

Sermon
Christmas Eve – 2017
Based on Luke 2:1-20
Rev. Dr. Kevin Orr

Here we are again to hear the familiar story of the birth of Jesus, a story that many of us have heard hundreds of times. It's a story that has become immortalized when Linus takes the stage, the lights dim, and, blanket in hand, he recites the passage from memory from the King James version, to remind Charlie Brown and the rest of us what Christmas is all about.

We are here again to sing the familiar songs, the great Christmas carols that we have sung hundreds of times and that are sprinkled among the other holiday favorites we have heard on our radios and in the shops like "I'll Be Home for Christmas", "Frosty the Snowman", and "Santa Baby." Yes, we are here to sing the old familiar carols, especially "Silent Night", as we light our candles and wonder at the mystery of Christmas.

Tonight, we are participating in Christmas Eve worship, a tradition that has been passed down from generation to generation. Being together in this space at this time is part of our treasured holiday traditions. As 2017 draws to a close, it is good for us to be together tonight, in community, surrounded by family and friends, people who love us, warm and safe in this place of sanctuary.

But what was it like that first Christmas, when no one knew the story? When no one had heard any of the songs? There was no trumpet blast. There was no breaking news coverage. No text alerts were received. Strangers did not show up in the market or walk the neighborhood streets Christmas caroling. Of course, there were celebrations going on. The winter solstice marked the beginning of the lengthening days, the light pushing against the dark. That's reason enough to celebrate. And among the people Israel there was the hopeful expectation that a messiah would come to deliver the people from the oppression of Rome and restore the glory of God's chosen people, Israel. But when the deliverer came, almost everyone missed it.

It is amazing to me how God became human, sending the Son into the world to be our deliverer, our savior, our Lord, in such a quiet, stealth, almost secret way. It's as if God slipped across enemy lines in the cover of darkness. Why God chose this way instead of another is a great mystery and worthy of much pondering.

The story goes that Augustus Caesar called for a census, that all the peoples under Roman rule would pay a tax. Joseph heads for his home town of Bethlehem, along with Mary, his future wife, who must journey with him in spite of her impending birth. She carried within her womb the one who cannot be contained, the very Son of God, the one whom the angel told her would be named Jesus, whose kingdom would have no end.

Only a few people knew about who this was in Mary's womb. Joseph, of course, knew. But also Mary's aunt, Elizabeth, who had had a revelation of her own. For she, in her old age, carried within her womb the greatest of prophets, John, the one who leaped for joy in her womb when Mary first greeted her. These two pregnant women shared an experience all their own, carrying within their own bodies two people who would turn the world upside down. Yet, who would believe their story?

As Mary and Joseph enter Bethlehem, the town is full of people. It was so crowded that there was no room even for a poor man and his expectant wife, who actually was not yet his wife. I suspect Joseph kept that to himself. The town was bursting with activity. The scene is depicted in this painting by a Belgian named Pieter Bruegel the Elder in 1566 called "The Numbering at Bethlehem."



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Which of all those people are Mary and Joseph? We are left to guess. The painting makes the point that when Joseph and Mary entered Bethlehem, nobody knew them or what was about to take place. They were just two more people taking up space in a crowded town. Nobody had any idea that the child in Mary's womb would one day be lifted up on a cross, crucified as a common criminal, only to rise again three days later, as the risen lord. None of the people in the town realized that the child in Mary's womb would be worshipped by billions of people 2,000 years later, commemorating the night of his birth. Like a whisper, the savior of the world is born in the little town of Bethlehem.

The shepherds had no idea either. They were on the outskirts of town, out in the hills, just minding their business and tending their sheep. And then, just as Mary and Elizabeth before them, the shepherds had their own angelic visitation. Often paintings of the scene show the

sky ripping open, bright light pushing back the darkened sky, and the heavenly host winging their way through the air. There is nothing quiet or stealth about this angelic announcement. But here's a question: if the appearance of the angels was that impressive, why were the shepherds the only ones who saw the angels? One would think that people in Bethlehem would have taken note of a bright light in the hills outside of town. Surely others would have seen something. But it appears that this message was only directed to these shepherds. Perhaps the appearance was not as sky-splitting as we often imagine it.

