



Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-21

Rev. Thomas G. James

Washington Street UMC

December 24, 2017

6lb 8oz Baby Jesus

Luke 2:1-7

Again, welcome on this Christmas Eve night. It is a joy to be gathered with you as we remember the Christmas story and celebrate God's gift in the birth of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the history of humanity, tribes of people have always looked to identify a leader. Every subset of our culture looks for someone to step forward and take the reigns to drive the future of the organization, club, or demographic subset. I have participated in a number of sports, clubs, and groups throughout my life, and they have all followed this model. In baseball and football, we always looked to the strongest, fastest, and best athletes, and we made them our captains. In honor clubs, academic groups, or student governments, we looked for the smartest and those with the highest GPAs, and we made them our presidents. In serving on Boards and Trustees of non-profits and NGOs, we look to the person who has the most experience or who has been the greatest donor, and we nominate them to be our Chair.

We see this practice in all levels of civic leadership, from our PTAs, to our City Councils, to our State Legislatures, to the President of our Country. We work hard to identify people as leaders who have the wealth, the prestige, the demeanor, the clout, and the stage presence to convince us they are worth our following. This is no new phenomena.

Going back through historical records, such a practice has existed in human history dating back hundreds of centuries. Even our Biblical history is full of stories of the people of Israel calling upon leaders to serve and to offer guidance. We have record of the Kings of Israel and Judah who governed the community as a whole – including Solomon, David, Saul, Ahaz, Hezekiah, Jehoshaphat and many more. Even with God as their Head, the people of faith have always longed for a physical, tangible, present leader to instruct their ways, to govern their community, and to protect them from warring and aggressive neighbors.

God granted the people their wish and called into service kings to lead. But time and time again, we find these militaristic and governing kings failed to provide faithful leadership. We find in the history of God's people, these kings succumbed to human temptations. They gave in to attractions of the flesh. They gave in to jealousy. They gave in to aggression. They gave in to pride. They gave in to greed. They gave in to the same laundry list of mistakes we still find elected leaders capitulating to today.

Amidst the many and varied mistakes of the kings before, God sought a new way to reconcile humanity unto one another and unto the Creator. Instead of sending yet another human king to try and work out the mistakes of humanity, God offered himself. In the presence of Jesus, God became as flesh – taking on the form of humanity. In Emmanuel, in the one whose name literally means, "God with us," God

became incarnate, taking on human form to show us a more faithful way. Instead of coming in the form of the kings before, riding in upon chariots and horse, instead of wielding sword and shield, instead of coming as one of great wealth and prestige, God chose to come in the form of an infant, born to a family with no claim to fame, born of a mother who was not yet even married, born in a family stable, wrapped in strips of cloth, and who was laid in his first bed – a feeding trough – called a manger.

This 6lb, 8oz baby Jesus was offered as the hope of the future for humanity. This infant was offered by the Creator of the universe to show the way of salvation. This lowly child, who was with God, and who *was* God, came to teach and offer eternal love, while still wielding the power of the Almighty. As we gather tonight, we should consider, “Christmas is not merely an anniversary celebration of Jesus’ birth. ... [Christmas] is the act of remembering what God has already accomplished in Jesus Christ.”ⁱ In the incarnation, God has already given and offered the gifts of eternal grace, love, and truth.

As we once more celebrate the birth of the King, perhaps we should once more reflect and ask ourselves, are we still longing for a *new* leader to come and save us? Perhaps instead of looking to those who talk a good game and who reside in multi-million dollar high-rises surrounded by gold adornments, we need but to look back to see that in the incarnation, we have been fulfilled with God’s great love and shown the way that leads to life. In the incarnation, we have been gifted with the promise of new life and entrusted with the resources to make life possible for all.

“She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

The Awe-ful Shepherds Luke 2:8-14

Shepherds are filthy pariahs. This is not a knock on those who work in the agricultural world today who continue to provide food for tables across the nation. Shepherds in the Biblical era were outcasts of the community. They stayed with the flock throughout the day and night, offering protection for the sheep. They were oppressed because of their lack of hygiene and their tattered clothing. The job of shepherd did not pay a living wage; it likely barely paid a minimum wage. It was a job held by younger men who had no other job choice.

When the angels came upon the shepherds, who were still out in the field keeping watch over their flock at night, we’re told the glory of the Lord shone around them. This is just another example of the phrase, *the darkness can not keep out the light*. The shepherds had been happy to have been masked by the darkness; there is little question why they would be terrified when a great light shone around them.

This is the kind of story today that we hear about in the news. These random farmers were out in their field at night, and are now sharing stories of how they were abducted after seeing this random light in the sky. You’d see a picture of their truck, which has a new “visited by aliens” sticker on the bumper.

