

New of Great Joy

Joy to the World, gloria in excelsis deo.

“Do not be afraid for I bring you good news of great joy.”

Many of us have heard these proclamations so often, for so many years, that its power may be lost on us. If you come to church most Sunday's or you just come on Christmas Eve you have heard them proclaimed. It is hard for us not to imagine ★cutsie, kitschy Angels flying in gracefully sitting on a cloud and proclaiming the good news like little cherubs with white robes, a blue sash, a brass horn and golden wings. The reality is though if an Angel were to appear to you in the still silent night whether in your bed, or out in a field somewhere tending your sheep it would likely scare the pants off of you. Try to imagine, an angel of God appearing before you. A messenger come from the most high, to announce who knows what. And then, the glory of God fills the night; and blinds you with its radiance. Less kitschy and a whole lot more frightening – something to send even the most righteous to their knees.

★For each of the characters in the story having an angel appear to them might not have been “joy to the world.” Each one of them was told their whole way of being was about to be transformed. Ordinary people were shaken out of their ordinary days so that they could go forth and change the world. “Do not be afraid” are the first angelic words because they would have been scared out of their minds. “Do not be afraid” I want you to be strong and of great courage because God has a message for you. As we have walked through this series in Advent I have heard more and more angel encounter stories from some of you gathered here and each of them - including my own comes with a mission.

For Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph and the Shepherds their mission was to be a part of bringing Emmanuel, God with us into this world. Good news that the promises of God are being fulfilled on this holy night. Good news that the lowly will be lifted up and the hungry filled with good things. This very night, the promises of Isaiah are being fulfilled.

This year I equate best with the shepherds in our story. A group of people just doing their job. Like the shepherds most of us are simply going on with our ordinary lives, working our jobs, raising our children and grandchildren, getting to the gym on occasion but mostly just going through the grind and trying to get by? A night like this comes along once a year and like each of the characters in this nativity we have a glimmer of hope that this story of light and love might permeate into our world and our lives, somehow. Perhaps on this Christmas Eve night you too have come because you have seen the signs, something is up. Christmas is coming. So you have come from the fields, from the stores, from your kitchens, having heard of good news, and wanting to see this thing. To see the manger and the bands of cloth and to know that love has drawn near. To see this thing of good news and great joy, that is for all the people, including them, including us.

And so like the shepherds we have come to experience the holy, to see this babe in the manger. When the shepherds arrive they find the child, as promised wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. Simple details confirming what the angels have told them; confirming that God has made good on God's promises and that the world as they have known it is to be turned upside down, made right, redeemed.

But you know, even before the shepherds arrive, they have already experienced one of the signs of God's coming kingdom. The messengers came to them - to the lowly, the unworthy, the religiously negligent. God's voice came first to lift up the most downtrodden, the most unlikely. This was the first sign, this is still the telling sign – that the good news of great joy is indeed for all the people, even the shepherds, even us.

That to me might be the most important part of the story and when we domesticate and kitschify the story we miss it. God used, for God's most important task a young poor girl, a carpenter, scruffy, dirty shepherds and a stable. This most vulnerable baby is a gift to God's most vulnerable people. It is a gift to us.

Then, we seldom remember this second part of the shepherd's story. For some reason we have forgotten the significance of what they do when they arrive in Bethlehem. They were sent to tell the others, because the angels told them that the news was not just for them but was for all the people. Just as they herded and delivered sheep all their days, this special night they were to

collect up and deliver the words of the angels. They were to shepherd and herd and deliver the good news of great joy to all the people. These marginal men, these ones who have seen suffering and sorrow, who have been shunned and whose worth is insignificant, they are the ones to declare to others that God's realm is breaking into history.

Former moderator, Peter Short, tells the story a pageant full of eager young children, precious angels in white sheets and shiny halos, anxious to deliver their good news of great joy to all the people. But the young one whose job it was to speak the words of good news froze up and couldn't deliver. A mother was forced from her hiding spot where she was prompting the children, she was forced from that spot into the limelight and into saying the words, "Be not afraid. I bring you good news of great joy." Peter shares how moved he was to hear an adult say those words. "She is, after all, an adult. Surely she must know about the sham and the drudgery and the broken dreams of the world in which she finds herself an unlikely herald. Surely she knows of the exhaustion and hopelessness that overwhelms us. Surely she is aware that the world to which she announces the good news of a Saviour is the very same planet that is sick with greed, fear and despair. Out of the mouths of babes the words have a certain sentimental appeal." But this was an adult angel. One of the adults who know better. One of us, still declaring good news and great joy. For all the people. The task of the angels and the shepherds continues to be our task, our tale to tell. Like Mary and Joseph we are to birth and raise up in our desperate world hope, peace, joy and love.

Joy is not a good mood, it is a good truth: a truth that lies deep in the heart of things. Joy is the strange knowledge that in spite of all we have become and failed to become, we are born anew with this babe in the manger, who is born to bring love to our world. Do you wonder who will go forth from here to tell the news of great joy? It's you and me, the next generation of angels and shepherds, who are to tell of the good news of the gospel.

Each character in our nativity story goes back to their lives, but they will never return to who they were before. Because now they know that God has come to them, God has come into their place and into their lives, and God has reached out and claimed them. God has claimed them for God's love and God's justice and God's peace. This is the good news of great joy. News

we are to declare. As adults in a world that groans in despair, we have good news of great joy to share. Go tell all the people of the world and do not be afraid.

amen.