

December 13, 2020 The Terrified Servants Luke 2:8-20

Dearly Beloved;

Here we are on the 3rd Sunday in Advent, and it could not seem more like an untraditional Advent season, leading to a different kind of Christmas, if we had planned this. New phrases abound. We self-isolate. We socially distance. We wear masks. And we seem to be constantly washing our hands. This time of year, even more than Easter, just seems to be so different. There is a song I keep hearing as part of a commercial on television, "Maybe this year, God will appear, Maybe this Christmas." There is a blessing nestled at the heart of Covid-19 ridden 2020. There is a lot less distraction, it seems to me, as we approach Jesus Birthday party.

In fact the one thing that no one can take away from us, is that we do remember, what this time of the year is all about; not the parties, or the gifts, or the sentimentality, (although I really enjoy Dicken's, A Christmas Carol, and Miracle On 134th Street, preferably in black and white), but Jesus is the reason for the season. Somehow it seems easier to remember that this year, every day, as we roll toward the 24th and 25th. I want to share with you that Rev. Rebekah, my daughter and the minister of Graceview Presbyterian Church in Etobicoke, and I are planning a joint devotional for Christmas Eve. It will be posted to her church's website and to that of St. Andrew's. I hope you will take time to watch us if you are on the internet. And remember you don't have to watch it on the eve of the 24th if you are with family, consider doing so on the day itself. May God bless you

as we continue to approach Christmas with Covid-19 in the area around us.

The late Walter Cronkite was the master of newscasts and special events, some of them tragic. I will never forget seeing him breaking down on camera when he announced the death of President John F. Kennedy. Walter also hosted a history program called "YOU ARE THERE." He took us on the spot and up to date, when Julius Caesar was assassinated. And to the volcanic eruptions that caused the death of Atlantis. And the burning of Rome in the time of Nero. Our Christmas celebrations unfold in that spirit, that we may grasp something of what it was like to be there with Mary and the angel, with the holy family in Bethlehem.

We have been looking at the servants of God involved in the Christmas history. The prophets who foretold his birth, including Isaiah "the willing servant of God." Mary, with her questions, her doubts and fears, but nonetheless, the obedient servant of God. Joseph is remembered for his reluctance, but he served God wonderfully, after being visited by the angel in a dream. Today we turn to the Shepherds who were working the night shift out on the hills that surround Bethlehem.

In 2015, as our tour bus approached Bethlehem I was surprised to see a Ford half ton on a hill top, surrounded by a number of men in modern dress, watching over flocks of sheep and goats. The tour guide pointed them out to us and

reminded us that seeing them is an every day experience when visiting Bethlehem. Times change but some things remain the same. The night on which Jesus was born, there were shepherds out on those hills, in the fields watching over their flocks.

And it was while they were working the late shift, in the midst of the darkness of a winter's night, the angel of the Lord appeared, and they were terrified as the glory of God's presence lit up the night. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid." Because they were very much afraid, terrified. Light in the midst of darkness. It's not supposed to occur. An angel of God...and they who know so well, how unclean they are because of their work with the animals, expect that someone is going to get vaporized, by judgmental wrath, and are surprised that they of all people should be the recipients of good news.

The shepherds were unclean. Remember Isaiah's words when he beheld the vision that was part of his heavenly calling? "Woe is me for I am a man of unclean lips, in the midst of a people of unclean lips." And the angel cleansed him with a coal from the alter, that did not hurt, but brought an intense experience of excitement to him. As Luke describes for us the experience of the Shepherds the same kind of transformation takes place. They are sinful men. As am I. As are you. As are we all. And yet God, the One and Only, Almighty God, chooses to touch the earth, to come among us, to give to us a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

The gift of Christmas is Jesus, come for all the people, and all the people groups. He is not just yours, or mine, or ours. The angel proclaims that Jesus is born and is for the saving of “all the people.” Jesus is good news to the whole world. For all that we see around us that appears to us to be wrong, sickness, death, the brokenness of humanity, when we are in it up to our neck, Jesus is the good news that brings hope, that causes love to break out and become a force that changes the way people see people, and some of them really do see God.

The shepherds are the minimum wage workers of their time. They are as common as the soil and the grass that grows on those Bethlehem hills, providing nourishment for sheep and goats. But in the economy of God, it is to those common folk, the news is announced. Jesus is born in Bethlehem, the city of David. And here is where the servant of God thing, changes their way of life. There is a concert that erupts in the sky over those dark hills of Bethlehem. A host of angels appear with the one angelic messenger (which really means with the “message carrying messenger.”) They praise God. They announce peace. They bless the shepherds. It’s a miracle!

And then the angels depart. The hillside once again becomes dark. But nothing is the same. These shepherds start talking about what they have seen, and what they have heard, and they get goosebumps and excited, and they come to a consensus. They should leave the sheep and the goats and the

hillside and they should go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, “which the Lord has told them about.” Notice that: they aren’t going to Bethlehem to see if it’s true. They are going into the city to see what God has revealed to them. They leave the hillside with a certainty of what they are going to see. Because... because God has told them what is going on down there at the stable, near the inn.

Sherry Mayhew, our Choir Director, taught us a song called, “Run Shepherds, Hurry To Bethlehem.” And Luke tells us they hurried. They were not being cool as they went into the city. They are hurrying, scurrying to Bethlehem. “And they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in a manger.” Can’t you hear one of them saying, “Will you look at that!” And as a crowd gathers, because it is not every day that a baby gets born in a stable, these common, once terrified shepherds boldly bubble away telling everybody what the angel told them about this child out on the hills with the sheep and the goats. The Christmas evangelists, (people who share the good news of God) are those shepherds who were terrified to be caught unawares by angels of the Lord. They cannot contain their joy. And their eagerness to share is the singular reason we know what we find in Luke’s account of the birth of the baby in Bethlehem.

Now that is a good story, A beautiful story but there is another image that Luke shares with us that could have only come from Mary and Joseph and some of the other witnesses of the shepherds performance at the stable. People are amazed

at what the shepherds had to say. That is the word used in Luke 2:18 “amazed.” My Oxford Dictionary tells me that word means “Overwhelmed with wonder.” Apparently these common shepherds were marvelous communicators. There was more than just a little joy at the stable.

And there is another comment in Luke about Mary. She “treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Pieces of a puzzle. She saw the expressions on the faces of those shepherds from the hills. Their excitement, their joy, their bubbling with new...life. And angels, a whole choir. For close to 3 decades she weighs, and thinks about those shepherds, their testimony, their joy, their unworldly peace.

One more detail. There came a moment when someone said, “Hey guys, I think we should get back to work.” Luke tells us they went back to the hills, the flocks, their ordinary duty. But...they did not go silently into that good night. They are said to have gone, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard, and all that they had seen, because it was just as the angels had said.

Christmas Day is not common. Christmas Eve, is filled with excitement. Those terrified shepherds have left their mark on the most wonderful time of the year. Terrified? Yes they were. Servants of God? In every way.

Let us pray;

O God as we take one step nearer the celebration of the birth of your Son, Jesus, overwhelm us with wonder at the details of HIS birth. Touch us with Joy. Grant us your precious gift of peace. And cause us to bubble with glorifying and praising YOU for preparing us for the journey of faith. Amen