

# BELPRES CHURCH

**Sermon Title: God is a Verb**

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## **Scripture:**

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### **Luke 2:8-11**

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

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## **Transcript:**

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It is so good to see you here. If you go to this church, you know this is my favorite night of the year. I look forward to it all year. So thank you for being here. Those in the room, in the community center, online, thank you for joining us. And I just have to say, after two and a half long years, it is so good to see this room full today. Thank you.

So Jesus, as we look at the scripture and think about tonight, help us to understand what it means that you have arrived in our lives and in our world. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

Well, I paid my way through college by working a lot of different jobs, all of which were very boring except for one. For a while I had a job transcribing undercover tapes for the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. It was like the coolest job ever. They would send people into a sting operation wearing a recording device, and then I would transcribe the recordings. There was this one time they'd sent in a former drug dealer who was cooperating with them into a party where guns and drugs were going to be sold and he was supposed to get recording of all of this. But while he was there, he got distracted by a woman and he started flirting with her. And I had to transcribe not just words but every sound. So if they started to kiss, I would have to

figure out how am I going to transcribe kissing sounds and things were heating up and I was getting worried stuff might happen that I didn't know how to spell.

But fortunately, he remembered himself and went back to his assigned duty. It was the weirdest job I had until this one. And believe it or not, I have seen weirder things here. What I liked about that job was it was not boring. I was transcribing action, lots and lots of action. That first Christmas had a lot of action in it because the God who comes to us himself in the person of Jesus at Christmas is a God of action. Grammatically speaking, the word God is a noun, but theologically God is a verb. He has a bias for action. And I think that's different than sometimes how we think of God. I think we maybe think of him as a set of doctrines that we either believe or don't believe. Or maybe we think he's up there somewhere kind of watching us, like we're his reality TV show or something and he's eating popcorn, but he doesn't actually do anything in our world or in our lives.

Or maybe there is a God, but what's that got to do with the problems I have, this relationship that's breaking up or this health problem or financial problem? Or maybe things are going really good. So what do I need God for? What's he for for that? Not to mention the problems in our world like racism and poverty and violence and injustice. I think for a lot of people the question is not so much is God good, it's what is he good for? What is it exactly God that you do? Christmas shows that God is a verb. He acts, he transforms our lives and our world. You can see that by looking at just some of the verbs in some of the verses that we just read. And those verbs in those verses kind of point to what God does, the actions God takes in our lives.

And it says then there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks at night. So that was their job, just doing their job, ordinary day, nothing unusual about it. And then an angel of the Lord appeared to them. The original text was written in Greek and the Greek verb for appeared literally translated is, stood close to them. And that's a verb. At your job or school or retirement community, in your highs and in your lows, in your worries, in your fears, in your doubts, God doesn't just watch passively from up there somewhere. God stands close to you because he loves you and he wants a relationship with you. Not religion with you. Religion is about rituals and that sort of thing. He's not interested in religion. He didn't come to change your religious life. He came to change your real life and he wants a relationship which is why he stands close to you.

But not just that. The text goes on and it says, and the glory of the Lord shown, oh, the glory is fading. The glory of the Lord shown around them and shown is the second verb. God stands close. The glory shown around them. We don't exactly what that means, what it means it was shining all around them. But whatever it was, you can bet it wasn't ordinary. Like when the shepherds went home that night and the Mrs. Shepherds asked, "How was your day, dear?" I'm sure they didn't say, "Oh, same old, same old. Angel showed up, whatever." I'm sure they said, "Actually it was pretty extraordinary." Which is another thing God does, another action he takes. God stands close in our ordinary lives and brings his extraordinary power into them.

Shepherds were just ordinary folk. They were on the lower rung of the social ladder. They weren't the elite. Bethlehem is just this podunk village. Nothing special about it. No elite ever went to Bethlehem.

Jesus was not born in New York. He was born in Hackensack. He went to ordinary people in ordinary places doing ordinary things and brought his extraordinary power. This fall my wife and I went to Europe on an empty nest trip except that my oldest daughter has a built-in sensor that can detect free things like food and free food and free lodging so she invited herself to go with us. So it was an empty nest trip plus the nest, which was awesome. We loved having her with us. In London, we went to an art gallery of a famous art historian, famous art historian being a contradiction in terms, and his name is Philip Mould. And when we're at his gallery, we turned a corner and there he was, Philip Mould himself and the glory of Philip Mould shown around us.

