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December 23, 2018

This will be a Sign

Intro to Worship

The watching and waiting is almost over... Christmas is almost here! As we've been counting down the weeks in this Advent season, we've been reflecting on the angels that turn up in the stories of Jesus' birth. Whether we imagine angels descending from on high with feathered wings, or believe instead in real, live angels like our neighbor sitting beside us who shares a word of comfort in hard times, we refer to those who share God's message of hope, peace, and love with us.

Today we listen as the angel announces the birth of the Christ Child to lowly shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. We're told that the angel's message is good news for ALL the people. Let us listen with openness to hear God's good news for us today, and be inspired to be God's angels in the world, creating more love in the midst of fear.

With joy for what is yet to come, let us sing about the one called Emmanuel, God WITH US through it all.

Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: 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 there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Last week we began our conversation on Mary with the recognition that reading scripture is complicated. That we are presented with things in our text that our 21st century, post-enlightenment minds question or reject. Whether we're talking heavenly angels, virgin births, or stars acting as GPS for magi, we need to figure out how to interpret our scriptures

when our mind puts on the breaks. I suggested that rather than read our holy book for "facts", for a play by play description of what factually happened, that we read instead for the truths it holds. To look deeper than the surface level of the words to see the meaning behind the story. To ask, what was the author trying to say to the early community of faith? What would they have heard in this text? And from there, discover what truths are revealed about God and about us as Christ followers.

I say that again this week because our scripture turns once again to the angels... and this time not simply one angel, but a "multitude of the heavenly host," that breaks into song declaring "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among all whom he favors." The angels of our scripture come to the hillside to visit with shepherds... they come bearing the news of this newborn king, not to the religious leaders of the day... the ones who were anticipating the coming of the Lord, watching and waiting for it, but rather, to the social and religious outcasts, those on the margins of society.

The author of Luke has something very specific that he's trying to say here... and we need to stop long enough... dig in deep enough to discover what it is... I've mentioned in passing over the past few weeks that Matthew and Luke tell very different birth stories of Jesus, each trying to reveal something specific about this child born king. Luke's story has no kings or magi... no star or camels. Instead we find shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks by night, making sure that none of them wanders off or gets poached by a wolf. In other words... doing their job... their very unglamorous, smelly, dangerous job. Shepherds lived on the margins of society, physically outside the city gates. And because they tended animals who needed care all the time, the shepherds worked on the Sabbath, making them ritually impure and outside the established religious institutions. Shepherds were regarded so poorly in society that they were prohibited from serving in judicial roles and couldn't be admitted in court as witnesses. To buy wool, milk, or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property. Shepherding was the last job to take when you could find no other work. These are the desperate, the desolate... the equivalent to modern day bussers and dishwashers, the day laborers, factory workers, and cleaning crews... those who sophisticated society chooses not to see.

In Luke's telling of the story, God chose to show up FIRST on the margins, not to the fancy city people or the religious elites, but to workers in the fields, to those forgotten and rejected. God shows up to those who have been told so often that they don't belong, that maybe they've started to believe that they are worth less than others.

The angel says "*Be not afraid, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will be for all the people.*" Not just some, but ALL the people. "*To YOU is born this day a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*" Luke's announcement of the birth of the Christ Child comes first to the shepherds so that WE would believe that Christmas is Good News for ALL people, truly all the people. And it's as if the angels knew the shepherds would not believe them... that these outcasts living on the margins of society had come to expect less... as if

they didn't deserve to be included in this good news. Knowing the shepherds would need proof, the angel continues...

"This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And then the skies open and the single angelic messenger is joined by a multitude of the heavenly host. You would have thought that THAT was all the sign the shepherds needed! But no... the sign is a child, a newborn baby.

There is nothing more ordinary, precious yes, but ordinary than a baby. We were all once babies and many of us have had babies of our own. In fact, there are 251 babies born every minute in our world! And yet a baby... a new born, helpless baby in a feeding trough was it—the sign the shepherds were looking for. Luke tells us that God chose to be born into the world not in the form of power and might, but in the form of a poor and vulnerable baby boy, and that first to know were shepherds! How humbling is this God?! Humility is spoken about MANY times in both our Old and New Testaments, how we're called to be humble. To follow after the example of Jesus and humble ourselves before the Lord, and our neighbor. The image of humility for me is kneeling down, lowering oneself so that those who believe they are less than, may know equality and justice.

In our current society, being raised up as the best, the greatest, the one with highest accolades is what is valued. But the angels share good news that God has shown the most humility of all and come down from on high, blessing us with a savior, one who would lift up the lowly. This is the Love that comes down at Christmas. Love in the form of someone vulnerable to care for. Something fragile to protect. Something helpless to hold. A Love that would grow to teach us more about the love of God and what that looks like in action.

Here's the deep and powerful message of Christmas: God's Love means caring for the fragile, the weak, the marginalized and forgotten. And this Love doesn't just come down, it brings down. This love brings down the powerful from their thrones and lifts up the lowly. This Love has the power to bless the forgotten people, the least, the last and the lost—with justice and righteousness. This Love has the power to change the world we live in, so that God's kingdom may come on earth as it is in heaven.

And so, love comes down. Love comes down to lift up those on the margins. Love comes down to lift up the gay ones, the brown and black ones, the poor ones, the sad ones, the vulnerable ones, the mentally and spiritually ill ones.

Love comes down when we stand up for the bullied.

Love comes down when we fight for those who can't.

Love comes down when we feed the hungry and visit the prisoner and heal the sick.

Love comes down when we protect what is most vulnerable in and around us: our hearts, our relationships, our earth; our communities. It is my prayer that as we hear the angels sing of peace on earth, goodwill to all, that we would pick up that song... that we could continue God's work of lifting up those on the margins. That we would live out the

humility that God exemplifies for us through Jesus, Love come down to walk among us. May our lives bear witness, as the angels did in our Christmas story from long ago, that as we share love through humility, it becomes good news of hope, peace, joy, and love for ALL THE PEOPLE. Amen.