



Sermon for December 25

Christmas Day

Luke 2:8-20

A few weeks ago, in our youth Sunday school class, we were talking about the story of Jesus' birth. Thinking about the angels appearing to the shepherds, I asked what the kids thought that might be like—to be minding your own business, out at night with the sheep, when all of a sudden....AHHHHH! A great big blast of shining light and some very loud noises. What might our response be to that? One of the kids responded excitedly by covering his eyes, cowering under the table and shouting, "Spare me! Take the sheep!" We laughed pretty hard at that one, but it has stuck with me as such an honest response to what was probably in reality a frightening situation.

The story of Jesus' birth, this Christmas narrative we recount each year, is a beautiful story. It is filled with faithful responses to God's call, people who trust in something impossible to fully understand. Jesus' birth, as the angels declare, is really good news—God, descending to Earth to be incarnate, with us.

It is also a messy and strange story. A literal army of angels shows up to the shepherds, telling them not to be afraid? The scripture describes them as terrified, which might just scratch the surface of the emotions they were feeling.

This is a hard tension to hold, the balance of extreme joy and extreme fear, as I try to put myself in the shepherd's shoes. The angels are bringing good news, of great joy! Something world-changing has happened. And yet. How do you just leave everything behind? How do you trust that this sign from the heavens is real and true? What does it take to step out in faith in the way that the shepherds do?

The story of Jesus' birth is filled with signs that feel foreign—stars that show the way, angels that bring big news—but there are signs that show up in our lives too. Whether or not we experience the full force of the heavenly host in the same way the shepherds do, there are signs of God at work, opportunities to see the Holy Spirit, in our everyday lives. As I hear this Christmas story, as I wonder how I would respond in such a situation, I realize I don't have to wonder—that we are given the same opportunities as the shepherds, to see signs of God and decide how we will respond.

In the angels' message, their proclamation of Christ's birth, the great fear of the shepherds becomes great joy. They have witnessed something incredible and decide to investigate further, going with haste to see this promise God has made known to them.

As we soak up this season of Christmas, this beautiful story of Christ's birth, it is also a time for us to think about the ways we experience God With Us in our lives—and what our response to this good news is. The shepherds act, ultimately, I think, as a reminder that fear and faith are not mutually exclusive. When we get signs of good news, our first reaction might be to shout, "Please, spare me!" but the good news of God is that our fear does not disqualify us from participating in what God is doing in our lives and in our world. Our fear does not disqualify us from joining in the sharing of the Greatest News Ever. Angels in Greek really just means messenger, and the Shepherds become messengers when they drop everything and head to the manger. They become an earthly extension of the heavenly host, joining in the work of sharing the good news. The same invitation extended to the shepherds is extended to us—we get to join in this proclamation as well. God has come to earth, and we may not have a child wrapped in cloth lying in a manger to go and see, but we still have good news to share. In the face of signs from God, we may be afraid, but we are still called to participate in what God is doing here on earth. Amen.

Vicar Jesse Hershberger