

"It's Hard to Keep Good News to Yourself"

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Luke 2:8-14 (NRSV)

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 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: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

President Kennedy attended Mass in Miami one Sunday morning.

After the service, he shook hands with the priest.

The priest leaned in closely to the President and whispered in his ear,

"I think you are doing a good job."

With a grin on his face, President Kennedy quickly replied,

"You don't have to whisper that kind of good news."

The news of Jesus' birth was too good to be whispered.

The announcement needed to be as big and bold

as the mission he was sent to do and the person he would become.

This was why God interrupted shepherds

watching their flocks by night
on the outskirts of Bethlehem.

Their quiet, peaceful evening was not going to stay that way.

God sent an angel to speak to them;

God sent a heavenly choir to serenade them;
God shone the glory of the Lord all around them.

Instead of getting a good night's rest,

these shepherds then made their way
to a manger in Bethlehem to see a newborn baby
and the young couple
who were already in love with this Child of God.

In the days and nights that followed

-- and I suspect for the rest of their lives --
the shepherds shared with anyone who would listen
their recollections of this holy night.

This evening, our attention is drawn

to the conversation on that quiet and peaceful hillside,
a conversation between the angel and the shepherds.

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.

Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

(Luke 2:10-11)

Shepherds rarely heard good news.

They have yet to be nominated to be *Time* magazine's Person of the Year.

Contrary to our modern, positive, pastoral image

of shepherds in nativity scenes and Christmas plays,
shepherds in the first century were scorned.

People imagined them to be shiftless, dishonest people

who grazed their flocks on other peoples' fields.

They smelled like sheep,

and were as dirty and gritty as the sandy desert or rocky mountainside.

Despite the fact they provided the very animals used as sacrifices in worship,

rarely, if ever, were shepherds allowed to enter the Temple.

Shepherds were maligned as unrefined and ostracized as unethical.

God must not have felt the same way.

Funny how that happens.

The folks who get cast out or cast away

are the same ones God collects and with whom God communes.

God chose to reach out to the same shepherds

who were shunned by neighbors and religious leaders.

God chose the shepherds

-- not the scribes nor the Pharisees nor the High Priest in his lavish palace –
to be the first to hear the Good News about Jesus' birth.

God chose those keeping watch over their flocks by night

to be first to visit the site where Jesus was born.

God is the champion of the least, the last and the lost.

Throughout the Gospel of Luke,

we see God bringing front and center
people disparaged and disdained by society:
the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten,
the disrespected, the displaced,
outcasts and sinners.

The Bible tells of how God brought folks to the front of the line,
gave them places of honor, offered Living Water and the Bread of Life.

Such is the story of the people Jesus included in his circle of friends,

and devoted his life to lifting up and serving.

God in Christ spoke into the shadow places of their lives,

showed them the light,
showed them the gift of new life,
showed them the way,
and reminded them that they are good,
made in the image of God. *Imago Dei*.

Christmas and Good News go together, hand in glove.

And the best part of this good news

is that it is for all people who have ears to hear and a heart to receive it.

What good news does the gospel have for you this morning?

I pondered this for some time last week.

Let me share some ideas for you to consider.

You do not have to be famous or powerful

for God to know you and care about your well-being.

You do not have to be perfect to be loved by God.

You do not need to believe to belong in what God is doing

to make the world better for all people.

No sin you have committed is beyond God's ability to forgive.

Forgiveness reverses the destructive process of sin,

and opens the door
to new, fresh, holistic ways of thinking, behaving, and relating to others.

No problem you encounter is too small for God to notice

nor too big for God to help you overcome.
No temptation is, either.

Our challenges do not intimidate God;

our unwillingness to let God help achieve our potential
breaks God's heart;
our willingness to humble ourselves
and accept God's guidance and restorative powers
gives God great joy.

If where you are now in life

is not where you need to be,
you do not have to stay there.
Change is the evidence of your faith.

Nothing you have done wrong

and nothing bad that has ever happened to you
will have the final word in your life.

Rely upon the gift of the Holy Spirit
to help you chart a new way forward.

God has an unlimited supply of strength, courage, determination,

patience, wisdom and love from which you can draw.

Develop a close and closer relationship with God

through prayer, meditation, Bible study and service.

Faith is bigger than fear.

Love is more powerful than hate.

Love always wins.

Serving others is more fulfilling than being served.

Generosity is more rewarding than greed.

Humility is more appealing than arrogance.

Ultimately, hypocrisy will be exposed,

truth will be revealed,
right will overcome wrong
and justice will prevail.

Joy comes from making hope visible;

peace is a by-product of doing what is right.

God smiles and draws close and closer to you each time, every moment

you adopt Jesus' values and lifestyle
-- instead of the world's values --
by sharing what you have with the needy,
speaking up for the voiceless,
advocating for those who have been left behind, making
friends with those who are lonely,
respecting and recognizing those who differ from you,
welcoming the stranger,
forgiving those who have hurt you,
asking those you have hurt to forgive you,
healing wounds instead of inflicting them,
tearing down walls of suspicion and hate,
practicing tolerance as if the world depends on it,
and by building bridges of goodwill,
understanding, reconciliation and hope to all people.

Like the shepherds in the Christmas story,

**what part of the gospel message
do you need to accept and embrace this morning?**

How would this good news change your outlook on life and alter your relationships?

Could this be the gift you need the most this Christmas?

Will you accept the gift of the presence of the divine?

Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

Like the shepherds, will you receive the good news God has for you today?

I hope and pray you will.

God is speaking into the shadow places of our lives,

 showing us the light,
 showing us the gift of new life,
 showing us the way,
 and reminded us daily that we are good,
 made in the image of God. *Imago Dei.*

Like the shepherds,

**will you share this good news
with those who need it as much as you?**

Will you share the presence of the divine, Emmanuel, God-With-Us,

by practicing, by being, by becoming a minister of presence?

The shepherds left the manger in Bethlehem stunned,

a mite perplexed, and with joy in their hearts.

They had a story to tell anyone who would listen.

Do you think maybe it was too hard for them to keep this good news to themselves?

And someone must have, because we have their tale to tell.

 Someone must have looked past their appearance or the smell of their clothes.
 Someone must have decided to hear them, to see them,
 to love them as they are,
 and the gift they received was so good, so good.

Do you think maybe it was too hard for them to keep this good news to themselves?

I wonder if there is any similarity with what happened a few years later,

when two disciples on the road to Emmaus
had a surprise encounter with the resurrected Jesus.

They ran all the way back to Jerusalem,
arriving after nightfall, to tell someone the good news.

I wonder how sharing the good news like the shepherds did,

and like others shared about Jesus,
served to change lives,
to enhance relationships,
to restore the Beloved Community.

I wonder how many of our neighbors' lives

could be changed for the better
by hearing about your divine encounters and life-changing experiences.

I wonder if Christmas is a good time to give someone the gift of your story...

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen!