

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, December 15, 2024

Beloved, as we continue in worship this day on this third Sunday of Advent, we continue a sermon series we've entitled together Holiday Gatherings, and we believe, we trust, the words of Jesus when he says that where two or three are gathered in his name, he is there amongst them. And so we're imagining together the way Christ shows up in our Gatherings. We have talked about the prophets, and last week we focused on Mary and Elizabeth, and this morning we will focus, as Jeanene shared with our children, on the shepherds and the angels, how God shows up amongst us where just a few are gathered. We're going to read from the Gospel of Luke, the 2nd chapter, verses 8-15. The page is noted, the page in your Pew Bible is noted there in the bulletin for you to follow along. Before we read the text together, let us join our hearts in prayer. Let us pray.

Gracious Spirit, let your peace fall fresh upon us this morning. Let it fall fresh, and let it quiet us, that we might hear what it is you have to speak to us this day, and that in hearing we might be called to lead lives of response. So may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you, God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Beginning in the 8th verse of the second chapter of the Gospel According to Luke:

Now in that same 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 God 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."

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So this is a traditional reading for Christmas Day. This is often the lectionary passage that we would read if Christmas Day happens to fall on a Sunday or if we happen to have a special service to celebrate Christmas Day. And so for many of you, if you've spent a lot of time at church it's a very familiar text, okay; but if you're new to church or new to this particular tradition, it might be a newer text for you. There are many lessons that are wrapped within this gospel scripture this day. I just want to draw to your attention three of them. There's a lesson for us in fear; there's a lesson for us in inclusion; and a lesson for us in priorities—fear, inclusion, and priorities.

Let's talk about fear. The shepherds in Luke live in fields. It is their natural habitat. They are experts in what it means to navigate these fields, particularly at night. They know how to handle

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it when the weather changes. They know how to navigate the terrain with their sheep. They know how to deter sly predators like wolves and even thieves prowling in the night. In short, shepherds don't scare easily. They're familiar with the darkness. They are familiar with that which would make most of us turn around and scream into the darkness, "Who's there?" They are familiar with what it feels like to be alone or with a small group all night long. They had likely seen in their lives as shepherds all sorts of different things on their watch. They probably even had to fight in the darkness to protect their flocks. And so it catches us by...catches our attention, maybe even by surprise, that when the angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were terrified, scared of that which has come from the darkness, terrified in their navigating the darkness of that night. It's a lesson for us. We don't judge ourselves for those reactions that we have. We don't judge the shepherds for being scared when they hear the angels speaking to them or the glory of the Lord shining around them. We don't judge those feelings. What we judge are the responses, and there's a lesson for us in the response of the shepherds. It's a response that we actually don't get all the way until the end of the text this morning. Verse 15 says when the angels had left the shepherds and gone into heaven, they 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." The shepherds meet their fear with curiosity. They don't allow their fear to make them draw back into themselves. What they don't do is huddle their flocks closer together, maybe going back to back looking out upon the dark sky. They don't do that. What they say is 'let's go see it.' This reminds me of when Jesus is calling the early disciples, and some are asking for all the details of what discipleship is going to look like; and he simply says to them, "Come and see. Come and see." Faith is meeting fear with curiosity. The Shepherds do just that. They don't know exactly what they're going to find there, but they know what the angels have just told them. And they don't know what the rest of the night might bring them, but they do know that they should go and be curious about this thing that they have heard together. And it makes me wonder in our seasons that feel like scary fearful nights, how do we greet our own fear? Or how do we greet the fear that we meet in our communities and in the world? Is our response to go back to back and to draw the flocks in so that everyone can have some semblance of safety, or are we willing to lean into curiosity about what God might be doing in the world? Are we willing to go then to that place to see the thing that has taken place, or will be taking place, that the Lord has made known to us? How do we respond when we are afraid?

The first lesson of the shepherds is that faith is meeting fear with curiosity. The second lesson is one of inclusion. 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." Good news of great joy for all the people. I am not simply bringing you good news for you, the shepherds, on this deep dark night. I am bringing you good news of great joy for everyone. Now this would have been—to the people who heard the Gospel of Luke—radical to them, right? It still seemingly is radical to many who follow in the ways of faith today—that everyone is included in this good news message. No one's left out. And this church, I'm proud to say, has been about, over our history, expanding the circle of welcome in God's Kingdom, right, kind of living into this belief that this is good news for all. And I think we do that generally well as a community, but for the shepherds that night, they would have had a

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communal message. They would have understood the radical nature that everyone is invited in. The people that the Israelites and also the the Gentiles, right, Jews and Gentiles, all those who followed in all sorts of different faith, they would have known it to be radical and it would have been significant to them. But what it also means to us in this season is that everyone, and I mean everyone, is included in this good news. That means the person who drives you nuts at work is included in this good news. That means the person who betrayed you is included in this good news. It means the person that hurt you. It means the person who feels far off like a lost sheep. They are included here. It certainly means that all, all of creation, all humanity is bound up in this promise, but it also means that person that you haven't spoken to in a really long time. It also means that person that disappoints you. It also means that person who actually makes you angry because they don't live like everyone is included. They're exclusionary themselves. They're included. There's a lesson of inclusion that is radical here. Good news of great joy for all the people. The good news is for the shepherds, but it's not simply for the shepherds. No one gets left out. Everyone gets included. Anything less falls woefully short of the vision of the Incarnation that Luke is trying to communicate, and so in this Advent season will we allow our holy imaginations to be broadened enough to include all the people?

There's a lesson in fear, a lesson in inclusion, and now a lesson in priorities. This one might get to meddling a bit. Reverend Gerald Lui says this about this text. He says, "Luke tells us... what Luke tells us is that even though the shepherds were frightened, they did not hesitate to cut the night shift short after hearing of the Messiah's birth. The good news of great joy altered their priorities. It changed their schedules and their responsibilities. Through the angels and the glory of God shining around them, God invited them to discover a new life, and they allowed that invitation to re-prioritize their current life." What we know in seasons like this is that many things vie for our attention, and I'm not just talking about holiday gatherings of all sorts, right; but I'm talking about all sorts of different things that would take up more space in our calendars, more space in our schedules, more bandwidth emotionally, mentally, even physically, right. The shepherds have responsibilities too. They have work to do. And, yet, when the promise of the Incarnation is brought to them, they allow those responsibilities to be shifted, re-prioritized, so that they might experience the Incarnation of God. And I wonder in this season how the coming incarnation of Christ might reorder our priorities and the ways that we spend our time and our money, and the ways in which we direct our prayers and our energy. How might the Incarnation be a lesson for us in priority making? It's easy to put a couple of worship services on your schedule, right? When school's out there's a little bit more time, right, but what does it look like when other things begin to fill right back in? We don't get much of a reprieve here, beloved. Fill right back in. What does it look like to continue to center the Incarnation and that good news for all people in our lives? It means that some things will have to fall away, some priorities will have to become lesser than, so that the Incarnation of Christ in our midst might take higher place, maybe even primary place.

There's a lesson in fear, and it is to allow our fear to be shaped by curiosity. That is the meaning of faith. There's a lesson in inclusion that everyone's invited, everyone's welcome, all people are

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included in this good news of great joy. And there's a lesson in priorities in this season of Advent to allow ourselves to be reshaped. So will we dare to keep the faith of the shepherds? Will we dare to do what it takes to see and proclaim the unexpected light and salvation of God breaking through in the most unlikely parts of our lives and the world? Those are the questions of this Holy Gathering. Thanks be to God.

In the name of the Father and the Son the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.