Our English translation tells us the shepherds were terrified at the sight of the angels. In the original Greek translation, this word for “terrified” is *phobeó*, which can also mean “awestruck.” The shepherds

may have been terrified that they had been found in the dark of the night. But it is quite possible the text is telling us they were filled with awe. Instead of being scared of the visit, they may very well have been filled with wonder. Those who are terrified are filled with fear; those who are awestruck are filled with hope. Even had they felt fear at first, the news the angel brings is a word that instills hope.

The angel or the Lord said to them, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Go, and you will find him wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.” As the angel finished speaking, a whole multitude of angels appeared praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The shepherds were not the people one would expect to have been the first to be invited to the bedside of the newborn. The shepherds were never invited to such functions. But yet the angel of the Lord says I am bringing good news of great joy for *all* people. This means the shepherds are included. No one ever brought good news of great joy for the shepherds. That was an uncommon occurrence.

Yet, in the invitation of the angel, in the announcement of Jesus’ birth, we hear good news for the shepherds – indeed, we hear good news for *all* people. “According to the angel’s song, the Messiah’s birth conveys goodwill [to all]. No one is inconspicuous in the eyes of the Savior.”ⁱⁱ If the news of Jesus’ birth is not for those society would invite last, if the news is not an invitation to those who have been relegated to the dark, perhaps it’s not really the good news. But the angels announce in the presence of the awe-struck shepherds, this is the *good* news, that God favors all people, and in the gift of Christ, God offers everyone great joy.

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to all humankind of good will!”

Responsive Proclamation Luke 2:15-21

The response of the shepherds to the angelic announcement is of vital importance. Indeed, throughout the Christmas story, every character offers a faithful response. Mary responds in poetic prayer. Elizabeth responds in the act of hospitality. The magi respond in the visitation and delivering of gifts. And the shepherds respond by praising God.

Having been told by the angels of the good news of the birth of Christ, the shepherds made haste to visit the birthplace of Jesus. There in the presence of Mary and Joseph, the shepherds shared what they angels had proclaimed. Then, leaving the nativity scene, the text tells us the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God.

Usually when I hear this text, I picture the shepherds jumping, skipping, and shouting down the streets of Bethlehem. I picture them so overfilled with joy that they leave the sheep in the stable as they go banging and knocking on the doors of those who lived near by in the middle of the night. As each random neighbor opens their doors, I picture the shepherds shaking hands and saying ‘Merry Christmas!’ I picture the inn keeper being like Scrooge, watching these unwanted shepherds in a disgruntled state, wondering why his stable has become such a place of commotion and visitation.

I'm not sure where such a visual comes from. Perhaps I had some Sunday School teacher earlier in life describe it this way. Yet, this isn't what the Biblical text offers. There is no midnight gallivanting in Bethlehem according to Luke's gospel. Verse 20 says, "The shepherds *returned*, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

With no further narrative to offer what became of the shepherds, it seems they went back to the fields, returning to their post keeping watch over the sheep. While seemingly anticlimactic, such a narrative seems to offer a most faithful response.

The incarnation isn't about this one glorious moment when Jesus walked the earth. The birth of Christ is not a simple celebration that took place one night some 2000 years ago that was forgotten as time crept by. The power of the incarnation is the glorious truth it offers about a God who instills the presence of eternal love in the lives of humanity. The shepherds returned to their fields that night, but they returned as markedly different people. Their lives had been changed because of the promise and presence of the Savior.

Understood this way, we find that Christmas isn't meant to be a one-night celebration. The incarnation isn't something that is to be celebrated but once a year. No, having celebrated this night in the encounter of the nativity, we are reminded that the most faithful response is in returning to our separate lives, our individual places of work, our separate circles of influence, our lofty corner offices in town, our far-out shepherding fields, praising and glorifying God. For in receipt of God's grace and truth, as those who have encountered the peace of God in the birth of Christ, we become the extension of Christ that shares and spreads the good news of great joy into the lives of all.

Friends, the world today does not need a new savior. What the world needs is people who are filled with God's hope in the gift of Christ to share that gifted peace with others. We do not need to look for new people of power to overcome human error, we need to recall and give praise to God who has made reconciliation possible in the gift of Christ. We do not need extravagant and vocal street preachers to remind people of their brokenness. We need shepherds to praise God and share the good news of Christ in their daily lives.

The gift of God that we celebrate tonight in the birth of Christ has *already* offered the hope of a better tomorrow; it has already made possible forgiveness; it has already taught faithfulness; it has already proven love; it has already fulfilled salvation. The celebration tonight is that all this has already been done for you by God through Christ. So return to homes, and continue to live your lives, but do so giving praise and glorifying God, for the good news of great joy is made known to all, Jesus Christ is here, the King is born, God lives among us.

"He was called Jesus, the name given him by the angel." All praise be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Kimberly Bracken Long. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 1*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.

ⁱⁱ Ashley Cook Cleere. *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary. Year B, Volume 1*. Eds. Barbara Brown Taylor & David L. Bartlett. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008.