

“Yes, Angels Really Do Sing!”

December 18, 2016

The First Christmas Songs series

Join in if you know it:

I'm dreaming of a white Christmas

Just like the ones I used to know

Where the treetops glisten and children listen

To hear sleigh bells in the snow

“White Christmas” is, by all accounts, the most popular secular Christmas song of all time. Bing Crosby’s version is the best, but countless artists have covered it. The words help us visualize a quaint scene, and in the midst of holiday chaos – have you been to Meijer lately? – the dream of a calm and peaceful Christmas is welcome.

Even though “White Christmas” is popular, the words from Luke chapter 2 when the angels sing to the shepherds may be just as popular. “Do not be afraid for behold!” Everyone wants to be an angel in the pageant, right? Angels have “good news of great joy” to share about a Savior! And the song they sing makes its way into our favorite Christmas hymns: “Gloria in excelsis Deo” or “Glory to God in the highest!” It’s the start of good news.

I’m sure you’re familiar with “fake news.” It’s been around forever, but seems to get more attention these days. I saw an interview with actor Denzel Washington where he talked about “fake news.” He’d been the subject of a fake news story, and when asked about it, this is what he said: “If you don’t read the newspaper, you’re uninformed. If you do read it, you’re misinformed. What is the long term effect of too much information? One of the effects is the need to be first, not even to be true anymore.”

And then he said this to the interviewer: “So what a responsibility you all have. To tell the truth – not just to be first – but to tell the truth. We live in a society now where it’s just first – who cares? – get it out there. We don’t care who it hurts; we don’t care who we destroy; we don’t care if it’s true. Just say it; sell it. Anything you practice you’ll get good at...including B.S.” Excuse the term, but it was powerful to hear!

Washington’s comments made me think about these shepherds and all of us. Certainly they received good news – not fake news – but real news of Savior born for them and for the world. What continues to amaze me is that these men - the most humble and lowly of their time - didn’t keep it to themselves. They knew that the news

they had was important and life-changing, and they made the journey to the manger. And I don't think they walked; they ran! This news made them move!

William Barclay says that shepherds were looked down upon by the religious folks of their day because they couldn't keep the details of the law – the hand washing rules and regulations. But what's interesting is that it might have been these very shepherds who had supplied the perfect lambs for sacrifice in the Temple.

It's also interesting that the shepherds who had looked after the Temple lambs were the first to hear news of Jesus - the Lamb of God coming into the world to take away sin. These night-shift shepherds – probably the lowest of the low in their time – are the first to hear “good news of great joy.”

And they show up at the manger where Mary and Joseph are tending to this new life and this new hope of the world. Their presence is another sign that this child is a Savior. He is the One who comes to be Emmanuel - God with us! God with all of us!

We usually think of this encounter as something that happened long ago. It's a part of the Christmas story, and maybe you think of kids dressed up, but what might it look like today? I invite you see this video called “Light is Born.” **SHOW VIDEO**

Think about these shepherds. They were in darkness tending sheep every night. Their lives were difficult and filled with “dirty work.” They were the lowest of every social and economic ladder - the ones scraping by to survive. They weren't on anyone's holiday party guest list.

And maybe just like Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, they were waiting and hoping for God to act - to bring hope and new life. Just like us, they needed good news. They needed Christmas.

The man in the video is searching. Perhaps some of us are searching today. And we know people who need hope and help. When I think of the situation in Aleppo and across Syria and so many places where innocent men, women, and little children are experiencing unbelievable violence and tragedy, I pray that I could do something - that the “good news of great joy” for all people would truly be a reality - not just for you and me, but in our world. And so we're called to act and respond with the faith we claim.

The angels sing of the glory of God and the promise of peace, and the shepherds remind us that this “good news of great joy” - the news of a Savior - demands our response. It's real news that we're called to share!

But I wonder if there were people who didn't believe the shepherds. I wonder if there were people who ignored them or told them to go away. I wonder how the news was received - did people think it was “fake news?” I wonder if people took one look at these lowly shepherds and thought, “Seriously? These guys got a visit from angels? I

don't think so!" I wonder if any of that stopped them from sharing "good news of great joy." By all accounts, it didn't stop them at all. Luke tells us that they amazed people!

I was inspired by now Bishop Laurie Haller's blog post this week. She lifted up the confusion over "fake news" in our culture. She wrote, "As we prepare to celebrate the birth of the Savior of the world, God calls us to share the good news of the gospel of unconditional love and grace rather than the fake news of despair, hopelessness, and God's vengeful wrath."

We can get sucked into the pull of "fake news" easily. I'm not just talking about the pull of the media, but anything that compromises the Good News of Jesus Christ. Friends, we're in the midst of difficult times. We must stand against hate, violence, exclusion, and injustice. We must speak against those who would seek to harm and hurt others.

We must stand firm in the truth of the angels' song – it's "good news of great joy" for all people. It's not just for some, but for all. And the Savior whom the angels sang about is Jesus who came to be with us in our humanity and showed the depth of God's love for all people.

The good news we can share is that God's love restores, redeems, and renews us. The good news we have is that God's grace saves us, and it's a gift for all people. The good news we proclaim is that each of us is beloved by God - with no exceptions. And that good news can be acted upon in how we reach out to places like Aleppo, or our county jail with our noisy offering, or to our local schools with shoes and boots - over 40 pairs already this school year!, or to families who have gifts to share with their kids. It shows in how we act and speak in the midst of long lines and busy times. Good news shows in how we take the time to smile and talk to others.

Remember what Denzel Washington said to that interviewer? "Anything you practice you'll get good at..." If we practice sharing "fake news," we'll only get better at it. The same is true for "good news of great joy." If we keep practicing telling "good news," we'll only get better at it.

And it's our news to tell. The shepherds didn't rely on anyone else to tell about what they'd experienced. They went in a hurry to meet the Christ child and then went and told everyone what they had seen without caring if people believed them or not!

We can't rely on anyone else to tell the good news. And we can't wait to tell the good news. For some, this is the worst Christmas season ever. The struggles of life and the reality of despair are real, and they need hope. Maybe you need hope today. Our world needs to hear good news, and we need to live it boldly and clearly.

And I know it can be scary. That's why the first thing the angels say to the shepherds is "do not be afraid." Friends, this "good news of great joy" - the news of a

Savior born for the world and the promise of peace - is ours to claim and to share. We need the hope of Christmas - that good news that God loves us and knows our human experience as joyful and as difficult it is. And we know people who need the hope of Christmas, too. We need to remember our role to share it!

Friends, we have one week until we celebrate Christmas. I pray that we're listening to the first songs in Luke's Gospel and allowing them to change how we celebrate. May God help us to stand up against and speak out against "fake news." May God help us focus on the "good news of great joy" that is ours to share.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.