

Sermon – December 25, 2022
“Good news of great joy for all the people”
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: Luke 2:1-20

Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, and fill our open hearts anew. Anoint the sharing of these words, blessing your people, transforming us into Christ's image, and guiding us to fruitful labor in Jesus' mission right here, right now.

Amen

Merry Christmas! Good morning to everyone and thanks for coming out on this beautiful Christmas morning. Last night on Christmas Eve, we gathered at Fairfields UMC to celebrate the eve of Christmas and today we are gathered to give praise for the arrival of the Christ child. We were blessed to enjoy a time of candlelight last night, a time when we sought to let those many little sources of light shine in the dark and remind us of the glory of God that shone around the shepherds on the night when Christ was born. That light from God was a light that spoke to the in breaking of light into the darkness of the world. Light that speaks today to an event that changed everything for humanity. Light that marked the arrival of a child and peace on earth. An event that brought forth an angel from God to speak a message to shepherds on a hillside close to Bethlehem. The angel's message was Good News of great joy. Those who were once filled with fear at the sight of an angel had their fear transformed to joy by the news they received. Fear

gave way to joy as the angel told the shepherds that a savior, the Messiah, the Lord had been born. And with the delivery of that great Good News, the heavenly host appeared on earth and gave praise to God for this new creation that had come from heaven, God in the flesh, born as a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth, and placed in a manger. The delivery of the long-awaited Good News was a moment that brought such joy in heaven that the host of heaven came and proclaimed the arrival of peace on earth to those whom God favors. Our shepherds have been present with this heavenly host and heard their praises to God. We don't know how long this praise of the heavenly host lasted but at some point, the host left. When Handel wrote a chorus in the Messiah that put this time of praise to music, he ended the chorus with a delightful violin solo that grows quieter and higher, helping us to hear the angels leaving while still giving praise to God for the good news of the birth of Mary's first-born son. Our candlelight service was like this as well. As we extinguish our candles, the light fades and we are finally once again in the dark, but we have seen a great light and know the Good News, that something has changed. Darkness has been penetrated in an everlasting manner.

The praise of the angels ended on that night at some point and the angels returned to heaven. When they were gone, the shepherds were alone with the message of Good News of great joy in their minds. These shepherds have been in the presence of the heavenly host and lived. They have heard the message of Good News and been given a sign to verify the angel's word from God. The sign they have been given is that in the city of David they can now find a baby boy wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. In Luke's Gospel there are two other people who encounter an angel and receive a message and a sign to verify the message. Zechariah did not believe the angel's message and is mute until the sign of his son John's birth happens. Mary did believe the angel's message and went in haste to see her cousin Elizabeth to verify that the sign and words she was given were true. The shepherds now have a choice. They can return to watching their sheep and try to forget about the angel's message or they can go to Bethlehem and seek a newborn baby boy wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They can go and learn if the message of the angel is true. They can seek the sign they have been given and verify that a savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born this day in the city of David.

We wait and watch to see what the shepherds will do as we have with all who have encountered an angel in Luke. We await their response. Zechariah did not believe. Mary believed and went in haste to see the sign given to her. What will our shepherds do? They decide to go

and seek the child and see the sign that confirms the angel's message. How long it takes for one of them to speak the words that suggest this course of action is not clear, but one of them finally says, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."ⁱ They will go and seek the child to verify the Good News of great joy they have received. Notice the shepherds give credit to the Lord and not to the angel as the source of the Good News. There is no doubt in their minds of the source of this Good News; it is from God.

Seeking the child to verify the Good News becomes the priority of their lives. They leave behind the flock and go with haste to Bethlehem to find Mary, Joseph, and the child who is wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in the manger. They go with haste and seek the child. The shepherds do not know the name of the child. They do not know of Mary and Joseph. They don't know who to ask for. But they most likely know the mangers of Bethlehem, even those hidden from view. They are shepherds, those who care for animals, and they know the places where the animals are cared for in Bethlehem. They have a new job, to find the savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

Luke doesn't tell us how long they searched, just that they found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. I imagine them all crowded into the stable looking at the baby, telling each other, "Yes, there he is!" Maybe they ask Mary, "When was he born?" and she tells them this day. Maybe they ask Joseph if the child is a girl or a boy and he tells them a boy. Can't you hear them as they point to the baby and say, "Look, he is wrapped in bands of cloth, just as we were told!" Then they start talking, telling Mary and Joseph all that had been told to them by the angel. They hurry through the words of the angel, sharing what they have received from God with Mary and Joseph: "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 he favors!"ⁱⁱ I have always wondered at what point one of them says the obvious, that what the angel told them was true, that this day in the city of David was born our savior, the Messiah, the Lord. And when those words are proclaimed, it gets very quiet in the stable. This Good News of great joy is true! The message of the angel has been verified! God has sent a savior to all people!

The Messiah has come! The Lord has been born this day in Bethlehem and they have seen him with their own eyes! The way for peace on earth between the people of God and God has come! The shepherds leave the stable at some point and go first to tell all who will listen to this Good News. They become evangelists and all who hear their news are amazed. But being one who is amazed does not equal being one who believes. It takes more than amazement at the shepherds' words to find the favor of God, to become part of a chosen people. It takes faith in response to God's grace. Mary also has seen and spoken with an angel. Mary has been given the Good News as well about the child she has given birth to and now cares for as his mother. Mary has new information about her first-born child. As the shepherds leave her and her firstborn son alone and go off to tell all who will listen what they have witnessed, Mary takes the words the shepherds brought from the angel and treasures them, beginning to ponder them in her heart. She begins to ponder what it means for a child to be a savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Mary's pondering points to a seeking of a deeper understanding of who this child is and what it means for the child to be holy, to be the Son of God. There will be time to ponder these ideas and the words of the shepherds in the days to come as the child grows.

I don't think I ever wanted to be a shepherd and I don't recall shepherds being featured at career days when I was considering career choices, but there are lessons we can all learn from those to whom the angel came with Good News of great joy. The first lesson is, when we hear the Good News, we should be like the shepherds and go and seek the savior, Messiah, and Lord. We are to do this at once and in great haste. We are to seek until we have moved from being amazed about the child to having faith in the child as our savior. As the shepherds heard the great Good News proclaimed to them by an angel, we also are to listen to the words of Good News shared with us and then act on what we have been given.

Next, praise God for what he has done in our lives. Just as Christ was born on this day, there comes a day of rebirth for each one who has moved from amazement about the Good News to faith in Christ as their savior, Messiah, and Lord. So, offer words of praise to God for sending His son to be born in a stable, wrapped in bands of cloths, placed in a manger, heralded by angels, and found by shepherds. Give God praise for the coming of the Christ child into our lives. Let our praise be shared with others that they may move beyond being amazed and come to faith, that they may also move from darkness to light and celebrate this Good News with great joy.

And finally, once we have come and met the Christ child, then we are to go and share the Good News with all we know and meet. Learn who this baby in a manger is today, gather those words and ponder them in our hearts until we grasp who the Christ child is for us and all of humanity and then go and share the Good News of his arrival. Don't necessarily go running through the town or subdivision in the early hours of the morning shouting the Good News, but go and seek him where he is at work and join with in his mission to all people by sharing the message we have been given that is found in the Word of God made flesh and written down in a book for us. Go and share the Good News of the birth of our savior, Messiah, and Lord with all whom the Lord places in our path.

Pray with me: Father God, we thank you for sending your son to be God with us. Guide us that we might be like the shepherds who heard angels speak and went and found the sign and moved beyond being amazed at the news, but came to faith in this child as their Lord. Amen.

ⁱ NRSV

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