

HEAR THE ANGELS SING
Isaiah 9:2-7 / Luke 2:1-20
Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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Christmas Eve is not meant to be spent alone and we feel genuinely sorry for those who have no one to be with on this holy night.

What would your Christmas be like if you couldn't have Christmas dinner with family and friends? What would you be missing if you couldn't share with others the sublime peace that comes in the glow of a candle lit sanctuary, listening to the story of the first Christmas and singing your favorite carols?

Christmas is meant to be enjoyed with others. Worshipping the Christ Child together enfolds us into the beloved community. Here we are affirmed in our identity as God's children and blessed with a growing sense of belonging.

All the more reason for people of good will to be aware of the alone and forgotten not only on Christmas Eve but every day of the year. Our celebration of Christ's birth is fatally flawed if we make no room for them in our hearts. If our prayers follow the template,

Bless me and my wife
my son John and his wife,
Us four, no more. Amen.

we dishonor God and completely miss the point of what Christmas is all about. Christ came to move us beyond thinking just about ourselves so we can fully embrace the Christmas spirit.

How do you embrace the Christmas spirit? That is the question. And we begin to find the answer by acknowledging Christ was born into a world more similar than different than our own.

Two thousand years ago, the Rome Empire dominated the known world. In the world Jesus was born into, the arts flourished and towering edifices, public and private, were erected. The shelves of shops were filled with merchandise coming from the four corners of the earth. A sophisticated system of roads made speedy communication possible. For some it was a great time to be alive.

But for the many, life wasn't so good. If you were one of the few privileged to be a citizen of Rome, you enjoyed all the benefits of Pax Romana, or Roman Peace. Unfortunately, if you lived in one of the conquered countries, like Judea, you had no rights to speak of. Roman soldiers could sweep into your village, empty your pantry and take your cow or anything else they fancied with impunity. Otherwise, the Romans delegated authority, leaving things to Caesar's puppet, King Herod, a blood thirsty thug, to keep law and order in the land.

Living under these harsh conditions, the people could only turn to their religious leaders to speak up for them, but the religious leaders were too busy managing organized religion. The Sadducees, the rulers of the temple, collaborated with the Romans to keep their privileges intact so they were no help. The Pharisees, laymen dedicated to keeping the Law of Moses, became so strident and legalistic they ignored the spirit of the law and ardently followed the letter of the law and then became its enforcers. If you didn't practice all the mandatory rituals and traditions you were shunned and became an outcast along with foreigners, lepers, tax collectors and prostitutes.

As a result good people were shut out of the community. Beaten down and demoralized by their Roman masters they were also banned from their own synagogues and temple. They became lonely outcasts, scorned and rejected by their own people.

It may surprise you that even shepherds were blacklisted. Why shepherds? Because living out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by day and by night, they couldn't keep the Pharisees' codes and rituals, not to mention the Sabbath, a day of rest.

As far as the managers of organized religion were concerned, shepherds were just as irresponsible for the decline of religion in Israel as the tax collectors and prostitutes.

When you think about it, isn't it curious that the angels didn't appear to the priests in their temple or the Pharisees in their synagogues. The fact is Christ's birth announcement wasn't made in church but out in the fields to people with no standing. In his infinite wisdom, God revealed his glory to lonely outcasts who fell through the cracks.

With our sentimental image of shepherds it's hard to comprehend why they were lumped in with the other degenerates of society. This is especially ironic since the shepherds provided a necessary commodity, the lambs routinely sacrificed by the priests in the temple for their sins.

Now you understand why the big reveal of the long-expected Messiah's birth was made to the shepherds. The religious folks were too content. They thought they had God all figured out and everyone else was dammed. But they were dead wrong. Only lonely and forgotten people could appreciate the angels' glad tidings of great joy.

Listen again with new ears to St. Luke's account of the happenings on that holy night.

In that region there were shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then the 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." (Luke 2:8-10)

Certainly the angel didn't want the shepherds to be afraid of him, but he also didn't want them to be afraid of the hopeless life they found themselves in. The angel continued,

"I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people...a savior has been born...the Messiah, the Lord..."

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared...praising God and singing, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those with whom he is well pleased." (Luke 2:9-14)

This message foreshadowed the primary theme of Jesus' preaching, "Rejoice, the Kingdom of God is at hand."

