

While Shepherds...

A Meditation for Christmas Eve 2022

Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC, Lexington

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Luke 2:2-14

Joseph went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that 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 filled with fear. 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: unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace to all people!'

Prayer

Come, Christ-Child, come. Come Prince of Peace. Come and illumine and enlighten and enliven us this night. Amen.

Sermon

Tonight let's travel to Bethlehem with the shepherds. Tradition tells us a lot about the Magi, even gives them names (Gaspar, Balthazar, Melchior) - but rarely have Christians imagined the names and stories of the shepherds. Perhaps, tonight, you might imagine them with me - travel with shepherds who might have been named Micah and Jedediah, Joanna and Lael...

What did they do when they heard the good news?

Luke's Gospel continues,

15 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.' 16 So they went with *haste* and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 *and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.* 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

They made known what had been told them about this child...glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

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Micah was always awake in the middle of the night. In this clan of shepherds and sheep, he kept watch, stepping through the clusters of sheep and watchdogs, peeling back the tent flaps to check on his family. Folks had long since given up on offering to trade off with Micah - they knew that he could not sleep. Micah had an anxiety that would not let him rest until early morning.

That night, when everyone from town to field was asleep, he was up at the top of the hill, looking out over the little town, looking down on the flocks, looking up at the sky.

And that was when it happened. He met a love that would not let him go.

He was the first one to see the angel brighten the sky,

The first to hear the angel say:

Do not be afraid.

“Fear not,” said the angel, for mighty dread Had seized their troubled mind;

“Glad tidings of great joy I bring To you and all people.”

And Micah, one who was always afraid, was not afraid anymore. He woke the whole encampment, shouting, you have to see this!!

Eventually...once Joanna and Jed and the rest had wiped the sleep from their eyes and stumbled from the tents and heard God's choir singing,

‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people!’,

Micah led them down the hill, into town, and to the manger, where he bent low in the presence of the Prince of Peace.

You'd like to hear that Micah slept well after Bethlehem - maybe his family would have loved that, too - but Micah kept on keeping watch, night after night. Watching, now, not for danger, not from fear. Watching for glory. Watching for peace. Watching for good news.

Micah left Bethlehem ready to share good news of great joy: news of love that would conquer all fear.

They came to Bethlehem to see Christ whose birth the angels sang,

And they returned, ready to sing that good news with their lives.

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Joanna was asleep in that way that moms sleep, which is to say, asleep but listening. She heard Micah's shout and jumped up to check on her children, the campfire, the watchdogs...and then she looked up, and saw the angel proclaim:

'Do not be afraid; for see— I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'

When Micah said, let's go, let's go - Joanna said wait a minute. Yes, we should go see that baby, but only after we've gathered what he and his parents will need. They've been traveling, and who knows how everyone's doing.

Joanna grabbed the bowl of lanolin she used on her own tender skin, milked two of the sheep to bring fresh milk, and packed a soft lambswool blanket -

"If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb..."

And she wrapped up young Lael who should have been asleep but Joanna knew they also needed to meet this baby.

And down she went, to Bethlehem - with joyful steps they sped - to meet this baby, whom heaven could not hold, born a child and yet a king.

And Joanna sat right down next to them on the ground, mud and straw and messy baby, tired Joseph, aching Mary - right in the middle of it all, she sat with them, and learned once again what it is to love a child.

They came to Bethlehem to see him whose birth the angels sang,

And they returned, ready to sing that good news with their lives.

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Jedediah was sound asleep when Micah started yelling, but he crawled out of the tent just in time to hear, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people!’

It was not the angels that surprised him, really. It was their message.

To all people, Jed thought? *Really?*

God’s come to us? To shepherds?! We of such low estate? In this unlikely place surrounded by sheep?

There, in the glow of halos, in the shadow of wings, with glory songs overcoming night sounds, Jed who went to bed hungry every night found his soul fed.

God is with us. No one is alone.

He knew, “Beneath life’s crushing load those who toil along the climbing way...” are met with love and hope.

So when Micah started urging everyone to hurry, Jed followed.

On his way into town, Jed noticed the folks who didn’t even have a cave or a stable to stay in.

He came to the manger and saw the child, too...and his mother, who was singing her bold lullaby:

“God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

God has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.”

And Jedediah slipped out the door of the stable to find food. There were hungry people waiting.

They came to Bethlehem to see him whose birth the angels sang,

And they returned, ready to sing that good news with their lives.

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It was a miracle that Lael remembered that night at all, they were so young. Years later the angels' song - "the beating of wings, thousands of them...and voices high and wild like trumpets..."¹ seemed dream-like.

As Lael grew, around the campfire the family told and retold what happened that night, and when neighbors and strangers would come to call the story would be repeated...

The angels - they were right there in the sky - you could hear them singing...and that's why I'm not afraid anymore.

That tiny baby just glowed - I knew right then he was special. It's why we've taken in so many babies over the years - not a one of them should get lost.

He came down that we might have love. He came down that *we* might have peace. He came *for us!* Shepherds, even - and you, too!

Lael grew up hearing it all.

Years later, sojourners who stayed at the camp responded with stories - of a holy man, a teacher, healer, a peace maker, a preacher in the countryside. One who fed the hungry, welcomed everyone. Jesus. Micah and Jed and Joanna thought he sounded awfully familiar.

One day, when Lael had grown up and taken their place among the shepherds, it was time to take the sheep into the Temple at Jerusalem, just a day's walk away.²

And that is when Lael saw Jesus - coming into the city on a donkey - and they realized they had met this man as a baby when they were both so young. Lael did what any of us would do - dropped off the sheep at the Temple and joined the great parade that welcomed Jesus into the city. Lael became that day, a disciple, a peacemaker, a sheep of the Good Shepherd.

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"We hear the Christmas angels / The great glad tidings tell / O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel!"

When you return from Bethlehem this night,

How will you sing the good news with your life? Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner, "The Birth" in *The Magnificent Defeat*

² "We might even imagine that the flocks over which they keep watch are the flocks that will be dedicated for Temple sacrifice." - Jewish Scholar Amy Jill Levine, *Light of the World: A Beginners Guide to Advent*, Kindle Edition.