Look at this painting from 1910 by Henry Ossawa Tanner. He is the first African-American painter to receive international acclaim. He was born in Pittsburg, by the way. It may take a minute for you to see the angels.



Rather than ripping open the sky like fireworks, these angels are subtle, blending in to the surrounding hillside. The angels are almost ghost-like. They tower before the little shepherds in the corner of the painting, huddled around the fire. These shepherds, alone, were in the right position to be able to see these shimmering angels, to hear the good news of great joy and to hear the song of glory. What a powerful vision it was. And then, the angels dissipated like mist.

It wasn't until after the shepherds heard the good news and heard the singing that they had any idea what had happened that night in Bethlehem. It certainly *was* news to them, *joyous* news; news that did not come from some stranger, or from an excited friend. No, it was news from an angel. And having received this good news, the shepherds were prepared to encounter for themselves their savior, their king. They were filled with wonder. They had to take the risk of leaving the sheep unattended, to run into town to see for themselves what the angel had told them. And off they ran, to approach the newborn king, of the line of David, the Christ.

They entered Bethlehem as the only ones who knew of Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. They did not know their names, not even the name of the baby. They did not know what they looked like, only that the child was wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They were the only ones in town who knew how special that child was. Being shepherds, they likely knew exactly where the mangers were. They perhaps had fed their own sheep from that very manger where the child king lay.

After a quick search, they find the baby, just as the angel had described him. And with great excitement, they spoke to the parents, to Mary and Joseph, sharing what an angel had told them about the child. This painting from Cameroon depicts the meeting of the shepherds. Christians from the Mafa people, who live in northern Cameroon, created this painting in the 1970s, one of a series of paintings to help teach others in their tribe about the faith.



In the midst of all the noise and bustle of Bethlehem, the shepherds, Mary and Joseph speak of the angelic visions they have received. They speak of things no one else is prepared to understand or believe. And as they share these revelations, they encourage each other while Mary held in her lap the incarnate God, the king of kings and the lord of lords, the savior of the world. What a conversation they must have had! I can imagine they were beyond belief that of all the people in the world, they were the ones who first knew and saw the Christ child. They were surely bursting with joy at the glory and wonder of it all, even as people strode past them, paying little attention, as they rushed around to take care of their business. All those people walking past the Christ and having no idea who that baby was. And this is how God came into the world. Like an open secret, hidden in plain sight.

Perhaps you can understand why when the shepherds told others that people responded with amazement but then moved on with their business. The messiah of Israel is born and the chief priests know nothing of this? Herod has no idea either? The messiah is lying in a feed trough in a barn? Most people in those days didn't pay much attention to shepherds anyway, or take them very seriously. Their story sounds like a fairy tale.

But here we are, gathered together to hear the story and to sing the songs while the people around us are running about in the noise and

bustle of this time of year, taking care of last minute shopping, running to another party, or taking care of some business. They have probably heard the story as well. Who hasn't seen "A Charlie Brown Christmas?" But life has more pressing matters. The story of the Son of God being born in the little town of Bethlehem and lying in a manger because there was no room at the inn is the stuff of children's Christmas plays. It's a nice story. Perhaps it's just a fairy tale.

It's not a fairy tale for us. We have received the revelation ourselves. The story has found its home in our hearts and deep in our souls. Something deep within us believes this story to be true. We have heard the good news. We have sung the songs passed down from generation to generation. And now, with great expectation, we hope to encounter for ourselves again the wonder of God entering the world as a baby.

Come, draw near in your imagination, from the depth of your soul, and see for yourself the newborn king, our savior. He is here to meet us at this table of bread and wine. He is here to meet us in the beauty of candle light. He is here to meet us as we sing "Christ the Savior is born. Christ the savior is born."