This Kingdom isn't a geographical location so you won't find it on a map. Instead his Kingdom is a state of being and you find it in the hearts of people of good will.

Read the Gospels. Jesus spent much of his time trying to deconstruct organized religion. He tried to cut through the red tape and tear down the walls that separated people from each other. Jesus wanted to free us from practicing unnecessary add-on traditions, keeping us from doing what we're supposed to be doing, going out into our neighborhoods to work for God's peace by loving and serving our neighbors instead of shoving them aside and pretending they didn't exist.

Picture in your mind's eye the people who tend to be ignored today. Got it? Now, reframe that same image with Christ in the picture. Watch him risking his reputation by accepting a tax collector's invitation to party with his sinful friends. Watch Jesus choosing to spend time with the riffraff and the poor instead of enduring the sedate and smug company of the religious. Then ask yourself, "Where do I fit into this picture?"

The other night I watched my favorite version of Dickens's Christmas Carol starring Alastair Sims. Old Jacob Marley, dead these seven years, came to haunt Scrooge on Christmas Eve. At first Scrooge dismissed Marley's apparition as "humbug." The tormented Marley howled in agony, pleading for Scrooge to save himself or his fate would be far worse than his own.

Scrooge protested, "But you were a good man of business, Jacob."

Marley screamed in shame, "Business, mankind was my business. Their common welfare was my business and it's at this time of the rolling year that I suffer the most."

Mankind is your business too because it was Christ's business. He spent his life and died on the cross for making mankind his business.

Too often Christ's Gospel is watered down to a sentimental spirituality with Christ as your personal savior, a personal trainer you keep handy to keep you fit for heaven. That's the

message of some of the televangelists. They become rich selling this stuff but their customers are poorer for it.

Christmas Eve is a time to choose sides, hopefully on the side of the angels who preached peace, justice and good will. Christmas Eve is a God-given opportunity to reconsider the incarnation, God becoming flesh and bone in order to live and serve in your own flesh and bone.

When you think about it, this is actually good news. Christ chooses to live in you so he can live through you. Christ singles you out and trusts you to do something important with your life to impact other lives and change the world for the better. It's true, when God's will is done, through you and me, God's Kingdom comes, through you and me.

I hope you're wondering, "Where do I begin?"

That's a question our congregation has been struggling with this past year. We want to make a difference in the neighborhood we find ourselves in. Already our A+ Before and After School program is making a difference in the lives of thirty something children from Pleasant Plains Elementary School and their families. On Sunday mornings we have Sunday Morning Drop In which begins at 8:30 with breakfast and ends at noon with lunch. In between the children from the neighborhood attend worship with us, then go to Church School and play games. We also sponsor Movies on the Lawn with the Loch Raven Village Association twice a year and the annual Breakfast with Santa. But we realize God is calling us to do more. So in the months ahead we'll be praying, watching and listening for opportunities to partner with people of good will, in this neighborhood, to do something important and lasting to bring the love of Jesus to our neighbors.

Where can you begin? On your own, you can pray, watch and listen too. If you listen hard you can hear the angels' song pointing you in the right direction where the Christ Child is found in people and situations God sends your way. Who knows? You may discover your vocation. You can conspire with your friends to give your time, talents and treasure to a good and noble cause like a food pantry or a hospice or becoming a Big Brother or a Big Sister to a boy or girl who needs love and guidance. Really, what on God's earth keeps you from doing what you were born to do?

Seven hundred years before Christ was born the Prophet Isaiah received a divine revelation he passed on to people of good will.

*For a child is born for us
a son is given to us;
authority rests on his shoulders
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...
and there shall be endless peace...*

*He will establish it and uphold it
with justice and righteousness
for this time onward and forever more.
The zeal of the Lord of Hosts will do this.
(Isaiah 9:6-7)*

None of us can save the world, that's Christ's job. But don't forget, mankind is your business too. You and I can make and be a difference in the world God so loved. Like Mary, we together can treasure these things in our hearts. Like the shepherds, together we can praise and glorify God for all we've heard and seen and pass it on to them.

That's what Christmas is really all about, you and me putting flesh, our flesh, on the line by living for Christ and his kingdom.

There are lonely and dispirited people out there waiting for you and me to embrace them. Will you, like Christ, decide to lay down your life for them this Christmas Eve?