

Luke 2:1-20

Synopsis: The sky was brighter than usual that night, making it easier to keep track of the sheep. And then it got really bright. You would have thought that all that "glory" shining would have been "the sign." That's what most of us look for—great big obvious clues about God's presence. But instead, the angel says that a baby... a newborn helpless baby in a feeding trough was—the sign. In a flash, the message was that #morelove is found where you least expect it and perhaps is already there residing in the ordinariness of your life.

The message that the sign of God's presence in the world was to be found in a newborn in a feeding trough shows us how powerful vulnerability is. When God offers God's self in this form rather than that of might and force, we recognize that love is what will save us if we but open ourselves to each other. And we discover that God does and will use the so-called "lowest" or marginalized to bring the real message of love to the world.

"Do not be afraid for I bring you good news of great joy."

Many of us have heard this verse so often, for so many years, that its power may be lost on us. We have heard it loud and clear read from the pulpit. We have heard it muffled and indistinct, spoken in a voice from behind a costume far too big for the preschool cherub asked to deliver the lines. We have heard it year after year until it has become sentimental, predictable, harmless. But it was not always so.

The shepherds were watching their flocks at night. A still night, a silent night; the only creatures stirring were the sheep and the nocturnal animals. And suddenly, unexpectedly, horrifyingly, the angel of the Lord stood before them. And just as frightening, the glory of the Lord shone around them. Try to imagine, an angel from God appearing just before you. A messenger come from the most high, to announce who knows what. And then, the glory of God fills the night; the glory, the radiance, the light of God blinds you to all else. A frightening prospect don't you think – something to send the most righteous amongst us down on to our knees.

For the shepherds, these appearances would not signal the coming of good news. For them, this appearance would be like having a police car pull close behind you, with all their brilliant light and noise calling for your attention. The shepherds were rightfully afraid because, aside from all the mystery and splendor, they would probably be expecting bad news and strong judgment from God's messengers. Shepherds were not as we imagine them now. They were not shiny faced children wrapped in old house coats and tea towels. Shepherds were grungy. Shepherds of the first century were "...suspicious migrants who lived on society's margins." (New Proclamation 1998-99) They were "...stereotyped as unclean because they were regarded as thieves who stole, slaughtered, and sold the new born lambs of the flock that had been entrusted to them." (New Proclamation 2004-4) The shepherds in the times of Jesus' birth

were squeegee boys; on the edge, suspected, grungy and smelling, religiously unkempt and unclean. Bright lights and booming voices would more likely be a sign that they were under arrest than that they were to hear good news of great joy.

We live in a culture of fear rather than a culture of love. Fear breeds “one-upmanship.” Fear says that I have to be better than you to feel worthy. Fear says that I must use power in all the stereotypical ways in order to gain the approval I need. The angels say “do not be afraid” and show us how everyone matters by giving the message first to shepherds (shepherds were despised—seen to be dishonest people who let their sheep eat the grass on other people’s land). True power and the possibility of loving deeply comes with simply being open and vulnerable and being truly yourself. God can work with that!

The angel role here is that of “story-tellers” They declare what has happened. The scripture proceeds, then, to confirm through the shepherds own eyes, that what the angels have declared is true. As a result of having heard and seen these things, the shepherds themselves become messengers as they return “praising God”—mirroring the songs of the angel multitude.

I wonder What acts of love have we witnessed in our lives that compels us to proclaim that love wins?

It’s the whole gospel story, it is the whole Christmas story. Love exists, love wins from the most unexpected places. The great army of angels sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace." It is glorious and awe inspiring but what is more amazing is that each person in our narrative believes the message. Do we believe this heavenly pronouncement? Do we believe that love wins? Do we really hope for peace on earth, peace in our lives and families, peace among us as religions and nations?

A few years ago in an interview the Dalai Lama was asked if he had hope for the future. He laughed and said, 'Of course I have hope. The future has not yet been decided.' That is the only way to live. At least that is what ‘wholehearted’ people believe. If you have been following our series by Dr. Brene Brown you will have heard her message. You cannot let fear and despair win. You must believe in hope and love. You must connect, you must engage, you must risk, you must be vulnerable. You must have the courage to be imperfect, and in doing so you must be kind to yourself. You need to let go of who you think you should be to be who you are. Each of the people in our series have fully embraced their vulnerability and they believed that God saw them as beautiful. It’s the only way they would have risked to believe the way they did.