And my wife and I were so excited. We're like, that's Philip Mould. That's Philip Mould. Meanwhile, our daughter was like, you guys are freaks. Okay? This isn't someone super famous. He's just this ordinary guy, is just this ordinary person, but that's kind of like Jesus to a lot of people. He looked ordinary, but he was actually extraordinary because he was God in human form. And to us, he was extraordinary. So the text goes on and it says, then the angel of the Lord said to them do not be afraid. I bring you good news, not bad news, not medium news. Good news. Today in the town of David, a savior has been born to you. Born is a verb and it's the whole point of Christmas. God doesn't watch passively from up there. God came himself in the person of Jesus because he loves you and he wants a relationship with you.

We can't go to him so he has to come to us. He acts. Even the name Jesus is a verb. It means God saves. Starting with saving us from our sin, but not limited to saving us from our sin. And sin is a funny word. It's got a lot of baggage. Originally it was an archery term that meant to miss the bullseye. And that describes me. I miss the bullseye. I don't go to bed every night going, yep, everything perfect, another bullseye. I missed the bullseye of God's intended best. I sin. I'm quite good at it actually. The things I don't want to do, I do. The things I do want to do, I don't do. I mean, if I were a Jedi, there is a 100% chance I would use the force inappropriately.

I have hurt people and I know that that needs to be accounted for. It's in all of us. If someone hurts us, we feel like justice. There needs to be a price paid or there's no justice. It's deep in all of us. And the God who overlooks the ways we hurt each other, that is not a God of justice. So God comes himself in the person of Jesus, dies on a cross. There's another verb. Dies on a cross to pay the price for our sins that deep down we know needs to be paid or there's no justice in the world. And then he was raised from the dead. Justice is served, but mercy wins. And if we accept his sacrifice, we are forgiven, set free of guilt and shame. He did this because he loves you and he wants a relationship with you. It's not about what you have to do for God.

There's not verbs you have to do. God is the verb. He does all of it. It's not about what you have to do for God, it's what he did for us. With Jesus it's not do, it's done. You don't have to do a bunch of religious stuff to get his approval. You don't have to clean up your act or get your life together because in Jesus, God comes to us just as we are, not as we should be, stands close to us, brings his extraordinary into the ordinary parts of our life and saves us. Those are just a few of the verbs God does. And it doesn't stop there because he doesn't just save us from our sins or from difficult situations, but even when our lives are going great, even when we don't have any problems, he doesn't just save us from something, he saves us for a life of meaning, purpose and joy. Even when our lives are great, there's more meaning, purpose, and joy with Jesus.

I think sometimes people imagine that following Jesus is going to be boring. That has not been my experience in my life at all. When I was in eighth grade, the only thing we did all year in our gym class was basketball. That's all we did all year long. And I had not grown yet, so I was basically a hobbit. And so basketball just wasn't going to be my thing. So the coach, the gym teacher, never let me play. He benched me. And that's when I learned that who gets to play is a purely political decision. The coach had his favorites. They were the guys that could shoot and dribble and rebound. And for those purely arbitrary reasons, they got to play and become athletes while I sat on the bench and developed character and became a pastor. I wanted in the action, but I couldn't. He benched me. He benched me so I couldn't be in the action. Jesus doesn't bench anybody. We were made on purpose for purpose and when we live our purpose, we find meaning and joy and wholeness.

I was in Congo and Rwanda this summer and I got to spend some time with a man who I admire a lot named Gilbert. Gilbert's father was killed during the genocide there in 1994 and his mom couldn't take care of him and his siblings, so Gilbert ended up as a kid on the streets begging for food to take back to his siblings. But God did not passively watch that. God acted. A man who Gilbert's father had helped go to school, found Gilbert and as a way of thanking Gilbert's dad who is now dead, this man paid for Gilbert to go to school.

God acted in Gilbert's life through this man. And at that school, Gilbert had a friend who would invite him to join him in church over and over. And Gilbert was like, "No. Why? What good is God going to do? What does God have to do with anything in my life?" But this friend just kept inviting and inviting. Again, God acting, God reaching out to Gilbert through this friend. And so finally Gilbert went to church and the sermon that day was about how God is father to orphans and as a fatherless orphan, that really resonated with him. So he said, "Okay, I'll try this man Jesus and if he disappoints me like everyone else, I'm just going to keep doing my own thing." So he asked Jesus to be his leader and his forgiver. And in Gilbert's words quote, "From that time on, he never left me alone. He stood close to me."

