

Punctuating the good news (Luke 2:8-20)

Are the angels talking about certain people? Or all people?

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December 23, 2022

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It is interesting what grammar and punctuation can do.

Some of my friends are Oxford comma aficionados; others could care less. What had been sacrosanct, like saying “she and I” instead of “me and her,” has gone to the dumpster.

But some things are still worth the close reading. Take the angels’ announcement, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is well pleased.”

It sure sounds like God has already started separating the sheep and the goats. And maybe that is the point of the good news of Jesus’ birth: that tyrants like Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius have no chance of winning the battle for power. No contest needed; God will win.

But what if we are reading it wrong? For one thing, we have to determine whether *anthropois* means “men” or “mankind.” People? Or *all* people?

And then there’s the problem of punctuation: in the earliest New Testament texts there isn’t any. That poses more problems than we might want to imagine.

As Fred Craddock points out in his Luke commentary, everything changes if you put a comma into verse 14. Now, instead of “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among [those] people with whom God is pleased,” it reads, “On earth peace among [all] people, with whom God is pleased.”

That may seem radical. Universalist, even. But doesn't it match the angel's earlier words? “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

I don't mean to suggest that God does not have volition to choose who is saved. Nor do I think that every action we take is one that God celebrates. God forbid!

But this Christmas, this song of the angels just might be a sign to us, and not just to shepherds long ago: to treat *everyone* as recipients of good news, of great joy, and maybe even of God's pleasure. Who knows? Perhaps there is still hope that our Savior might transform us into all the people God so deeply desires to love.