

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

December 20, 2009 Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 2: 8-14

Christmas Messengers: the Shepherds

So here we are at the last of our sermon series of four sermons on Christmas Messengers, in which we've looked at the role that angels play in the Christmas Story. We've seen how important they are in furthering God's plan for the world as He not only sends His son to be born, but as He Himself is born. No small event!

All of history turns on God being born as a human being – incomprehensible for those of us who've known about it for 2,000 years, let alone for those who were witnesses at the time! And so God sends his messengers to the key players to bring them along as participants in his plan.

First Zechariah and Elizabeth who give birth to John the Baptist (Jesus' cousin who starts preaching about Jesus' coming to prepare people for him) then Mary is visited by Gabriel who tells her straight out what God is doing in and with her. And then Joseph needs to be convinced to hang in there with Mary and so an angel visits him in a dream.

Now lastly, the angels (and this is the first time we get more than one) appear to shepherds nearby.

Now the shepherds, for real, were nothing like the shepherds on our Christmas cards and in our crèche scenes. Being a shepherd was the lowliest job you could have. It was hard, rough, dirty work, day and night – taking care of smelly, some would say stupid animals. There was the risk of being attacked by wolves and other predators.

If Cable TV existed back then, shepherds might have their own reality show, just like the ice road truckers, the lumberjacks and the fishermen. They'd certainly be on Mike Rowe's *Dirty Jobs* show.

And yet God sends the birth announcement cards to the shepherds first. This amazing thing has happened in town and God sends his messenger out to the fields to tell the shepherds. Interesting... Why? We wonder...

Why not tell the Temple priests or the kings? Jesus the Messiah, the Savior who was promised to establish the glory of Israel and David has been born. You'd think God would want to get the word out, get everyone on board by telling those in religious / political authority.

But we see this consistently with God – He comes to ordinary folk to accomplish his purposes on earth. God works at a grassroots level – not from the top down, but from the bottom up. In Mary’s song (that we sang) last week – she says, “God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.”

That’s how God operates and how he will operate through Jesus.

In the meantime, he’s got to get the word out, and so the angel goes out to the shepherds nearby. And once again, the response to the angel? FEAR. I love the old King James translation, “They were sore afraid.”

And of course, they have every reason to be! An angel is probably the last thing they expected to encounter that night. But there they are, receiving the most famous message in the Bible:
Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

And just in case the shepherds think this is indigestion rather than a visit from Almighty God, the angel gives them a sign. (Not the star, that’s for the Wise Men who come later in the story.) Their sign is the real thing:

You shall find the child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

As I said in the other sermons, when God is doing great things, angels are involved. Most of the time, God works through human beings, but when it is the fullness of time, when the history of the world is going to be changed, angels are needed.

They bring messages from God and make sure things go as planned. And here, we see what angels do best, what they’re doing most all the time when they’re not appearing to us. They join together in the most pure, exalted glorious song of praise we can imagine:

Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace, good will to all people.

They are giving the shepherds a glimpse of heaven that living human beings never get to see. Imagine these men hearing the songs of angels amidst their “dirty jobs” in the fields! It must have been more uplifting than we could imagine!

This is what God does – he takes the lowest and lifts them up to the highest heaven. And the highest people, Emperor Augustus, King Herod, Chief Priests go on with the daily business of their ordinary lives with no idea of what has happened – that the messiah, the savior of the world has been born.

The souls of the lowly shepherds are lifted to the highest heights by angels; they get the good news that shakes heaven and earth. And all of a sudden, life is changed for these men – they leave their sheep behind and go to find this messiah.

And there he is, just as the angel said, wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

Life is indeed changed for them – the glory of the Lord does not keep them in the fields, it causes them to witness a miracle. And as they leave, they go off praising and glorifying God for all they'd seen.

You could say that the shepherds are the first evangelists! They are overcome with what they've seen and they have to share it. Their joy cannot be contained; there's simply nothing else to do, the word has to go out!

And so these shepherds become role models for us. The joy of Christmas is experiencing the birth of the messiah, the savior of not only Israel, but of all humanity. And not just in the story of the season, but in our daily lives as well.

When we are low in spirit, the message of Christmas, the REAL message of Christmas can lift us up. When life seems ordinary, Christmas says our world is not so ordinary; God is involved, deeply involved with the world and our lives.

There are angels among us; heaven is not so far from earth as we think it is. It can break through with songs of glory at any time. Particularly when all seems sad and dull.

The story goes during the Civil War, the winter of 1864, that at Petersburg, Virginia, the Confederate army faced the Union divisions of General Ulysses S. Grant. The war was now three and a half years old and the glorious charge had long since given way to the muck and mud of trench warfare.

Late one evening one of the Confederate generals, Major General George Pickett, received word that his wife had given birth to a beautiful baby boy. Up and down the line the Southerners began building huge bonfires in celebration of the event.

These fires did not go unnoticed in the Northern camps and soon a nervous Grant sent out a reconnaissance patrol to see what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that Pickett had had a son and these were celebratory fires.

Well, it just so happened that Grant and Pickett had been contemporaries at West Point and knew one another well, so to honor the occasion Grant, too, ordered that bonfires should be built.

What a peculiar night it was. For miles on both sides of the lines fires burned. No shots fired. No yelling back and forth. No war fought. Only light, celebrating the birth of a child. But it didn't last forever, for the child born was NOT the son of God. Soon the fires burned down and once again the darkness of the night and the darkness of war resumed.

The good news of Christmas is that in the midst of a great darkness there came a light, and the darkness was not able to overcome the light. It was not just a temporary flicker. It was an eternal flame.

We need to remember that. There are times, in the events of the world and in the events of our own personal lives that we feel that the light of the world could be snuffed out. But the Christmas story affirms that whatever happens, it still shines.

And so our Christmas messengers are saying to us today:

Don't be afraid!

God cares so much about this world, that He Himself is willing to visit it! Amazing!

And the message of the shepherds is this:

After seeing the Christ child, after receiving God's gift – go out with joy!

Share with others the source of your joy!

And so with the song of the angels still ringing in our ears, with the good news in our hearts, how can we not be like the shepherds? How can we not go out and spread this good news? It really is too good to keep to ourselves.

Christmas should light us on fire. The Spirit of Joy should send us forth spreading light in a dark world, so that the salvation promise to all humanity might be known in the minds and hearts of all people.

Thanks be to God for this glorious good news!

Amen.