

Christmas Eve Service
Year B, 24 December 2010
Christ Church, Millwood, Cunningham Chapel
The Rev. Karin MacPhail

I don't know about you, but when I hear the words from Luke's gospel, the words we read every Christmas Eve, the story of Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, and the shepherds and the angel, my mind and my heart are flooded by all sorts of Christmas memories and images.

I remember being a little girl, struggling to stay awake through the late service at church, looking forward to getting home and into new Christmas pajamas and falling asleep dreaming of what Santa would bring. I remember my first Christmas as a newlywed, negotiating family traditions that were different from the ones I'd grown up with. I remember being very, very great with child one Christmas, five days before my son, our first child, was born. I felt a special connection with Mary that year!

One image that always comes to mind is the picture of a little boy with a blanket, standing in the middle of a stage, and the sweetly wise and innocent voice of Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas special. I was just reading in the *Washington Post* last week that when *A Charlie Brown Christmas* first aired in 1965, half of America—that was more than 15 million households—tuned in to watch.

Imagine that. All sorts of people were watching and listening as Linus read from the Gospel According to Luke. All sorts of people have seen this show and heard this gospel message every year since.

I must have seen *A Charlie Brown Christmas* at least twenty times, and each time I see it, I can't quite believe that I just saw and heard what I just saw and heard. I can't quite believe that between all the commercials trying to sell me the best Christmas gift—the greatest toy or the most beautiful necklace or the shiniest car with the biggest bow on it—Linus is on network television reciting from the Bible the story of the birth of Jesus and the true meaning of Christmas. It is absolutely magical.

Luke tells us, "In that region there were shepherds, living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." Some people who research such things believe that the shepherds here are just everyday people. Regular folk. Not so great, but not so terrible either. Other people who study the Bible think that the shepherds were probably more...unsavory than that. Shepherds were dirty and smelly from their work outside with the sheep, and they wouldn't have been the sort of people you'd want to spend time with.

Some think that the best equivalent today might be the men who hang out on a street corner waiting for an odd job for a day painting houses or packing boxes or mowing lawns or sweeping floors—day laborers, some of them undocumented workers. Whether they are just like everyday folk or more like outcasts, shepherds were definitely not the people with privilege and money and power and status.

So these shepherds are minding their own business—keeping their sheep safe at night—and “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” Biblical angels weren’t sweet-faced cherubs or quirky, lucky charms, or beautiful women with gauzy dresses and long hair. Angels were fierce and powerful—other-worldly messengers of a holy and all-powerful God. When an angel in the Bible appears before you, you are afraid. And if “the glory of the Lord [shines] around” you, you tremble. The shepherds were terrified.

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid.’” Do not be afraid.

Then the angel says perhaps the most important words in the whole Christmas story. So listen closely. The angel says, “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.” The angel proclaims, “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.”

I am bringing **you** good news. To **you** is born a Savior. A sign for **you**. **You** will find a child.

You shepherds. Good news for **you**. A savior for **you**. A sign for **you**. A child for **you**. I am telling **you** first. And this news is for all the people. **All the people.**

Martin Luther writes that the angel who appears to the shepherds “does not simply say: ‘Christ is born; but **for you** he is born.’”¹ Luther continues, “What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own?”²

The shepherds heard the angel say that first Christmas, “Hey shepherds! Salvation is for you! Jesus is for you! God loves you, and the precious Christmas gift of the Incarnation is for you!” And the angel said it was not just for them but for all the people.

They didn’t have to have all the answers or great jobs or fancy clothes or lots of money to receive this gift. They didn’t even have to have clean fingernails and smell nice. An angel of the Lord still came to the shepherds and gave them the greatest announcement ever heard. And a multitude of the heavenly host joined in with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” Imagine what all those angels praising God must have sounded like!

¹ Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*

² *Ibid.*

All of that magnificent splendor just to deliver the news to some shepherds. Plain old shepherds. Dirty, smelly shepherds. God pulled out all the stops for this little group full of nobody special. And that's what Christmas is all about. God pulls out all the stops for each one of us, even if we're not anybody special or anybody particularly important. God so loved the world—even the lowly, especially the lowly—that he sent his only begotten Son.

I think it is perfect that that beautiful one-minute long recitation of scripture in the Charlie Brown Christmas special is this account of the angel telling the shepherds of the good news for them and for all the people. Because **all the people** were watching—15 million American households that first year and many millions more in the 45 years since.

The poor and the rich, Christians and Jews, people of other faiths and people of no faith were watching. People with power and people with none, educated people and uneducated people, children and grown-ups were listening. All the people. Little Linus gives this good news to ordinary people, just as Jesus came to ordinary people, and the angel proclaimed to ordinary people. And here we are again celebrating Christmas, just ordinary people.

After all these years, Christmas is still worth celebrating! Christmas still proclaims the good news that God loves us and knows we need a Savior, God-in-flesh living among us, a person we can hear and see and touch. God knows we need a Savior who can teach us and show us how much God loves us.

Jesus Christ is born in Bethlehem. He is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord, God-made-flesh. And this is good news for you, God's best surprise for you. And you and you and you.

Even if you don't usually go to church, Jesus is for you. Even if your heart feels heavy with sin or sorrow, Jesus is for you. Even if you don't feel especially good or holy, Jesus is for you. The shepherds were not so holy, but when the angel of God appeared to them, they listened. Maybe that's the whole reason God chose them.

Those simple shepherds listened and were amazed at what they heard. Those simple shepherds believed that the angel's message was indeed good news for them. They rushed to Bethlehem to proclaim what they heard, to see the newborn Savior and to glorify and praise God.

The most wonderful present this Christmas, the most wonderful and amazing present every Christmas, is the free gift of Jesus Christ for all people. God's Christmas gift to us, every year, is his gift of love, born at Christmas. And it's for you. For the shepherds, for all the people, and for you. Every year for you. Listen and be amazed. Believe and proclaim. Glorify and praise God!

Merry Christmas!!