

Sermon Sunday Next after Christmas

First Lesson: Isaiah 9:2-7

² The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.

³ Thou hast multiplied the nation, and not increased the joy: they joy before thee according to the joy in harvest, and as men rejoice when they divide the spoil.

⁴ For thou hast broken the yoke of his burden, and the staff of his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, as in the day of Midian.

⁵ For every battle of the warrior is with confused noise, and garments rolled in blood; but this shall be with burning and fuel of fire.

⁶ For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

⁷ Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even forever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.

Second Lesson Luke 2:1-20

2 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

² (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

³ And all went to be taxed, everyone into his own city.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

¹² And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

¹⁷ And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.

¹⁸ And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

Introduction

As a child, I grew up in the 70's and 80's. In a time where no internet or streaming services existed, when the holidays rolled around you had to be particularly observant if you wanted to watch your favorite holiday special. Kids at school would pass the word, "Hey Rudolph is on tonight!" or I would comb our weekly "Tv Guide" to find out what night *Santa Claus was Coming to Town* was airing. There were many different movies, cartoons, and specials, and we all had our favorite, but so few talked about the true meaning of the holiday, the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. One of my favorites, was the Charles Shultz, Peanuts cartoon where Charlie Brown complains about the overwhelming materialism that he sees amongst everyone during the Christmas season. Lucy suggests that he become director of the school Christmas pageant. Charlie Brown accepts but it is a frustrating struggle. When an attempt to restore the proper spirit with a sad and forlorn little Christmas tree fails, he needs Linus' help to learn the meaning of Christmas. If you remember, Linus recites our second lesson today, from the Gospel of Luke. In a time before political correctness and fearful networks, we hear the true story of Christmas. Later, the whole group, including Snoopy, sings the hymn "*Hark! The Herald Angels Sing*, the same hymn we sang in our processional this morning. This hymn also tells the story of the birth of Jesus and the joy and tribulation at the birth of the Prince of Peace. Written by the Anglican priest and hymn writer, John Wesley, it was always my favorite growing up.

Another Christmas tradition in my family was the watching of the 1951 classic, *A Christmas Carol*, starring Alastair Sim. In my opinion, it is the one version that truly expresses Dickens' love for Christmas and there are many references to the real reason why we celebrate. From Peter Cratchit reading Psalm 91 by candlelight, to the Ghost of Christmas present reminding Scrooge that we need to be kind and present with our neighbors not just on Christmas. He says, "So it is with the child born in Bethlehem, He does not dwell in man's heart only one day a year but in all the days of the year."

As we move toward the New Year, let us look at how we can keep Jesus in our hearts, and like the shepherds who received the good news and spread the word of the newborn King, how can we communicate to others what the birth of Jesus gave to the world.

Body

Luke 2:7-20 Jesus is born in a manger and the nearby shepherds are told of the coming of Jesus by an Angel of the Lord. The angel tells them where to

find Him and praises the glory of God. The shepherds are eager to see what God has told them about and they go in haste to the baby Jesus.

When we read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, we can learn many valuable lessons and discover some profound truths to think about. First off, we see how God uses people, both the powerful and those who appear insignificant, to accomplish His will. Caesar Augustus pushes forth a tax that makes Joseph and Mary go to Bethlehem. A powerful man who God uses to put His agenda into play. The shepherds tending their flock are lowly members of society but are used to glorify God and spread the news of Jesus's birth. Luke tells us that the angels gave an impromptu concert of praise, announcing the birth of Jesus. Once the shepherds heard it, they went with haste to the Savior, Christ the Lord. Even Mary, a young woman who would be considered insignificant by so many in her day, responded to the Angel Gabriel with bold, sacrificial faith, saying, "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it unto me according to thy word.*"

God works in the lives of people, both the powerful, and those who appear to be insignificant to further His kingdom. Noah obeyed God and built an ark, listening and obeying through faith (Hebrews 11:7). Job suffered greatly and yet never stopped believing in, and having faith in, God. In the Book of Ruth, we see God is at work in the day-to-day activities of average people helping them achieve wonderful things. Both Isaiah, as we hear in our first lesson, and Daniel prophesized about our coming Messiah. Our world is filled with all types of people and God works in miraculous ways through all types of people to accomplish His will. All of us are blessed by God and are part of something wonderful. *The LORD delights in those who fear Him, who put their hope in His unfailing love* (Psalm 147:11 NIV).

