

Christmas Eve, 2016
Luke 2:1-20
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It began as an ordinary enough night, as the shepherds kept an eye out for predators that could spook the flock, which had just started to settle down for the evening. It wasn't an easy or glamorous way to make a living, being a hired hand caring for someone else's livestock. It was the kind of work you took when you couldn't find any other kind of work, or didn't have the skills to do anything else. It was menial, hard and dirty labor. Necessary and thankless work. Shepherds were not at all held in high esteem; they had a reputation for being dishonest, thieves even. It was difficult for them to be an active part of their faith community. There was no way they could go to synagogue with any regularity or make the yearly pilgrimage to the Temple. Their responsibility was out in the field with the sheep. But at least on this night none of them was out there by himself. They took turns, watching for several hours at a time, so each of them could get a little sleep.

The air was quiet and still, until all it once it wasn't anymore. Something – or someone – was suddenly there with them. A quiet and powerful presence surrounding them with a blinding light, so bright their hands flew to their faces to shade their eyes from its brilliance. They were all wide awake now – startled, terrified of this sudden burst of immediate divine presence – when the one appearing before them spoke: *“DO NOT BE AFRAID, FOR I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF A GREAT JOY FOR ALL PEOPLE”*. . . The angel's message was simple and direct: One has been born / for you/ in the city of David / today/ a Savior / who is Christ the Lord. And here's what you'll find: a child, wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.

In the next instant, the shepherds were surrounded by a whole host of heavenly beings, their voices tremendous, the wild light erupting around them as they praised and sang: “Glory to God in the highest, and peace to God's people on earth.” And as quickly and unexpectedly as they had appeared, the whole heavenly company was gone.

The shepherds stared at one another for the longest time. Did we just see and hear what we think we saw and heard? What do we do now? These kinds of appearance don't happen to nobodies like shepherds, especially while they're at work. To the faithful religious in the Temple, maybe. But us - why us? Why did we get this message? What in the world should we do?

“They went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.”

I wonder what Joseph and Mary felt and thought when these unexpected rough-looking visitors turned up, so soon after the baby is born? Well someone let the nameless, smelly shepherds in, and they pour out the story of what had just happened to them out in the field. "An angel with good news for all, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. You will find a baby, lying in a manger."

The parents are amazed at the story the shepherds tell them. Mary, tired and spent from labor, hears every word and keeps the shepherds' story to ponder later. God has interrupted the shepherds' simple and ordinary lives and as they leave the scene of this new family at the manger, they go away changed men, even if only for a little while. They go on their way, praising God for this amazing thing which they have heard and seen.

It's an amazing and almost unbelievable story isn't it, that God stepped physically into human time and history, and came in the most helpless and vulnerable form imaginable, a naked newborn clothed in human flesh. He came into this world in a rush of water, blood, sweat, and tears. He came from a mother's body, where he had been formed, fed, nurtured, and protected for nine months. And now he is here. A holy infant whose cries say only two things: "I am here. I need you."

Over and over his cries, his presence will say, "I am here. I need you." I need you to hold me, draw me in love close to your breast, to your heart. I need you to look and really see me. I need you to listen for my cries and coos, and after a while, my desires and dreams. I need you to know that I am real and I am here with you. I have come *FOR* you.

How do we begin to fathom a God who makes God's self so small and humble, so vulnerable, and dependent? What kind of God freely lays the Divine self in the hands of human beings? What kind of God does that? A God of pure love and a God full of hope. A self-giving God who has been forever reaching out to all of creation to reconcile and make us whole again. A God so compassionate that God is willing to be right here with humanity in our suffering and sin, our pain, sadness and sorrow, as well as our laughter and joy.

What should we do on this holy night? Why not take our place right behind the shepherds and once again run to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come to pass. From our daily lives, we run to see the new, promising and hope-filled One born in Bethlehem.

From our obligations and responsibilities, we run to the strength of Emmanuel, God with us.

From our fears of loss and instability, from anguish and despair over the state of our weary and war-torn world, we run to the eternal treasure that will never fade or lose its value, its staying resurrection power.

From the darkness in which we live our lives, we run to the Son of God, who knows each of our names, who calls each of us by name, and whose very call will empower us to follow.

Tonight we go with haste and –
From sorrow we run to joy.
From hatreds we run to love.
From antagonisms we run toward peace.
From sickness we run to the healer.
From sin we run to the Savior.
From death we run to life.

God's quiet revolution has begun, and will continue to be made known through us. The call is to step away from position, power, possessions, and self-protection, and join the little and lowly, the least and lost, the outsider, the despised, and those the world deems of no account. We have received the good news of great joy, for all people. A Savior and Lord - God come to be with us and for us. For all of us. Listen, friends. Do you hear it? God is still whispering, "I love you. I am here. I need you."

Take the Holy One to your heart, then, and be at peace. Love and hope are born once again for you and for all the world, now and forever. Amen.