

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 20, 2020, The 4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7, Luke 2:1-20

THE ANGELS OF ADVENT: THE ANGELS COME TO THE SHEPHERDS

It was a season of darkness. The people of the land felt the weight of a government who not only didn't represent them, but who oppressed them. They were oppressed because of who they were, who their parents were, who their ancestors were. They were the people of Israel.

They longed for liberation. They longed to be saved from what the world had become—a place of oppression, where no one had a voice, unless they had money, or they were connected to the right people in the Temple in Jerusalem, or connected to King Herod, or the government of Rome.

They longed to know that God heard them; they longed for life to change for the better.

They longed for the Messiah promised for generations, they longed for the Savior promised by God.

They imagined the day he would come, with the might and power of heavenly armies that would dwarf and destroy the armies of Rome.

They longed for the Messiah who would show the world that they were God's people, God's chosen ones, God's sons and daughters.

They cried out for a liberator who would change their world.

Would he come to them from the palace; raised with the wealth and splendor of the luxuries they only heard about?

Would he appear from the heavens in a blaze of light that could be seen throughout the world?

Would their enemies once again tremble at the power of their God?

Or was the Messiah already among them, gathering the army that would go up against Rome and triumph?

Then it might be like the days of King David, when Jerusalem was the center of the world, and God's people were oppressed by no one.

When the Messiah came, would Jerusalem be the seat of government for the world again?

They were the people who walked in darkness, and they longed for their world to be saved.

And in a small village in northern Galilee, in the tiny town of Nazareth, far from the power-brokers in Jerusalem, and the powerful of Rome, a young girl named Mary was engaged to a carpenter, named Joseph.

They followed the rules of Rome and made the 80-mile journey to Bethlehem, the City of David, to be registered for the census.

Joseph was from the family line of David, and King David had been born in Bethlehem. It would probably mean more taxes from the government that oppressed them, but they followed the laws and went to be registered. The journey would have taken at least four days, but probably more, because Mary was in her 9th month of pregnancy.

While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to give birth to her baby. But the town of Bethlehem was so crowded with people there for the census that Joseph could not find a place for them to stay.

So, Mary gave birth to her first-born son in a stable,
surrounded by the sounds and smells of barn animals,
far from home,
far from the women who would have helped her with the birth.

She wrapped her son in bands of cloth as was commonly done to keep the baby warm and feeling safe.

And there in that stable,
because there was no other safe place for him to rest,
she placed her new son into the manger, the feed trough, filled with new straw.

Both Mary and Joseph had been told by angels that their son was to be the Messiah, the one who would save his people from their sins. Was that what they were thinking about as they marveled over their new son?

As they counted his fingers and toes, gazing into his little face, watching the way he slept, listening to the sounds of his first cries, the miracle of him nursing,
were they thinking of the life before him?

Or were they like every first-time mom and dad, stunned by the beauty and mystery and miracle of their child?

That same night, out beyond the houses and inns and stables of Bethlehem, far out in the fields beyond town, there were shepherds who had brought their flocks together for the night. They often travelled alone during the day, but at night it was safer to bring the flocks together and stand guard over them. If you've ever been out on a truly dark night, then you know that they could see very little. Their low fires gave them light to see each other, to see the sheep. The night was lit by stars, and maybe the light of the moon, but nothing else.

If, on that night, someone had told those shepherds that they were going to be part of the history of their nation they would have scoffed. They knew how people saw them.

They were despised and seen as dishonest and untrustworthy.

They were known for grazing on other people's land.

They weren't known for their cleanliness, or their manners, or their respectability.

They were among the marginalized and the poor of their nation.

They had no expectations of doing anything more than what their fathers had done before them.

And yet on that night that changed the world, into the darkness of that night, an angel of the Lord appeared to those shepherds.

An angel from heaven came to them,

the dirty, marginalized, despised of Israel,

and the angel said what most angels seem to say when they appear to humans in the Bible:

"Don't be afraid!"

But how could they not be afraid, an angel from heaven was there in the fields with them. *"Don't be afraid, said the angel," for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."*

And suddenly into the darkness of that night, that had only been lit by stars, the sky erupted into a multitude of the heavenly army of angels praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

Were the angels chanting, were they singing, are there harmonies that only angel choirs can sing? We'll never know.

But we do know that those shepherds believed what they had been told.

The sky above them emptied as the angels went back to heaven. Once again, they were alone in the darkness of the field outside of Bethlehem.

They had the stars, and maybe the moon, and their low campfires.

And now they had a direction.

So those dirty, despised, never-valued shepherds hurried toward Bethlehem to see what the angels had told them would be there. And just as the angels had told them, they found the stable and they went in and they saw Mary and Joseph, and there in the manger was a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes, just as the angels had said he would be.

On this night of new birth, were Mary and Joseph surprised as the shepherds entered the stable, or had the mystery of their son's birth made them immune to other interruptions from heaven?

The stable was now filled with the scent of animals and the scent of unwashed shepherds, and none of that mattered to those shepherds or the new parents.

The shepherds told Mary and Joseph, and anyone else that would listen, what the angels had told them about this baby:

"This is the Savior; he is the promised Messiah, the Lord.

He is God with us here on earth, he is Emmanuel, the Christ, our Savior."

And everyone they told that night, and in the days and nights to come, were amazed.

Finally, the shepherds headed back to the fields and their sheep, and they were glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen in that stable, in that feeding trough, just as it had been told them by the angels.

The all-power Creator of heaven and earth had broken into human history and changed the lives of Mary and Joseph and those shepherds forever.

They weren't important people, they weren't wealthy people, they had no power or prestige, they were living their simple, ordinary lives

and God broke into their routine and nothing was ever the same again.

The Messiah came to earth, and he didn't come at the front of a raging army, he didn't step from the palaces of the wealthy, he didn't blaze his ways through the skies with blinding light, conquering the known world.

The Messiah, the one who saves all people from their sins, came to all people as a baby,

the child of a couple from a small, unimportant village up in the hills above Tiberius,

welcomed by scruffy shepherds, surrounded by the sounds and smells of a barnyard stable.

There was no perfume of incense,
there was no bed where his parents could sleep after an 80-mile journey,

there were no attendants for his mother as she gave birth,
 there were no fine linens to wrap the baby in
 there was no beautifully carved cradle to lay him in.

He was not welcomed by a delegation from Rome,
 Or a delegation from King Herod,
 there were no fawning power-seekers,
 there were no high priests from the Temple in Jerusalem,
 there was no army to guard and protect him.

The Creator who named the stars, and flung each planet into galaxies we can only imagine,
 Our God, who could have stormed the gates of earth,
 chose to be born into our world, and into our lives, as a helpless baby.
 The Word of God who was there before the first moments of creation,
 came in weakness,
 relying on first time parents to dress him, feed him, burp him,
 change him, and raise him.

This is the great mystery of this season. Our God put on our humanness, so that we would
 always know we are known and loved completely.
 God sent his Son, so that we can each be called daughters and sons of God, so that we can
 each be saved.

And on days like this one, in the midst of our ordinariness,
 In the midst of 2020, which has been far from ordinary,
 Jesus continues to break into our history,
 into our stories,
 into our lives,
 to tell us that the Light will always shine in the darkness,
 and love will always prevail,
 and the Good News of that multitude of angels is for us all:

For a child has been born for us,
 a son has been given to us.
 The authority of heaven and earth is in him
 and he is called
 Wonderful Counselor,
 Everlasting Father,
 Mighty God,
 Prince of Peace.
 Amen and Amen!