As we look at the gospel of Luke, we can look at the shepherd's role in the story and ask ourselves, "why would God send angels to shepherds announcing the birth of the newborn king instead of more powerful, influential people?" Perhaps it is because they were humble and obeyed with childlike faith. In verse 15, after the angel had told them the news and praised God, they knew they needed to go to Bethlehem right away. They obeyed God with a spirit of humility, an openness to His message, and adoration of the command. No excuses, no trying to bargain with God, nothing but obedience and a willingness to praise and worship God. Also, after they saw that what the angel said was true, they spread the word abroad and let people know that the Savior is born. Fr. Chris, in last week's sermon, talked about the "holy fear of God" and he described it as "awe filled, amazed, wonderous respect For God and all His power and might." Surely the shepherds

felt this holy fear and their actions showed us that they were excited about sharing the good news.

In the New Testament, there are many examples of people Jesus shared the message of hope, peace, love, and joy found only in His gospel, and how they responded by sharing the message to others. The Samaritan woman at the well was an excellent example of how through his loving presence, Jesus conveyed the Good News. Jesus tells His Apostles in Luke, to “*preach the kingdom of God*” and they obeyed, going through towns, preaching, and healing. In the Book of Acts, we know that the Apostle Paul, who was one of the strongest messengers of the gospel, “*preached and taught those things that concern the Lord Jesus, with all confidence, no man forbidding him.*” In Matthew, we are given the directive to “*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.*” Sharing our faith with others is not just a suggestion, but a commandment from God. When we share our faith with others, we show God that we are grateful for the blessing of Salvation brought by Jesus, and we love our neighbors by telling them how they too can be saved through the grace of God. Second Peter, tells that God doesn’t want anyone to be lost or perish but “*that all should come to repentance.*”

Action

Like the shepherds, the Apostles, and those who heard Jesus and knew he was truly the Son of God, we too must, by the grace of God, have faith to believe, and share that faith. We are His messengers on this earth, and it is up to us to share the gospel and live our lives in such a way that people will know that God is present. We can share the gospel informationally, by reading Holy Scripture and explaining how God will enrich their lives and through repentance of sin, belief in God, and baptism, they can receive eternal life. We can also share the gospel incarnationally, by living our lives in accordance with God’s commands and in a way that glorifies and honors Him. Often, this type of evangelism is the most powerful.

This semester I learned a lot about evangelism and ways to share my faith with others. Several weeks ago, I had the occasion to go to an award service for one of my former employees. While there I ran into a colleague who I had mentored and worked closely with. He told me he had heard I was in school for theology and that he would love to “bend my ear, as he had some questions.” We met for lunch and over a plate of Pad Thai, I told him how we were created by God in His image, how sin entered the world and how as humans we are fallen and have a propensity

to sin. I then shared how God sent His Son to us, so that all who believe and repent can be forgiven of their sins and have everlasting life (John 3:16). He asked a few questions, and we had a great conversation. I really think he understood who God was and was willing to accept God into his life. As we were leaving, he said something to me that has stuck with me for a while. He said, "I worked with you for over 16 years, and I never knew how strong your faith was. No one has ever explained God to me before."

I understand the concern many have about workplace discussions, but my friend and I had spent time away from work on many occasions. I was hesitant to tell him about my faith out of fear of being labeled, fear of being rejected and fear of not telling it correctly. I am sure the shepherds were afraid as well, but the angel of the Lord told them, "*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people*" We too should not be afraid to share the good news, the important news, the life-giving news of Jesus Christ. Paul acknowledges this in The Book of Acts, by saying that he wants to carry out the mission he received from God, the mission of testifying of the gospel and the grace of God.

Conclusion

The lowly shepherds, not the religious elite, the politically savvy, or the rulers of the people become the kind of people Jesus proclaimed His message to. The shepherds are an example that God works in the lives of all people, both the powerful, and those who appear to be insignificant to further His kingdom. Let us remember why Jesus was born and what He means for us and those trapped in darkness. Let us not be afraid to tell others about this wonderful truth and through our lives and actions, reveal what God has done for us. As the angel of the Lord told the shepherds in the fields, "*Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*" As we move toward the New Year, may we remember these good tidings and this great joy, that brings Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

To the only wise God, our Savior, be glory, majesty, dominion, and power, both now and forever, Amen,

