

GO! — HILLSIDES TO THE MANGER
Advent

Luke 2:8-18

A Sermon Preached by
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Seattle, Washington 98125
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Scripture – Read by Liturgists

Listen for the word of God.

Luke 2:8-18¹

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an 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; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those God favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Pastor Amy Roon

Please pray with me.

God,
Be in our heads,
Be in our hearts,
Be in our understanding,
Be in the words heard and the words spoken.
– Amen

And so this Sunday we consider the story of the shepherds and what caused them to go from the hillside to the manger and, since you do not have your resident shepherd preaching to you, I might talk a little bit more about the angels – and what they sang, but just a warning. Because we are out on this hillside with shepherds. And an angel comes and prays, "Do not be afraid," and then a whole host of angels appear and sing praise songs to God and *then*, ... then the shepherds go.

¹ The Holy Bible, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New Testament. ©1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. .

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As I read and reread this Scripture so incredibly familiar, trying to find something more poignant to tell you than, "Yeah, so, they felt motivated to go to the manger." I began to notice some things that the angels didn't say. The angel doesn't come to the shepherds with an urgent message making the case that government corruption is putting them and their families at risk, even though that was as true then as it is today. The Angel didn't come saying the poor and marginalized are enduring a massive and systemic oppression and you – yes, you! - shepherds are called to do something about it. The Angel came first with the message to assuage their fear, because the angels knew that you, that we are not good listeners when we are afraid. So the first message must always be, "Do not be afraid." It must also be first a message of prayer.

I feel this especially this morning, because as much as I want to go on this journey with you, as much as I want to feel like I, too, am inspired to go, my inbox is flooded with messages of fear. And I get so afraid. I don't have any answers. And I know you want answers as much as I do. And all I hear and read is "We have one last chance to stop this tax bill." These are direct quotes from my inbox.

"You know that black families are more often than not depicted as poor and uneducated, feeding the myths and stereotypes that we are inferior!"

"The Trump administration is prohibiting CDC officials from using seven words and phrases in official documents, [as they] are being prepared for next year's tax budget!"

"Five years after Sandy Hook, lawmakers aren't addressing the shootings that plague many communities!"

And yet the angels say, "Fear not!"

I remember asking my Sunday school teachers why the Angel said this. I could understand how the shepherds might be startled, but I think in my elementary school mind the idea of angels appearing in the dark of night sounded more exciting than fearful. And I was given the stock answer that fear in this context might mean something more like "overwhelmed with awe", but, you know, I think I was just too young to have a more varied experience of what being afraid can feel like and what it can do to me. The New Testament in particular has a lot of messages about not being afraid. And every day I encounter overwhelming messages of our human failings and oppression and I need the Gospel to remind me not to be afraid. Because good decisions don't come from places of fear, healthy communities are not fearful communities, and I cannot be motivated to go anywhere when I am too full of fear to move. Yes, the Angel knew what she was doing. If she hoped those shepherds were going to respond to her message, she was going to have to remind them not to be afraid, and once once they could see that they were not afraid, they burst into song praising God.

Now I have spoken before about how I was raised in church. I was raised with the critically thinking social justice motivated faith and prayers were written out or memorized or said spontaneously by persons with some training or they were quiet personal prayers between me and God that didn't require training. And it wasn't until I started to sing publicly, until I had to lead a gospel choir that I realized that the person who needed to remember and be accountable to see that this community prayed out loud was going to have to be *me*. As many of you know I only learned how to do any of these things by understanding them is a practice. That's what got me over my fear of praying in public: Praying in public got me over my fear of praying in public.

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I was raised to be even more skeptical of praise music. My brother called Christian worship that focused on praise music "powder puff Christianity." And I didn't correct him until I had attended an Anglican church in Paris and sung in the traditional service in the morning in the contemporary service in the evening. And, yes, I found myself loved and accepted and prayed for and critically engaged all by people who found it totally normal to sing music accompanied by a praise band while the words flashed by projected on a screen. And it was with that church that I would first name aloud my calling to be a pastor.

There's a lot I learned from the patterns of faith that I was raised to practice, but my tradition didn't show me the value and *courage* inherent in prayer and praise. And so the older I become, the more critical I am of social justice work that's done without it. If I can't find the words to talk to God about the wrongs of this world, how can I expect to talk to my senator? If I prioritize talking to my legislators over talking to God, what am I practicing in my theology? Now I'm not saying don't bother calling your legislators, I'm just saying don't shortcut your God talk just because God doesn't send you an auto-reply confirmation.

And at the heart of praise - of whole-hearted praise - is intrinsic hope. It sings with the conviction that the *world is beautiful* and the act of singing this conviction convinces me that the ugliness of evil is the falsehood, which I will never become convinced.

Some of you were at Seabeck a few summers ago and endured Ron Harbor and I trying to nail this point home over a couple of days. And if I can get a quick show of hands I'm not breezing through this too fast, how many of you remember that week or were there that week? All right, so if you if you have questions about this you have folks asked later besides me. You might remember the moment – I think it was probably Tuesday – when I acknowledged that I knew you all were getting restless. Ron and I were going on and on about the importance of music as a function of worship in prayer and in praise. And I knew that many of you were antsy to get onto the important vital work, this stuff, the songs of the civil rights movement, to get talking about how this engaged with justice. But what we knew you had to understand first is that this music that sustained the civil rights movement was absolutely and completely informed by the music of worship, that the practice of prayer and praise was essential to the practice of nonviolent resistance, because it is a practice. And I know that some of you are working really hard on your antiracist journey and what began as a gut punch of truth became an unshakable conviction that seemed so logical when surrounded by others that share that conviction with you, but perhaps now you are encountering the fierce wave of resistance when you start speaking those truths to all the people in your life. And if you're on that journey and you haven't met that resistance yet; if you've not encountered the hostility of the "This is not happening. Be quiet", keep speaking about it, you will. And when you do, I hope you have a song of prayer and praise in you. I hope that when you come here you have a practice of prayer and praise in the community you can experience that with, with your fellow shepherds gathered to affirm your call.

And I know some of you are thinking of wandered as I've wondered this morning and if I'm ever going to get back to the hillside on Bethlehem. Let me remind you what shepherds are usually watching for and what a *normal* experience of alarming is: a reason to leave the hillside and run into town with the message would be to alert the town that there is a predator on the loose. The message from the shepherds in any normal situation is flat out "Watch out! We have encountered fearful, dangerous predators and we are doing our best, but you need to rally because there is something out in the

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darkness that will kill you; and I need you to wake up." But that's not the gospel, is it? Because the gospel takes what we hear over and over again in our everyday lives and always turns it on its head, because it is not danger that compels them off the hillside, it is *hope*. It is not fear that makes them run but *love*. It is a message of hope delivered as prayer and praise. And so, in this small vignette of a side story to the narrative of the Nativity that you know so well, we once again hear the heart of the gospel:

Go!

Do not be afraid.

Go!

Trust that God is in the world.

Go!

Spread the good news that God is in the world,
Yes, even in the face of danger,
Yes, even to those who are only listening for words of fear,
Yes, especially to those who would try to convince you otherwise.
God is alive! God lives among you.

Glory,

Glory,

Glory,

To the God that lives among us.

Go!

Let the heavens show you how to sing that the earth show you how to praise and may you be swept up again in the song maybe the echoes of Angel praise light in your burdens strengthen your convictions and inspire you to go and sing

Glory to God in the highest heaven and

Yes, on earth there will be peace.

– Amen

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