

Luke 2:1-20
St. Andrew's, Nogales

Christmas Eve

Rev. M. Lucie Thomas
24 December 2010

Tonight is a liminal time, literally a time of standing on a threshold of a doorway before stepping in, or perhaps, stepping out, a time of being on the edge of something new, a time of transition. That is what Christmas Eve is all about. We are moving out of the time we call Advent, where we pause to think and pray and prepare ourselves for the coming time of thankfully receiving God's gift to us.

We are standing on the edge of something that is about to be revealed to us, once again, as it was revealed to the shepherds, on that night that Jesus was born.

In my mind I can very clearly see the scene with the shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. I once lived high in the Drakensberg mountains of Lesotho in Southern Africa, where the sheep and goats are herded much like in Biblical times. The shepherds live day and night with the animals out in the fields up in the mountains above the villages and towns, with no light except from small fires. They have few possessions, a blanket and perhaps a homemade wooden flute or another stringed instrument to play. Shepherds in most parts of the world tend to be hired hands, poor people, people often less than perfect, not powerful, and yet it is to such as these shepherds that God's angels declare the good news of Jesus' birth!

Can you imagine their terror when first one angel, and then a whole sky full of them appear? In our modern drawings of angels we tend to depict them as beautiful smiling young women, or rather androgenous beings, but to our ancestors in the faith there were not like that at all. They were old men and they were scary.

But after the angels leave them the shepherds overcome their fear and decide to walk to Bethlehem to see what the fuss is all about. And we are told they find Mary and Joseph and the child Jesus lying in a manger, because there was no room for them at the inn.

And then they remember the message the angels had given them of the "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." And they also remember the promise from God the angels sang to them of peace on earth.

To us is born a Savior. And to earth Peace. These are huge promises from God the angels make to the shepherds. And that good news is not only for the Shepherds. It is for all the people. The translation we heard tonight says peace on earth among those whom God favors. But that is a bit misleading if we think it is

just for a favored few. No, it is God's gift to all people for all time. "The angels do not announce that peace is at hand for those who have pleased God, but rather that the peace to be realized, the earthly counterpart of God's own heavenly glory, is God's gracious gift to all, bestowed at God's good pleasure."

That is why we come together with thanks and praise year after year at Christmas as we remember the birth of Jesus. In Hebrew he is called Emmanuel, which means 'God with us'. God present among us. God sharing God's own creation with us.

So how does this good news relate to us present here tonight? Remember that the shepherds were not praying and calling on God to appear. God's messengers showed up in the midst of their everyday, or perhaps I should say their everynight, lives. Too often we look for God in the beautiful times or places when we think we are ready to find God. What we forget is that God seeks us out, and often that is not when we are looking for the Holy One. I expect many of you can remember a time when you were not expecting God to be active in your life, but found God at work unexpectedly in a moment that felt truly holy to you.

Many of us here tonight may not be feeling peace or joy. Perhaps we are struggling with illness, or of a friend or relative gone astray, or remembering the death of a loved one around this time. My mother died in December over 20 years ago, and I miss her most at this time of year. Perhaps you or a loved one has lost a job, or there is tension in an important relationship. And yet we are all here because we realize that this night, this liminal night, this night of transition, is way stronger than any pain or disappointment we may bring with us.

This is the night in which Jesus, our savior is born. This is the night that Immanuel, God with us, comes to us. This is the night we remember God is with us and with all creation. Peace, joy, hope and love are with us.

Alleluia, alleluia!

Amen.