Do we believe this? Or do we live as if we believe there is no hope, as if the future has already been determined, as if the fragmentations and divisions of our lives and world are permanent. I have been struck this year by how many decorations I see with simply one word “believe” on them. I imagine that for most of them the message is meant to be ‘believe in Santa’ or ‘believe in magic’ but what if every time we saw that word wether adorned with snowmen and Santa and glitter or just a simple word we heard the message believe in promise, believe in hope, believe in

peace, believe in joy, believe in love. Believe that we too can bring these messages, this reality to our world.

This week, throughout the world, people will celebrate the birth of the Child of Peace. Even well beyond Christian homes, men and women with their families and children will mark this day with gift-giving and celebration. People and cultures everywhere will hear again the song of hope and will look to the Child. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from you are called to listen to the message and believe.

The first Angel appearance in our Advent series was to a priest Zachariah. One might think priests are used to hearing the word of God spoken clearly. Let me assure you they are not. At least this one is not. Sure I have felt holy messages, and I can tell you that I have moments where I believe, but I have a whole lot more in which I would wish the angels would simply appear and tell me what to do. But Gabriel gave Zachariah a message that was shocking, and because of his disbelief he was silenced until the prophesy came to fruition. See the messages of God often cause us to risk. Risk in relationship, risk in owning our own worthiness. Risk in loving beyond what feels comfortable.

Dr. Brene Brown shares that we numb vulnerability and that is what is killing us. Imagine. Just imagine how vulnerable Mary had to be. Imagine what it was to share her story with Joseph, with Elizabeth, with Zachariah... and then to go to the rest of the world and say - I'm pregnant. Not only am I pregnant and not married but an angel told me I am pregnant with God's son. We think we got scary secrets? Really. See a huge part of this story is about a longing for us to become real, authentic, and acknowledge that God is with us.

Do you realize according to Dr. Brown we are the most in debt, obese, addicted, and medicated adult cohort in history. The problem is society has created the need for individualism and perfectionism. We must be all together all the time and have it all sealed up in a perfect package. But that just isn't real and so we numb. But we can't actually numb select emotions - and as much as we try we can't actually take them away with a couple beers and a banana nut muffin. And when we numb our hard emotions the ones we don't want to feel we also numb the good ones like joy, and gratitude, we numb happiness and then we feel meaningless and scared and vulnerable and so we have a couple of glasses of wine and a pepperoni pizza.

See, the reason our biblical stories share stories of relationship that include vulnerability is because that is the only way to live into fullness of life.

Last week we imagined what it would have been like for Joseph. This man who risked his very life to accept the story. Who risked losing everything for - Love? For Hope? For promise? Because an angel appeared to him in a dream?

Joseph embraced uncertainty. How rare that is today. Our world is filled with powers that be attempting to make certain what is uncertain. That is why there is so much polarization because people are claiming certainty all over the place, where things are uncertain. Many Christians wouldn't even believe I was a Christian because my faith involves believing in mystery. If they

were to hear that I am pretty sure there isn't an actual physical heaven and hell and I was fully capable of believing this Jesus wasn't actually born of a virgin and I'm okay with the wondering and mystery of that. They would let me know I am going to the physical place called hell. See religion for many is no longer about faith but about certainty and I just don't entirely get that.

Shepherds were the first to look, shepherds living in fields. Unlettered, unwashed herders of livestock existing at the margins, far from the power-centres of respectability and prestige. "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace." The shepherds were faithful to what they heard. This is a feature of the Christmas story. It is in fact a vital feature of Christianity, even though we have often failed to believe it--that new vision is born not necessarily among the holders of power. The message of hope emerges among the least significant, among shepherds, among those who could never have imagined that they would be forever remembered in human history.

That is part of the story I want you to hear for yourself as you go forth from here to share this message with others. God chooses each one of us no matter how prestigious, or faithful or worthy we are all worthy in God's eyes. **YOU ARE ENOUGH. YOU ARE LOVED AND BELOVED.** Hear the angels sing to you - do not be afraid - God has a plan for you.

So here we are - we have come to the day - Emanuel God with us. Are we looking to the child of peace? The greatest of songs has been sung. It is still sung at the birth of every child--it is a song of hope. Do we believe it? Let's listen and remember as we consider this Christmas Child. What Child is This?