

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Merry Christmas!

So, how are we all doing tonight? Are you ready for a wonderful, even miraculous Christmas?

I hope so. Within the church we have been preparing ourselves ever since Thanksgiving as we made our way through Advent. And now, here we are. It just flies by. We were there when Gabriel met with Mary and she accepted the call to be the Christ bearer to the world. We witnessed an angel come to Joseph in a dream and he faithfully took Mary as his wife and agreed to be the human father to God's Son.

John the Baptist has been born and is now about six months old. The census has been called by Rome. Mary and Joseph, after a tiring journey, have arrived to Bethlehem and now, having found no accommodations available, they found a spot for the night in a local stable.

The star is bright in the sky over Bethlehem, the wise men are on their way, and the shepherds are in the field keeping watch. The music of all the animal sounds in the stable and the fields fill the night. It has all come together. Everything is in place. The day is here and so are we.

And then it happens. The time has come. Christ is born. An angel comes to the shepherds proclaiming good news of great joy and the heavenly chorus sings praise for what God has done that now overflows out of heaven. It truly is an amazing night and the world will never be the same again. The world has never been the same.

Of all the characters that played a role on that night and the nights leading up to that night, Mary, Joseph, the angels, John leaping in Elizabeth's womb, Zechariah losing and later regaining his sight, the shepherds and the rest, I always seem to be drawn to the Shepherds. Maybe it is because they remind me so much of us, of humanity. They were the first ones to receive the good news and they were the first ones to take action by going to see the new born.

They were sitting around their home that night. That is what our passage said. They were living in the fields. Living with their flocks. That was their home. They were out there, hunkered down, probably around a fire, keeping a vigilant watch for any and all dangers that may be present. I'm thinking that they were probably night-owls because that is when the dangers of their world came out, in the darkness. They were constantly on alert knowing that it is in the darkness that the threats abound.

So, that night, in their living room, in the midst of the darkness, the angel appeared and the light shone. Can you imagine what that had to have been like? They were in the darkness, watching for evil, clinging to the small glimmer of their fire, ready to act but hoping and praying that they would not need to, that they and those they guarded would not be overtaken by the threats that lay just outside of their vision made possible from the man made illumination. They

had to have been on edge, don't you think? It was a dangerous and troubled world in which they lived.

And then, in a moment their whole world changed. Their lives changed. The light shone and everything looked different in the light of God's angel.

Their first reaction was one of startled fear. Their lives had been focused on the constant threat around them. They were on defense, watching, ready to attack, but God brought a new perspective. He brought a new clarity and a new way of living. "Don't be afraid," the angel said. There is no need for that anymore. This is for you! Everything that is taking place tonight is for you. Unto you this day in the City of David the one who will bring clarity, and perspective, and light for all time has come into the world...for you, and for all people. Don't be afraid. Your reality is changing. A new reality is here. The true reality is being re-established. Take hold of it and find the joy and peace that has been missing in the world.

I think that the story of the shepherds, in many ways, is also our story. So many people live lives of fear. Fear of attack. Fear of not having what we want or going without. On edge, divided into smaller groups, around the glimmers of our fires, afraid of anything that lies beyond our vision. But that is not the life that God wants for us and is offering us. That is not the life that God is calling us to.

Instead of division, the Christ who was born today, invites us to embrace unity and fellowship. Instead of angst, and sorrow, and self-focus, the baby, whose birth changed the world for all time, brings to us peace, and joy, and a heart for others. Instead of fear, God, who shines the light that defeats the darkness of our embattled world, shows us how we will be able to live in a world ruled by love, if we are willing to join Him and follow Him in that.

And so, after you have left here tonight, and you are sitting around in your living rooms in your homes tomorrow, remember that fear does not rule our lives. Joy does. Love does. Peace does, at least they can because the light of Christ has come into the world and through that all things are made new for those who choose him.

I want to finish with a picture for you to keep with you when things in the world seem extra troubling. It was a scene in the Christmas special, *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. The scene takes place at that critical moment when Charlie Brown brings back to the stage for the Christmas pageant that puny, scraggly, pathetic little tree that stood so much in contrast to the values of how so many have come to embrace Christmas. After he was roundly criticized and laughed at for his bone-head move, a hurt and confused Charlie Brown turns to Linus and asks him, in light of his experience, he asks him to tell him what then is Christmas really all about. And with that mission Linus goes to center stage and shares the true Christmas story as told in

the same passage that we all heard tonight. But that is not the picture that I want us to take with us.

As shares the Gospel of Luke, as he reaches a particular point in the passage, he does something that he has never done before and that is what I want us to remember. Most people miss it or think that it is unimportant even if they do catch it, but it is a profound statement of faith that came from Charles Shultz's heart. At the moment Linus says, "Do not be afraid, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people." At that moment Linus drops his blanket. He drops his worldly security blanket. As he embraces the promise of God that was being made alive for them in that moment, Linus sets aside, at least for a moment, the false worldly security of that piece of cloth and puts his trust in the promise of our loving God. Fear no longer ruled his life. It had been replaced with Joy and Peace in the proclamation of this very day.

Tomorrow morning, as we awake to presents under our trees and stockings filled to the brim, be sure to give thanks for the true gift that we all receive on this day. And then, as we go into the coming year, maybe we can set down our blankets, or help others set down theirs, so that we all can take up the promise of Christ for our lives and for the world.

Fear not. Joy has come. Christ is in our midst. Alleluia.

Amen