And God sent more people into Gilbert's life who helped him go on to the university and eventually get an MBA. And Gilbert went into business, got married, had kids. He was successful, he was happy, everything was going great. In many ways the story could end right

there. From street kid to successful businessmen. From down and out to up and in. But Jesus had even more for him, even though things were going awesome. Jesus had even more joy, meaning, purpose. So God acted again. And one night Gilbert and his wife saw a news program about the plight of special needs kids in Rwanda, kids with autism, cerebral palsy, these kinds of things. And in a lot of cases their families don't have money to take care of them and there's not a lot of organizations that do that either so a lot of times these kids end up just being abandoned.

Gilbert said in that moment God acted again and gave him a thought that he knew was not his thought and he turned to his wife and he said, "We're going to do something about this." So he started an organization called Love with Actions that helps special needs kids learn everything from how to feed themselves to how to be actively employed. He took the name from a Bible verse that says let us not love one another with words and speech, but with actions because that's how God loved Gilbert. That's how God loves us with actions. And I've been there and it is so moving to see the joy on the kids' face as they learned to do things nobody ever thought that they could do. And the gratitude that the families feel to finally have some help. But also the joy on Gilbert's face.

I mean, does that look like a miserable man to you? Like he just lights up when he is around these kids. Gilbert told me it gives him way more joy doing this than being a successful businessman ever gave him. Tons of joy. He's not doing it out of obligation or duty. He's not doing it to earn God's approval. He already has that. God came to him, stood close to him, transformed an ordinary story of street kids ... There's lots of them there ... from ordinary into something extraordinary and rescued Gilbert and then invited Gilbert into God's activity in the world to rescue others which gives Gilbert genuine joy. He's not benched. He's in the action. Now, I'm not saying that Jesus is going to make you quit your job and start a nonprofit. Probably not. But God will act in your life somehow.

I've seen him. I've seen him transform marriages from broken to beautiful. I've seen him give people whose lives are going great, even more meaning and purpose and joy. I've seen him bring supernatural courage and hope to people in the harshest of circumstances. And when I was an angry atheist, he changed my life and gave me a bigger adventure than I ever would've had if I had just lived my own life my own way and hadn't followed him. He changed my life. He changed Gilbert's life. He can change your life because Jesus is a verb. So if you don't know Jesus, and maybe you're wondering why you're even here tonight other than someone dragged you here or drugged you here or however you got here, I'd encourage you to find out more about Jesus. And if we can help you here, we'd love to do that.

Talk to one of us after the service, maybe a prayer person after the service or join us some Sunday. We are a community of people helping each other experience the power of Jesus. And if you do know Jesus, pay attention to how he's acting in your life, even in that thing that you carried in here tonight that is so hard and so painful. Pay attention to how he's acting even in

that. Just like he acted in Gilbert's very difficult situation, he will act in yours. And when we see what God is doing, it gives us hope. Throughout history there are millions of examples of people who have sacrificed in some way to earn the approval of some god. Lots of sacrificing to earn the approval of some god, but only one God who sacrificed himself for us and that's Jesus. Which is why some of you have heard me say before the old slogan, Jesus is the reason for the season. That is not accurate. That is not accurate.

Yes, he came at Christmas, but the reason he came, the reason for the season is you. He came for you and he stands close and he wants to transform ordinary to extraordinary. And he saves and he heals and he ransoms and he delivers and he renews and he revives and he repairs. He makes everything new because he loves you and he wants a relationship with you. So come all ye faithful and come all ye faithless. Come joyful and triumphant or come sad and despairing. Come with hope, come with hopelessness. Come with your doubts, your anger, your fear. Come with all of your baggage in tow. Come just as you are. Come and see what our God will do.

Jesus, thank you that you are not all talk and no action. Thank you, Lord, that you are the God who acts. You're the God who does. And Jesus, help us to see what you are doing in our lives and we will be grateful. And we will give you all our thanks and all our praise. In your name, Jesus. Amen.

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### **Discussion Questions:**

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*Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.*

**Opening Question:** Looking back, were you able to apply any of the things we talked about last time to your life this week? What did you do? How did it go?

**Scripture Reflection Questions:** Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

**Sermon Reflection Questions:** Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What actions do you see God taking in the Christmas story in Luke 2:1-21? What do some of the verbs in the text tell us about God's activity in our lives and world?
- What has God done in the past or is God doing right now in your life? What action is he taking in your life?

**Closing Question and Application:** Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

**Closing group prayer:** Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.