

Good News for the Sore Afraid

Luke 2: 8 – 20

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The Community Church of Sebastopol
United Church of Christ
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“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field,
keeping watch over their flock by night.
And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them,
and the glory of the Lord shone round about them:
and they were sore afraid.” – Luke 2:8 – 9 KJV

I.

Here we are in a familiar place at a familiar time – the church on Christmas Eve. We have heard familiar stories accompanied by familiar carols. For some of us, the faces in the room are familiar, friends and family and neighbors we’ve known for many years, or at least a little while. Others might be visiting for the first time, or from out of town. While much about this night may be familiar, it is at the same a night unlike any other night in all history. We are a unique gathering – this exact collection of people has never come together like this before. This newness may come as a great joy – little baby June is here and her mom wasn’t even pregnant yet last Christmas. Or this newness may be marked by sorrow – Grandpa Bob always loved Christmas but he’s not here now to take too many pictures of the tree like he did, or to play Silver Bells on the accordion. Christmas comes to us every year, expected or not, as that which is both familiar and completely new. One year on Christmas Eve, when my sister and I were teenagers, my parents decided to put some presents under the tree rather than wait till morning. We were furious at their egregious breach of Christmas etiquette and hastily composed a song to the tune of “Rocky Mountain High” that began, “Parents ruined Christmas.” Retelling the story of that breach has now become a long-standing tradition. I suppose every day of every one of our lives is both familiar and new. No matter how many May seventeeths you’ve been through, no two are the same.

Every day, it seems, is a new creation, a new set of circumstances, and a new set of possibilities, if we have the eyes to see and ears to hear.

II.

Can we hear the Christmas story with new ears?

Imagine the impact of Luke's story about Jesus' birth upon its first hearers.

The King James Version of the Bible has some words that might help us.

The first word is "abiding."

That's what the shepherds were doing, they were *abiding* in the fields, keeping watch over their sheep at night.

Abiding means the shepherds were doing what shepherds do, what shepherds always do, on that night, let alone any night.

They were abiding in the ordinariness of their lives. They were watching sheep.

The shepherding life wasn't a very glamorous existence.

They played an important role in their society – sheep were an important source of food and fabric – but they lived on the margins of society.

Because they spent their time in the fields with sheep and with other shepherds, they were unkempt and uncouth.

If I were to draw a modern parallel, I'd say the shepherds are today's truckers – critical to society; somewhat unglamorous; with driving schedules, and therefore lives, outside the normal 9 to 5.

So, there they were, abiding, Raul and Sheila and Hakim, at a rest stop late at night, shooting the breeze, doing what they do.

So abiding is the first word.

The story of the gospel, it seems, comes not to important people doing extraordinary things.

The gospel comes to regular, somewhat marginalized people doing ordinary things, abiding in the fields, fueling up a truck, changing a baby's diaper, paying bills, cleaning house, running a meeting, going to class.

Did you hear that?

The Word of God is not reserved for the elite, the powerful, the connected, the mighty.

In fact, God deliberately bypasses all of those privileges and sends messengers to shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

The God of all creation chooses to share the most important news with the lost and forgotten.

Wow, what would it have been for the ones hearing *that* for the first time?

III.

As we imagine how the first hearers might have received this story, there is another word.

The New Revised Standard Version says the shepherds “terrified” when a flash of light and a heavenly messenger appear in front of them.

But I like the poetry in the King James Version, which says: “And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.”

Sore afraid.

One night last week, I woke up at 2:00 a.m. to a sound, a clunk downstairs.

I assumed it was the cat messing with something, but then I realized she was sleeping on my feet.

I listened for any further sound, and heard none, but it was hard to get back to sleep.

My adrenaline response had already been triggered.

In the morning, I discovered a round red ornament on the floor next to the tree.

And yet I had woken up sore afraid.

On that night long ago, the shepherds were suddenly surprised by something they had no categories to understand, no language to explain.

Where there was only darkness, now there was light.

Where there was only absence, now there was an overwhelming presence.

Where there was only abiding, now they were sore afraid.

Where there was silence, now there was a message, and the message to them was: “Don’t be afraid.”

Sore afraid is the second word.

And “Don’t be afraid” is the response.

It seems that the arrival of the good news is jarring, but its message is a comfort.

A flash in the night, it makes us sore afraid, but the message is “Don’t be afraid.”

IV.

But that’s not all the angel says.

After all, what reason did the shepherds have, and what reason do we have, to trust the angel who says, “Don’t be afraid.”

Is there not, in fact, much to fear?

I have a hunch that, as a congregation, we could generate a list of things to fear much more easily than we could a list of reasons to trust.

And if I were to offer a theory on why that is the case, I would say that it is because we spend more time feeding our fears than feeding our trust.

Speaking for myself, I tend to spend more time exposing myself to news than to the good news.

I spend more time worrying about the way things are, or seem to be, than I do keeping watch for how God is working, even now, to do a new thing.

Like me, and like you, those poor shepherds never saw it coming.

They were abiding. There was a flash and they were sore afraid. Then the messenger delivered the good news:

“Do not be afraid. Look, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people. To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

Whoa. A totally unexpected message at an unexpected time in an unexpected place from an unexpected messenger to unexpectant hearers.

Did you hear that? Unexpectant hearers. Just like us.

The story has become so familiar, we are unexpectant hearers.

We don't expect the story to say anything new.

But the angel continues:

“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child (Huh, a child is the Savior?) wrapped in bands of cloth (Huh, a little baby is our Messiah?) and lying in a manger (Huh, the Lord in an animal's feeding trough?).”

And just when the shepherd's incredulity almost got the better of them, “there was [suddenly] with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and singing, ‘Glory. Glory to God throughout the universe, and on earth peace among all people, whom God favors.’”

V.

It must have been the song that did it, which is probably why we have to sing carols to help us really hear the story.

It was the song that convinced them to go and see for themselves, which they did, “with haste,” the text tells us.

You see, when the gospel breaks upon you, there is new urgency to go and see for oneself.

It must have been a strange intrusion for Mary and Joseph.

There they were, alone in their postpartum exhaustion, and in walk a gaggle of truckers, people they'd never met before.

Could they even trust this band of strangers, smelling like diesel and truck stop coffee and trying not to curse.

Did they barge or did they respectfully linger at the doorway?

Did they stand there silent, not quite believing what they were seeing, but filled with the joy of which the angels spoke?

At this point in history no one else in the world knew had seen or heard about this good news of great joy for all people, just two tired parents and some wooly shepherds.

We might imagine that unique gathering as the first gathering of the church.

Strangers who were only hours ago simply abiding, now had a new story to tell.

Regular people who had been sore afraid, were now unable to contain their joy, and returned to their fields whooping and hollering.

Hearers not expecting anything new, were now seized by a story so full of newness, it was scarcely believable.

And is still scarcely believable. Yet this is the story we tell.

There are others stories out there, but this is our story, the church's story, and it a story that claims to describe the way things really are.

We really need not be afraid.

This really is good news of great joy for all people.

There really is born to us this day in the city of David a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

God really did choose what is foolish in the world to show an alternative wisdom.

God really did choose what is weak to show an alternative strength.

God really did choose what is small and forgotten to make a way out of no way.

Now, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." Amen.