

Christmas Eve – Luke 2:1-20
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church – Sedona, AZ

The Christmas Message.

"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people."

Good news delivered by an angel? Great joy for all people? Why is an angel of the Lord visiting shepherds at nighttime and telling them, "Do not be afraid?" The last couple of times we heard about angels appearing with messages from God it was to Mary and then Joseph. The messages given to them were also incredible and amazing: Mary, God has chosen you to become the mother of God's Son. Joseph, the woman to whom you are betrothed, is with child from the Holy Spirit. If those messages weren't earth-shattering enough, now another angel appears with a message to the shepherds who are in the fields, watching their flocks by night. Watching for predators. Watching to make sure their sheep stay with the flock. Watching even though they are tired from a long day of shepherding. Having an angel suddenly appear before them must have been bewildering. And surely they were stunned to be recipients of such an awe-inspiring message. Do not be afraid? Why shouldn't they be afraid? Well, for one thing, they were probably too shocked to be afraid; and then they didn't have time to be afraid because, before they could utter a single word, a multitude of the heavenly host suddenly appeared, praising God and proclaiming peace on earth.

Two wonderful and magnificent messages, full of blessing and great mystery were delivered to a group of lowly shepherds out in the middle of nowhere, in the darkness of night. One might expect such a spectacular event to happen in full daylight, amidst powerful and elite leaders of the Roman Empire. One might expect such important news to be delivered to the emperor, Augustus, himself. But, no. The marvelous news of God being born in human form as a vulnerable infant into a peasant family – this good news of great joy - was revealed to a group of nobodies; a group of hired helpers whose place in the class hierarchy was at the very bottom of the social pyramid.¹ God chose these often despised and untrustworthy peasants to accept inexplicable news, seek the newborn king, and bear witness to his reign of peace and joy for all people.²

This astonishing good news would have been challenging to convey not only because the message was blatantly countercultural, but also because, well, who would believe any message from a group of smelly, grubby, lowlife shepherds? Well, apparently many people did believe the good news. Many people held hope for the future even as they lived amidst oppression, violence and terror. Many people over many generations, have had faith that the long awaited Messiah, who had been born as a baby in a barn, was and is the

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2707

² Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh. *Social-Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, second ed. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press (2003), 232.

mighty savior of the world. They didn't exactly know how, but they believed in God's promise delivered through heavenly angels, through obedient shepherds, and through ordinary people, like you and me.

The incredible news - that God chose to become human like us and chose to make us in God's image - is indeed miraculous and incomprehensible. But as a people of faith it is believable because we have experienced God's goodness and loving kindness in our lives. We know that God is present and active in the world through the gift of Jesus because we continue to be recipients of the good news and bearers of the good news. Like the shepherds, we don't exactly know how this is possible, but we believe the message that God is a loving God; that God desires that our lives be filled with joy; that God intends that we live peaceably with one another; and that God longs for all people and all that God creates to be knit together as a new creation through Jesus, God's gift of perfect love.

God coming to us as perfect love in human form, in an imperfect world, is the good news that is intended to bring great joy to all people. But some people are so preoccupied with obtaining power, acquiring prestige, and accumulating possessions, that they are oblivious to the Christmas message.³ Some people, like the religious and political leaders of Jesus' time, challenged the good news, ignored its possibilities, and chose to focus on the immediate,

³ Richard Rohr. *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*. Cincinnati, OH: Franciscan Media (2008), 82.
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yet fleeting, prospect of personal wealth or status at the expense the vast majority of their neighbors. Some people, perhaps like you and me, have a tendency to get distracted by what appears to be the latest idea or innovation conveying power, status, or convenience; or maybe we are just doing our best to get by in a world that seems to be increasingly complex, and manipulated for the benefit of a privileged few. In such circumstances, it's difficult to hear the angels and shepherds witnessing to God's presence among us. It's challenging to experience the good news of great joy. It's hard to see how God offers blessings to all people, at all times, and all places. It's incomprehensible how God's peace on earth is actually a present and future reality. But that is the meaning of The Incarnation. That is the Christmas message.

The message of the angels and the shepherds is that God is with us. God is with us and gladly chooses to reveal Godself to us as a humble, vulnerable, child that we may choose to reveal God's caring, healing, and nurturing love to the world. God's presence with us and in us makes a difference in how we choose to live our lives; in how we make decisions not just for ourselves, but for the sake of all people and all that God creates. God's indescribable glory is revealed through each of us - ordinary people chosen to deliver extraordinary messages - that all may receive and benefit from the great joy of God's saving grace. The messages we are to deliver are faithful responses to the good news that has been shared with us from generation to generation. Good news that

we may have at first pondered in our hearts, like Mary. Good news that we are still trying to make sense of as we discern God's will for us. Good news that inspires hope amidst our waning and wanting for joy and peace in the world. And good news that we not only treasure in our hearts, and appreciate through praise and worship in our faith communities; but good news that we proclaim with a multitude of the heavenly host whenever we reach beyond our tendencies to be self-righteous and judgmental; whenever we advocate for the poor, the lost and lonely, and forgotten; whenever we break through the challenges of systemic sin to restore human dignity to those who have been abused, marginalized, and oppressed. This is the good news that God invites us to help manifest, for in choosing to do ministry in the flesh as Jesus did, we express God's perfect love for all people. Not just the rich, or the poor; but the rich, and the not so rich, and the poor, and the poverty stricken. God chose to be born into this world like us that we may embody the salvific love of Jesus through our very being. This is the Christmas message delivered to you this night, in this humble place, amidst a multitude of the heavenly host:

- You are chosen every day to be born anew through God's redeeming grace.
- And you are chosen every day to be God's good news of great joy to all people.
- May all of us in our daily lives reveal the wonderful Christmas message of God's perfect love, as we seek to bring peace on earth and goodwill to all.

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