tonight. It is a scandal because it goes against what society in general deems to be right and correct behavior. The scandal of the Incarnation is not just that God became man and dwelt among us but that God came to everyone – rich or poor, Democrat or Republican, orthodox or heretic, Nancy Pelosi and Donald Trump. It’s a scandal because God came into the world in the exact opposite way that we would have done it. If we designed it, God would have come only to our tribe and he would have sent everyone else to New Jersey.

Why I truly believe that Christianity is the only hope for us is because it is a hope for us, for all of us. The more Christian we become the more we love all of what God loves and God loves the entire world. That is scandalous because we have lots of reasons why we do not love parts of the world. But tonight, is the night of the most beautiful scandal in the history of the world. A scandal that brings good news of great joy to all the people. That offers a vision of the world that may be difficult to enact but the only one that heals all of the fissures that separate us one from another so that we may be his this day and forevermore.