

## *Christmas Eve, 2016*

Welcome to our Christmas Eve Service as we come together to celebrate and commemorate the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus the Christ.

Last Sunday in our morning worship, we spent some time looking at Joseph's story, as told in Luke 1, with the messenger coming to Joseph in a dream to assure him that everything would be OK, that God was in control, and that Joseph should take Mary as his wife, despite any concerns Joseph might have.

Tonight the scripture in the Gospel according to Luke is familiar to many of us, as we visit the shepherds, camping on the hillside, watching their sheep. Again, an angel of the Lord appears to them, saying, "Fear not! For behold, I bring you good news of great joy. A Savior has been born to you, who is The Messiah."

Have you ever wondered what you would have done had you been one of those shepherds? Can you imagine the whole night sky lighting up with the radiance of the "heavenly hosts"? It might be hard for some of you to envision since many of us never experience complete darkness anymore. But from total and complete, black as pitch, darkness to a glaring radiance that is blinding, in a nano-second...and music, and singing, and instructions...it is more than our human minds can comprehend. We want to think that this could still happen, that Angels still show up, that God still speaks to the lowliest of humanity, that God is still with us. After all, isn't that what Christmas is all about...Immanuel, God is with us?

However, suppose something like this did happen to you. Would you tell anybody? Who would believe it? Would you be concerned that folks would think you had lost all your senses, gone completely crazy?

A friend shared this story with me. I think it describes how we often feel when God shows up and shows off, in our presence.

A young man went to Wednesday night Bible study, during which there was discussion about listening to the messengers that God sends into the lives of biblical disciples. After the study, several went to have coffee and dessert where the discussion continued. Some wondered if God ever sent messengers or angels anymore. Others shared they did not believe in such happenings. As Ben got into his car, he prayed, "God, if you still speak to people, please speak to me."

As he drove toward home, his mind continued to think about how God might use him to accomplish God's plan in our world. Suddenly, Ben's mind wandered, "Stop, and get a gallon of milk." That was strange! Ben did not think he needed milk. But again, the thought, even stronger this time, "Stop, and get a gallon of milk." Aloud Ben said, "God, is that you?" No response. "OK, Lord, I'll stop. If it's not you, I'm really going to look stupid."

Wanting to be faithful, Ben turned into the next super market, went inside, bought a gallon of milk and returned to his car. Continuing on the route to his home, Ben thought, "Turn into Seventh Street." What? Seventh Street? I'm not familiar with Seventh Street. Continuing on, passed Seventh Street the thought was even stronger...Turn down Seventh Street. So Ben turned around, found Seventh Street and turned down the unfamiliar street. It wasn't the worst part of town, but the mix of abandoned, overgrown factories and small, run-down houses, caused Ben some concern. Every house was dark. Not a creature was stirring from the looks of things. Then he thought, "Stop here!" Really? There were no lights on in the houses on either side of the street. These people are all asleep, and if I go up to a house and wake them, they are not going to be very happy with me.

However, even as he thought these thoughts, he was getting out of his car, and making his way up the darkened walkway. As Ben reached the porch, he could hear some shuffling on the other side of the door. He knocked on the door, afraid of the response he would receive. More shuffling, then a gruff voice, "Who is it? What do you want?" And the door flung open.

Saying nothing, Ben thrust the gallon of milk toward the owner of the gruff voice. Obviously surprised, the voice turned, practically running down the hall, he handed the gallon of milk to a young woman holding a crying infant. With tears streaming down his face, the man's voice softly uttered, "It's been a hard month with several big bills, and we ran out of money and have no milk for the baby. We were just praying for God to show us how to get milk for our baby. Thank you!" And from the other room, a soft female voice added, "I asked for an angel. Are you an angel?"

Ben, tears streaming down his face, took out his wallet, removed all the cash he had and thrust it into the hand of the man standing in the doorway. "Merry Christmas" he said as he went to his car. In his car, he bowed his head and called aloud, "Dear God, I know you still answer prayers and I am fully convinced of your love and guidance. I give you my life, and I fully trust in you."

Tonight we are the shepherds...we are in fields. We have been sent to the fields to tend the sheep of His flock. There are others out there...dangers lurking at every turn. Wolves, lions, tigers and bears...ready to strike. It's dark in this world we live in. Too many dangers in the darkness.

God sends Angels to us...messengers saying, "Fear Not! For behold I bring you GOOD NEWS! Unto you is born this night, a child who is Christ the Lord."

The birth of this child is the fulfillment of all that had been promised. The Prophets foretold it. We have experienced the birth of Christ in our lives and hearts in so many miraculous ways.

**I invite you to also hear these words as they come to us from Isaiah 11:**

***"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."***

Tonight is not like any other night. Tonight the light shines in darkness, dangerous animals, once enemies can now be friends...and a little child leads us all.