

Christmas Eve, Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Kimberly Glenn
December 24, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, whose light guides us and leads us to abundant life.

It's been a pretty chaotic year here in America with a hyper contentious political season. Our media, that used to be our source of reliable news, has turned out not to be so reliable after all. We are eager to find news sources that are trustworthy. After so much news that we'd rather not hear, wouldn't we like to be the recipients of some good news for a change? When was the last time you heard some good news? Well you've come to the right place to hear a good message. Christmas is the time to hear not just good news, but the very best news. Good news is always a plus, but not all good news measures up to the kind of good news that the shepherds heard from an angel. Out in the midst of the fields where the shepherds were minding sheep, an angel suddenly appeared. It was probably quite surprising to see a stranger walk out into the field. They may have wondered if this was a thief trying to steal away some of the sheep. They may have felt alarmed and defensive. But the angel said, "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."

I wonder if that message satisfied them. I wonder if they thought that this angel could be relied upon to be telling the truth. The angel went on to tell them how to know they had found the Christ child and where to look for him. This child was not just any newborn, mind you, but this child, who was the long promised Messiah, would be found lying (of all places) in a feeding trough, a manger.

These shepherds were just regular people like many of us. They had limited resources, more limited than most of us, and limited access to power. They were regular human beings but they were not regular in terms of their status in society. Shepherds were considered the lowest of the low. They were employed but they were virtually homeless men, men who made their

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home among the flocks that they watched. They were considered so meaningless by society that they weren't even required to be counted in the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. They were homeless, they had no property and so were thought not to be contributors to society. I imagine they were probably sorely afraid they would never hear good news. They could use a change in their life circumstances, a change that a Messiah might bring into their world. This news, for them, was very good news indeed. They trusted the angel's message and went to seek this special child.

Have you ever received good news that changed your circumstances? I got some good news last Friday that changed my circumstances. Most of you know that churches have to raise money each year to fund their operations. That money does not come from sales of products. It comes from pledges from the people who attend that church, the people whose lives are potentially enriched and changed for the better by that church. Each year it is a nail biter to see if the pledges that come in to support the church match the expenses required to keep the lights on and the programs running. Each year I have to think about the cuts to the budget that might need to be made. While that is not nearly the same as living in the poor and powerless circumstances as the shepherds, it is a stressful situation that can weigh on one's mind and affect one's health. When I got a text on Friday from our parish administrator saying that we had just received a few last minute pledges that allowed us to meet our goal, I felt a wave of relief, a moment of gladness, a welcome feeling of thanksgiving. I could relax a bit. I could breathe freely again. I imagine the thought of what a Messiah might bring to them and their world made the shepherds feel suddenly hopeful about their life. They had been waiting a long time for good news like this.

Mary and Joseph were probably desperate that night for good news, too. It certainly had NOT been good news when they found out they would have to travel from Nazareth all the way

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to Bethlehem. The timing could not have been worse for them. Mary was in her ninth month of pregnancy. I had three children and can recall just how uncomfortable that ninth month of pregnancy can be. I'm a little person and carrying around a big baby inside me was more and more exhausting as the due date got closer. I don't know if Mary suffered through that last month like I did, but I can imagine that it was really uncomfortable for her to ride on the back of a donkey all the way to Bethlehem. She had to sit on the donkey's spine and the road had to be bumpy. Ouch.

When they finally arrived in Bethlehem Joseph found that any rooms that might have been available had already been rented! Mary and Joseph must have felt so frustrated and tired and hungry. They found a spot to settle in for the evening in a space that was typically reserved for livestock, for the cattle and the donkeys. They were probably so exhausted that they were happy to find any shelter. Mary could climb off of the donkey and sit under a roof protected from the weather and from all the chaos of the crowds.

When I went to Israel in 2013 the first holy site we visited was Bethlehem. Our guide took us to a location that resembled the kind of place that Mary and Joseph may have stopped for the night. It was not a shed like so many have imagined over the years. It was a shelter formed out of rock on a hillside. Our guide told us that this shelter was like a place where people would have sheltered their livestock while they stayed in the comfort of an inn. The site he showed us was located not far from a shepherd's field. The field was visible from the shelter. You could imagine that in the quiet of the night, the shepherds might have even been able to hear, however faintly, the first cry of the baby Jesus being born.

They wouldn't have had to wonder if what they heard was a human baby or a lamb's cry because the angel had told them that the baby was near. They came upon the shelter where the

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cry was coming from and there was the child they were searching for. The baby looked just like the angel had told them it would, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Mary and Joseph must have been surprised that the shepherds had found them. They couldn't have expected any visitors. Who would think to look for them among the animals? The shepherds told them about the message they had gotten from the angel, and that they had been told that this child was the savior of all people, ALL people, all of humankind forever.

The shepherds saw the Christ child and believed. Their world, their possibilities were about to change. Today in this world knowing this child, knowing this person Jesus Christ, continues to open the door to the power of the Trinity.

Today and tomorrow we celebrate that this child was born, that God loved us so much that he gave us the special gift of Jesus. Until only recently I wondered why we shower people we love with gifts. You know that feeling, when you love someone so much that you just feel the urge to give them something valuable? Well, I think that is how God feels about us. He loves us so much that he gave the most valuable thing in his possession to us.... Himself, in the form of a human baby. We humans tend to lavishing material gifts on people thinking that is the most we can do for them, the more gifts the better, the more expensive the better. But the truth is that we should probably consider God's action. In giving himself to be with us, walk among us and to cherish presence with us as the greatest gift. Maybe the best gift that we can give to the people we love is the gift of ourselves, the gift of our presence and our love. And that my friends is the good news. It's the very best news. Amen.