

Rev. Lynne Ogren
December 24, 2019

Zion Lutheran Church, Lewistown, MT
Christmas Eve Luke 2:1-20

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen

Before I took on this role of pastor I worked in Washington as a church staff person, guiding the planning of worship and overseeing the programs related to children and families. One of the great joys of that position was taking my turn leading the chapel time for our weekday preschool classes.

I grew up attending church, and the longer I worked at a church the more commonplace the Good News of Jesus Christ became. I'm familiar with the three year cycle of the readings we use. Before the latest hymnal was published I had many of the hymn numbers in the green book memorized.

But when I met with the preschoolers each week, I was often confronted with the fact that they had never heard the stories of the Bible before—including the Christmas story. I remember one year I was with the class that had mostly 3-4 year olds and I said something like, "Remember Mary and Joseph?" and all I saw were blank stares.

Well, of course they didn't remember Mary and Joseph! They were only 2 or 3 years old the year before! And I was struck by the fact that I had the privilege of telling these kiddos the beautiful story of Jesus' birth for the very first time. They might not remember all the details the next year, but they might remember Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was laid in a manger.

For many of you here tonight, this story might be as familiar as the stories of your own childhood that you tell at family gatherings year after year. The registration ordered by Herod which required Joseph to take Mary to his hometown of Bethlehem, the birth of a baby who was laid in an animal feed box, the announcement of the angels to a band of shepherds, and Mary pondering it all in her heart—you know it as well as you know your own story.

But maybe there are some here tonight who did not grow up with this story. What you know is what you've gleaned from the music that is played in stores and on the radio between Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. You've seen the nativity scenes with two or more people kneeling next to a manger which either has a baby or a light in it. And you wonder, what's the big deal?

Maybe you are here tonight because the rest of your family is here and you're being a good sport about this ritual we call worship, for the sake of the holiday and for those who are important to you.

That's OK. Whether you are familiar with the events surrounding the birth of Jesus or have a distant recognition, maybe tonight you will hear something new. I will admit that I find it challenging to preach this same story year after year and find something new.

Here's what I heard this year. It's in the last verse of the gospel reading: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

The shepherds returned. After all that happened that one night, they went back to the fields and their flocks. Let's look again at this story from the shepherds' perspective and see how they might have been changed by it all.

The angels came to them in the fields, proclaiming a message of good news of great joy for all people! At first they were terrified. Who wouldn't be? Even today we are amazed by full moons and eclipses and shooting stars. But an angel that lit up the sky, accompanied by a host of heavenly beings—that would be terrifying!

And when the angels disappeared, the shepherds left the fields—maybe bringing their flocks with them. They made their way to town to seek out the family the angels told them to find—Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.

Now, the city was not their territory. They were used to living off the land, away from crowds of people. And that night Bethlehem was even more crowded than usual. But they were compelled to come. The angel's message had them curious to find a small family and be the first to meet the child God had promised to send to redeem God's people.

When they found the place where a young couple had made space for their baby, probably surrounded by animals, they had to tell what they knew!

They must have told Mary and Joseph that this child was God's promised Savior. Maybe they told the innkeeper that had turned Mary and Joseph away. Maybe they spoke to other passersby who couldn't sleep and were out and about that night. This was good news of great joy, after all!

Then...the shepherds returned.

Somehow each of us has heard this story in some form before we came here tonight. We left our homes, or maybe you came straight from work today, to be here. Someone said something to us, whether that was long ago in our childhood days or just this afternoon, and we came here to see for ourselves. We came to tell the story through the carols we sing. We came to see who else is here. We came to wonder if what we were told is really true.

It is likely the shepherds were not regular attenders at their local synagogues. And yet these are the people the angels came to tell first, to tell the news that the Son of God had come into the world, just as the prophets of God had promised again and again.

This year I wonder how those shepherds were changed by this experience. Later, when Jesus would call the fishermen to follow him and become his disciples, they left their nets and took on a whole new role in their lives. But the shepherds returned to the fields. They remained shepherds, as far as we know, for the rest of their lives. It was their place in society and it was all they knew.

In a little while we will also return to our regular lives. We will still be a husband or wife, a sister or brother, a parent with children to care for or maybe a child with a parent to care for. In the next day or so, or maybe next week, we will return to our jobs or to school or to the regular routine of our lives. How will what we hear and see tonight affect us?

As the shepherds returned they went glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. They were filled with joy! They realized that this baby was truly good news for them, as much as for his parents. God had fulfilled the promise to raise up for them a new leader who would bring God's light and life into the world.

Maybe the shepherds stood a little taller, even if only on the inside, realizing that they were important in the eyes of God—important enough to be the first to hear and the first to tell others about the gift God had given to the world.

Maybe they found themselves returning to town a little more often, and saw themselves as belonging to the larger community and not just some stinky old shepherds who people generally didn't notice or care about.

Or maybe they took their role of watching over flocks of sheep a little more seriously. After all, the Messiah would be a shepherd to God's people. Being a shepherd isn't such a lowly position after all.

What stands out for you this year? What part of Jesus' birth story have you never noticed before? Take that new thing with you as you return to your regular life. Tell someone else about it. It might just be the news they need to hear, too.

Perhaps you will begin attending a church more often, to be a part of God's community and to hear how this baby born so long ago continues to be a source of good news and hope for you and for all people.

Tonight we give thanks and praise to God for shining the light of this good news into our ordinary lives, the news that God sees us and has given his Son to love and care for us—all of us.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Let us join in the shepherds' joy as we sing together "Joy to the World!"