

7pm Final Christmas Sermon

Merry Christmas! What a blessing it is to be gathered in community to mark and perhaps ponder in our hearts not just good news, but Good news of Great Joy, in fact, the best news EVER, and right on time!

Unto us is given, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. A savior born of a woman, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. If you've found yourself, at any time this year, stumbling spiritually, or heavy hearted or distracted with worry or fear or grief or wonder. Or if you find yourself living with a mix of it right now -We have good news of great joy. We have a savior!

Tonight we celebrate the astonishing fact of his birth, his modest arrival, and the remarkable and familiar people who are central to our understanding and our practiced faith.

The first folks who received the gob-smacking news of Jesus' birth were shepherds, which is a surprising, if not slightly scandalous fact. Angels did not herald Jesus' birth in the temple, or in palaces or places of warmth and luxury.

The angels and the choir of heaven announced the earth-shattering event to men sleeping in a field.

Shepherds, in ancient times were among the lowest and most suspect of our scriptural siblings. For the most part, they were poor, often hired laborers rather than owners of the livestock they kept safe. They lived WITH animals, slept outdoors on the edges of villages and town. Once upon a time, shepherds were so marginalized that, lumped in with tax collectors and gamblers, their statements or testimony were excluded from court. By definition they were thought to be untrustworthy.

Yet, this is the group to which the angel of the Lord chose to appear directly... Not through a mediator, not to high holy authorities who then proclaimed it to them, but directly to this rag tag group of hired subsistence laborers, whose jobs were critically important for the ancient economy, but whose social standing was suspect and lack of religious practices made them outcasts.

And the blessing for each of us is that the shepherds listened and followed through on the angels' pronouncements.

These young men, went to Bethlehem and had to knock on doors and talk with people in the streets, continuously repeating the other-worldly stuff the angel of the lord had told them. Eventually, they must have knocked on the same Inn door that had turned Mary and Joseph away.

Did the Shepherds' search take hours or days? We have no idea, but tonight we give thanks for their perseverance. We celebrate Christmas because they continued on, until they reached that same barn, with cattle, sheep and Mary and Joseph and the little baby Jesus.

The shepherds must have been excited upon finally discovering that what the Angels said was true. And here, the story includes part of our inheritance because Luke's gospel tells us that Mary took great comfort in hearing what the Shepherds said.

The Shepherds confirmed what both Mary and Joseph had been told. Until the shepherds arrived, we can imagine that young Mary was probably exhausted if not bewildered by the very ordinary birth of an extraordinary baby – our savior. Yet we know that the Shepherd's witness to Mary is what gave her comfort – “Oh”, perhaps she thought, I was not dreaming all of this. This baby IS something special, I **have said** a divine yes to God and the world. OH!

So this Christmas, may we be grateful to the shepherds, for passing along to us the great news that We have a savior. He has been born. He lived among us, died for us, and is Emmanuel – God with us, right now and always. And nothing can separate us from this savior.

From what are we to be saved? From our fears. From evil in the world and from our lesser angels, from the bad decisions, social and political distractions, a diagnosis or an addiction? All of it. Jesus' birth does not mean that those pains, losses or fears are erased. The good news of great joy is that God is with us. Our companion on the way.

God has come into the world as it is, a world divided by war and famine. A world of exhaustion and uncertainty, poverty and vulnerability, a world with fear and displacement and plenty. God is with us in the heartache of loving people we cannot protect and grieving things we alone cannot fix.

Our savior does not shout instructions or smite people from afar (as much as our prayers might find some of these petitions creeeeeeeeeping in 😊)

Emmanuel, God with us means that we are never alone or abandoned. The fact of Christ's birth does not mean that we are numb to suffering, but rather that our savior stands shoulder to shoulder with us and walks through it with us.

Our savior does not segregate us or remove us from this world, but rather teaches us how to live faithfully within it. Jesus' light and companionship show us what the transformative power of love is. Embodied love and the light of Christ changes EVERYTHING.

May this Christmas be for each of us a time of spiritual replenishment and wonder. We owe a debt of spiritual and faithfilled gratitude to the shepherds, and perhaps this is the Christmas we feel called to follow their excellent examples.

May we not stay stuck in our own metaphorical fields, speaking only with our friends whose experiences and lives mirror our own. Let us strike out and meet others – seeing where the face of God is most obvious to behold, and making ourselves available for our neighbors who may make the light of Christ slightly more challenging to discern.

Let us inwardly digest – take on-board the angels' good advice and set aside our fear so that we can fully experience the gift of the arrival of our savior – the Prince of Peace. Let us, even if for a few minutes during this service – ground ourselves in the great joy that offers us peace, that challenges us to behave in counter-cultural and always loving ways.

Perhaps the invitation of this holy night is that we practice being Shepherds in a world that needs them – Not shepherds of sheep—but shepherds of kindness. Shepherds making kindness loud. Shepherds of welcome. Shepherds of hope. May we become the Shepherds of noticing when someone feels left out or stepping in to help someone who is lost or struggling. May we take on the call to be a shepherd who bravely shows up, even when we don't have all the answers.

Shepherds don't fix everything but they stay close. They keep watch, they tend their charges. And if on this holy night, you are unclear about how you might go about accessing and engaging your inner Shepherd – we have a wonderful model to follow. Good news of Great Joy, Jesus, our savior is born!

Amen+

