

“A Witness to a Wonder”

Rev. Dr. Karen Blanchard
First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Saturday, December 24, 2016
Christmas Eve

Readings from Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9:2-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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 he 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. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:1-20

I don't about you, but the reading of the Gospel of Luke on Christmas Eve is for me is both familiar and comforting. We hear about Joseph and Mary, the angels and the shepherds as they each make their way to Bethlehem, but while we hear the words about what happened, we really don't know a lot about what they were thinking or feeling, except for Mary pondering these things in her heart and the excitement of the shepherds. But this year with a group of people, I read Stephen Cottrell's book, Walking Backwards to Christmas. In it we heard the story from different characters in the gospel reading. They invited us to consider what might have been going on in the hearts and the minds of the different people in the story. One of the individuals that he wrote about was a shepherd named David who was reflecting on the things that happened that night. We learn that the night began normally enough. Things were going as they always did in the darkness and the quiet of the countryside--they could only hear the sheep murmuring in the night. But something extraordinary happened and it startled him and all the shepherds. In the vignette he tells us about how the event transformed his life from then on.

For some reason this year when I was reading the story of the shepherds and reflecting on what Cottrell wrote, it brought me back to a startling moment in my life. It took place on a hot summer night. The sky was dark with just a few stars and the business of the day was over and it was quiet. Three of my friends and I were sitting on the curb in the darkness, when suddenly something caught my eye. A huge flame of fire flew across the southern sky and it lit up the night. It was a starry ball, streaking silently through the darkness. As quickly as it came it was gone. We all sat there. No one said a word. No one seemed to know what to say. It was as if each one of us was waiting to make sure that someone else had seen it. Finally someone said, "Did you see that?" And we all nodded yes. His question was an affirmation of what we had each seen. We all started talking but sort of in a whisper because we had witnessed something extraordinary. We didn't know what it was, a comet, a meteor, a missile, a star exploding? We didn't know enough to say. But we knew we had witnessed something very unusual. We sat there for a while in silence. I think none of us wanted to walk home alone. We wanted to make sure that our hearts had calmed down and everything was okay. What I do know, as I look back, is how it changed my sense of the world—to witness something so out of the ordinary. I didn't know what I had seen and I didn't know what it meant. But it was as if for the first time I realized that there was mystery in the world and that the world, indeed the universe, was larger and more vast than I had ever imagined—certainly larger than my corner of the world. It stayed with me all these years, that in the midst of the ordinary rhythm of the days, I had realized that night that unexpected things happen, things that we can't fully understand or explain. I have to admit I was glad—probably just as David the shepherd was, that I wasn't alone, that other people had seen it, too.

Maybe that's why the story of the shepherds resonated with me so much this year, because for them it was a moment in time, when an ordinary night became so extraordinary. And so in a way, I can put myself in their footsteps and imagine what it might have been like, how their world changed that night when they went from darkness into light and something happened that they couldn't fully explain. They moved from stillness to the sounds of the heavenly host. They went from half asleep to awe and wonder. Words of hope and promise were offered to them that night.

When we think about it, that was amazing in itself, for we are told, through Luke, that it was the shepherds who first brought the good news. We know for them it was not an easy life. They aren't held in high esteem and they were under the harsh rule of the Romans, as were the brothers and sisters of their faith. It was a time of fear and many worried what the future might bring. And yet, in that moment, heavenly light entered into the darkness and good news spilled out from unknown creatures. And the good news was entrusted to the most unexpected ones. They are the first to hear and share it with the world.

I also think about the words that the heavenly host offered: “Fear not” for they are words that echo throughout time. For each of us there are times and reasons when we struggle with anxiety and fear, and I think their story is a gift to us. It is comfortable and familiar, but it's more than that. We are invited to hear of the hope that reminds us that mystery and power and might move among us. That light can come into the darkness, the darkness of struggle or grief or despair, of loneliness or hopelessness. The Spirit of God can move among us and light the way.

So on this night we are reminded of the gift of hope being reborn, the power of the word that speaks to us in the midst of the challenges and anxieties of life. Tonight we remember that “God so loved the world” that “love came down at Christmas,” that God entered the world in a new way to be with us and to be among us. That is the Good News: that darkness can offer us the opportunity for light, the light of hope, so that we can sing, “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel,” trusting that indeed God is with us. Amen.