

Good News of Great Joy: How to Respond?

Luke 2:1-20

I'm a sucker for a good Christmas story. Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, is my all time favorite. Sentimental stories so often help us focus on the true meaning of the season. So we have stories like *the Littlest Angel*, *the Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, *Charlie Brown's Christmas*, Leo Tolstoy's story of *the Old Cobbler*, O Henri's, *The Gift of the Magi*, classic movies such as *it's a Wonderful Life* and *Miracle on 34th Street* and thousands of other sentimental Christmas tales.

Maybe we need these sentimental Christmas tales because we have become so inured to the Gospel story of Jesus' birth that we need some other reminders to help us *get it*, to help us get the true meaning of Christmas. After all Christians have been hearing this same gospel story for 2009 years now. And, of course, the story has become confused with everything else that surrounds it: the rampant consumerism of gift buying and gift giving, the Christmas light extravaganzas, Christmas parties, with Santa Claus, and Christmas trees and holiday music and the like, (the story has become confused with everything else around it) that the story of a baby born to poor parents in tiny Bethlehem sounds like just another old tale.

But the story of Jesus' birth is uniquely our story. Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is the *real meaning* of Christmas no matter what else comes along with it. How can we hear the story anew? How can we respond to the news that the angels told the shepherds is "*good news of great joy for all the people?*" Maybe the shepherds who hear that angelic message can give us a few clues.

Make no mistake, the shepherds *got it*. Having a supernatural vision of angels, the sounds of heavenly choirs singing impressed upon them that this was no ordinary birth. At first those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks in the hills surrounding Bethlehem, were terrified. But they heeded the angel's message. They rushed to Bethlehem to see for themselves this thing that had been made known to them.

After the terror of the supernatural vision of angels appearing suddenly without warning in the night sky, I suspect the next feeling registered by the shepherds must have been surprise and bewilderment. *Our Savior's birth, a king, the Messiah... in back-water Bethlehem, to no-name parents, a baby born in a stable, wrapped in rags and laid in an animal's feeding trough? You've got to be kidding!* But the shepherds didn't let the absurdity, the implausibility of this birth, stop them from receiving the good news the angels had proclaimed.

Surprise is still an appropriate way for us to receive this story. How could God come among us? How could the Creator of the Universe be revealed in the birth of a tiny, helpless baby? How could God's supernatural perfection, God's omnipotence, God's grandeur, God's infinity be communicated in the messy ordinariness of a human life? We should be surprised and perplexed to find God here in the stable. To find God not in the stars, or the big bang, or in big philosophical ideas, or in power and grandeur, but in a

human being – the infant boy held tenderly by his mother Mary, in the life he lived, in his actions, his teaching, his healing, his dying on a cross.

What makes that message so surprising is that we are always running away from our humanity. We hide our imperfections with clothes, makeup, facelifts and makeovers. We mask our human scent with perfumes and deodorants. We do everything we can to make ourselves age slower, be more powerful, less at risk from disease or accident, more financially secure. Think of all the products and services we spend billions on to make us less vulnerable, more powerful, less simply human. Yet God who is all powerful empties himself of all his grandeur in order to show us what he is like as a human being. If we don't find that message surprising, we're not getting it; we're not hearing it. Our first response to this good news of Jesus' birth should be surprise.

The next thing the shepherds did was to go to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place. The shepherds *showed up*. You're here this evening, you've showed up, for much the same reason. You've heard the same good news proclaimed by the angels and you want to see or experience anew for yourself what the Christmas story is all about.

I've found in my ministry that just being present is often the most important thing. The eloquence of my prayers, my knowledge of the Bible and theology matter a whole lot less than just my being present with someone at a difficult or challenging time. How can we be present tonight to the wonderful good news that 2009 years ago God was born among us? I think that means that we need to hear the story of Jesus' birth with fresh ears, to be open to our own feelings about it. It means that we need to look to see where that story is alive for us – whether in looking at the Nativity set and singing *Silent Night*, or reading the scripture story, or seeing the wonder in a child's eyes, or finding Jesus through helping someone in need, or in time together with our loved ones. To respond fully to the good news of the story we need to *be there*, to *attend* to it, to be open to discover where the good news of Christmas is leading us.

The third thing the shepherds did was to share the good news that they had received. They found everything just as the angels had told them: the stable, the poor couple, the baby wrapped in soft rags and lying in an animal's feeding trough. And so with wonder they shared the good news about the child that the angels had revealed to them.

How can we share the good news? There is so much that surrounds Christmas: Santa, gift giving, family traditions, the tree, special foods and the like. Can we in our families and in our traditions keep Jesus' birth somehow central to the day? Maybe just by keeping a Nativity set front and center. Maybe by telling the story of Jesus' birth to your children or grandchildren. Maybe before your Christmas dinner to read one of the Christmas Gospels – Luke 2:1-20 or John 1:1-14. Maybe by singing Christmas Carols. Maybe by sharing the very personal good news of the unique way that the life of Jesus has been born into your heart and life. The shepherds remind us to share the good news we have received.

We've been following the shepherds as giving us clues on how to respond to the good news of the Christmas story. I'm going to break for a minute from following the shepherds and suggest we follow God. We can respond to the good news of Christmas by following God and responding with hearts that are breaking. God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son. He placed his very life in our hands. God's heart was breaking for the brokenness of the world. We too should respond to this good news with hearts that are breaking.

I suspect that many of your hearts are breaking with sorrow for loved ones who are no longer with us, for friends and family members who are struggling, breaking for the pain you experience and for the pain of the world. The good news of Christmas is not all about joy and angels singing and happiness. The good news of Christmas is also about the hurt and sorrow of this world. That's why God's Son was born into our world, because we desperately need God's living presence to set us right. We respond to the good news of Christmas particularly as we serve those most vulnerable and in need.

I love how Christmas is a season of goodwill and charity. Food is donated to the hungry; gifts are given to children, and people contribute to their favorite charities. But our response to the Christmas good news should last long beyond a season of good will. I love this Christmas poem by Howard Thurman:

*When the song of the angels is stilled
When the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and the princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks
The work of Christmas begins
To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among the people
To make music in the heart.*

Our response to the good news of Christmas should be follow God's breaking heart of love.

Last of all our response to the good news of Christmas should also be to follow the first response of those shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Their very first response was trembling fear and awe. And so with awe and deep reverence I invite you to come again tonight to the manger where Jesus was laid. Sing with angelic choir – *glory to God in the highest!* Kneel in awe and wonderment as candles are lit and we sing *Silent Night*. Let the power of this story swell your heart as we praise God in song and candlelight. Receive with awe the very life of God borne into the world on Christmas Eve so many years ago.

*Silent Night, Holy Night, shepherds quake at the sight,
Glories stream from heaven afar, heavenly host sing alleluia;
Christ, the savior is born! Christ, the Savior is born!*

How do we respond to the good news of great joy that the angels proclaimed? Following the shepherds we can respond with surprise, by showing up and attending, by telling the story and sharing the good news, by letting our hearts break with God for the sorrow and suffering of his people, and with awe and reverence.