

“... as the angels told the shepherds of a sign, be the sign to others: in warmth, in bread, in friendship, in compassion, in justice.”

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St. Thomas Lutheran Church, Bloomington, Indiana

Wherever God Is Needed the Most

Luke 2:8-16

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 whom 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.

Perhaps it is good news that we are not all together in this place tonight. Maybe it is right that we're not here to see new Christmas dresses and funny Christmas ties. Babies in new footie pajamas. Maybe it is good that we will not share the light from person to person tonight. And that we won't arrive early to warm up the building. Maybe it is good news, maybe...because this isn't where the baby would be anyway. The stories we've heard tonight: stories about the incarnation, of God dwelling with us, pitching his tent among us, taking on our lot, all of these stories tell us that the Christ is born wherever God is needed.

Who among us hasn't wondered where God is in all this? Where is God when more than 300,000 Americans have died, many of them alone? Where is God while we learn of the latest effects of a virus we are still fighting to treat and prevent - let alone cure? Where is God this year? Where was God when George Floyd died on a Minneapolis street curb, calling for his mother? Where was God when Chichipate flooded? Where was God when people without homes were driven from Seminary Park right here in Bloomington? Where is God when my children grieve in loneliness for the friends they cannot see? Where is God when the needs of teachers are pitted against the needs of the student? When we are “biting and devouring” (Gal 5:15) our political opponents? Where is God when all

remains unequal - when we can measure access to quality schools and cents on the dollar and food deserts, and find that in so many areas we are lacking? Where is God?

Where?

There. Precisely there.

God is being born wherever people need God the most. That is the truth of the Christmas story. Bishop Craig Saterlee, of Northwest Lower Michigan, when he took up the Christmas story, said,

“I have come to regard God sending angels to shepherds as bigger than reaching out to outsiders. Spend enough time in the field, shunned by decent and religious folk, disappointed by God, or overwhelmed by grief, and we stop caring that we are outsiders. We give up trying to get inside religion, or even on God, to get on with life. But God does not give up on us. God sends angels to people who have given up on God.”

And more: God sends stars to those who are searching, even if they don't know what for. God grows shoots from dead stumps. God gives water in the desert. God warms hardened hearts. God brings new life in the midst of death.

God's work is transformative, life-changing. It happens in affliction, in confusion, in persecution (2 Cor 4:8). The Gospel, St. Paul says, is entrusted to us in delicate clay jars in order to make it “clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us.” Christmas comes to us in the delicate package of a newborn, passed with great care from mother to father to visitor as a priceless, fragile gift. “Do not be afraid” the angels say again and again. Do not be afraid, beloved. Trust, instead, that the worries and cares of your heart, the concerns for those who are without tonight - without a home, without food, without peace of mind, without the love of family - to *them* “has been born a Savior, who is the Messiah, Christ the Lord.” And then beloved, begin the work of Christmas, as the angels told the shepherds of a sign, be the sign to others: in warmth, in bread, in friendship, in compassion, in justice.

It is truly right and proper, Beloved, that on this Christmas, instead of caroling in a candlelit church, we find ourselves “keeping watch...by night.” We watch not flocks, but our families, our neighbors, the vulnerable in our communities. We watch for Good News, we prepare for a sign. Watch carefully, beloved, for Christ comes to those who need God the most.

Amen.