

“This Will Be a Sign: #morelove”

December 24, 2017

Angels Among Us series – 4th Sunday of Advent/Christmas Eve

In the weeks leading up to tonight, we’ve heard of the stories of angel appearances sharing incredible news of the birth of a savior. The angel-messengers didn’t appear to kings and rulers or courts or the privileged of society. They came to an old and barren couple (Zechariah and Elizabeth), a young girl barely a woman (Mary), a simple and humble man betrothed to her (Joseph) and finally, to lowly shepherds doing their daily work on a hillside.

Being a shepherd was a dirty job - not glamorous at all - and in fact, these folks were at the bottom of the social ladder. Certainly no one expected that they (of all people) would be the ones to receive an invitation to meet Jesus - Savior of the world.

I grew up on a dairy farm, and this encounter always makes me think of my dad. I can only imagine how he would’ve reacted to this group of angels showing up with an incredible message. I can only imagine the words spoken, their mouths gaping open or maybe thinking they were just so tired and seeing things after a long day and long night?

Truly, can you imagine these guys - rough, probably fairly poor, the ones who lived and worked among the animals all day and night - being the audience for the angels’ message of “good tidings of great joy?”

Shepherds were certainly not “insiders” – and many times they were loners. They may not have had family with them, and so they were family to each other. They weren’t always the most trusted in society, especially because people accused them of letting the sheep wander and graze wherever they wanted.

But it’s interesting - they would’ve been familiar with the surroundings - a feeding trough for a bed, a room that wasn’t typical for a baby to be born. Maybe this was ordinary life for them, and sometimes that’s where God shows up! Not in the places we’re expecting, but in the places we least expect, among people we least expect, and in ways we don’t expect! Even for these shepherds, this message is extraordinary!

The sign isn’t the angel visit, though I’m sure it was amazing. The angel tells them that the baby - vulnerable, powerless, totally dependent on his parents for help - the baby is the sign of God’s love for the world. I’m sure they were shocked. I’m sure they had a few questions. I’m sure it was hard to believe! I still think we’re missing some dialogue here.

Maybe it’s still hard to believe - that God doesn’t show up with big, grand moves, but usually God shows up often and in ways that we might overlook if we’re not careful.

Let's be honest: we're looking for the big signs of God's presence. "God, if you're there, just give me a sign." How many of us have said that? "God, if you're really there, let there be a parking space. God, if you're real, make this situation better." And yet how many times do we miss what God is doing because we're convinced that we know how God will show up?

I wonder if the shepherds thought about it much at all. Perhaps the shepherds were too preoccupied with their everyday work, but I wonder if that's partly why they receive this incredible Good News first. Maybe they were open to believe it - and actually go and see the baby - and then go and tell everyone else!

As we're focusing on the angels of Jesus' birth story and the angels among us now, we've been talking about how we stand against the pervasive sense of fear in our world. Hope is God's gift against fear that can drive us to despair. Peace is God's gift against fear that can make us stay focused on *what if* rather than *what is*. Joy is God's gift to us in a world where fear and worry can be our primary response.

For the shepherds and for us, there's a powerful message about how God comes - not with might or power, but with vulnerability. And it's a challenge to everything we know - that being vulnerable is the way of God. Being vulnerable is a part of who God is and who God calls us to be.

We struggle with the fear of not being good enough and trying to be better than - or "one up" - each other in order to feel worthy and feel good about ourselves. But what does it say to us that God - Creator of all that is - would become vulnerable and come to us as a child? God could come with all of the power there is, but God chooses the opposite.

We don't have to use power to feel important. We don't have to demean or be mean. We don't have to put others down in order to be worthy. We don't have to be better than someone else to be loved by God. When the angels say "do not be afraid" to the shepherds, it's a message that everyone matters. God is for everyone - no one is overlooked, no one left out, no one beyond God's love.

For all of us, the sign of God's Love is Jesus. He comes in vulnerability. He continues to be vulnerable and gives his life for our sake. God calls us to use the power we have to love deeply in his name and to open ourselves to each other. God can work with us and in us and through us when we open our hearts for Christ to come in and make his home in us.

God chose to offer salvation to the world not in the way we expect, but in a way we didn't even realize was possible until Jesus came. And when God came to the shepherds, it's one more reminder that God comes how God chooses to come. God

uses all of us to share Good News, and all of us can be messengers. God calls us all to be messengers of more love to the world.

So where will we bring more love? What step can you and I take starting today - to witness to this One who comes in vulnerability to bring hope, peace, joy, and love to the world? The message of this night isn't only that God came to show us love in Jesus, but that we're called to share it.

Where do we witness acts of love that move us and remind us that love ultimately wins? I see it in the love of a parent for a child who is fighting illness, the care for those who are vulnerable in our world, giving sacrificially because that's how God gives to us, and the moments when people speak their hearts to one another in faith and love.

The shepherds experience this amazing gift from God - a sign of love that is for them and for all the world - a Savior born for them and for us! They become messengers of the Good News of the birth of Jesus, the Savior! But they have to come to the place where Jesus is with humility.

The angel-messengers came to people like you and me. God worked through ordinary people and did extraordinary things. And so it is that God works through us every time we offer messages of hope, peace, joy and love to an anxious world. We are called to fly in the face of fear—to be angels among us.

I believe there are angels among us. We can be messengers of love, flying in the face of fear, for we are the Body of Christ.

May God help us. Amen.

Prayers of the People

In this moment of gathering together,
we gather in spirit those who are not here with us this night:
loved ones that seem too far away,
those who have little food, shelter or company this night,
those who are suffering in body, mind or spirit,
those who are living in fear and threat or reality of violence,
those who wonder if they are loved.
In this silence, we call them to mind in the quiet of our hearts.

Silence

Mission to the Messengers - SHOW SLIDE

During this season, we've had a mission every week - to offer that angel message of "do not be afraid" to the world. Tonight, we're sent from here to be messengers of

#morelove to the world. You'll see a quote from St. Francis that we can claim and share. So I'm inviting you to be "hashtaggers of love" and to share our quote meme for the week from our church Facebook page to your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat accounts and hashtag it #morejoy. If you're not into social media, I invite you to share these words with someone: write it down and mail it to someone, give it to someone, take a photo of it and send it in a message—whatever you can do in whatever channels of communication are available to you:

Where there is hatred, let me sow love. (St. Francis of Assisi) #morelove #donotbeafraid

God's light shines upon us - each one of us - alighting the possibility that we can carry this message through the witness of our lives every day. I invite you to look at the light - the light of Christ - and know this powerful truth that we must take to the world:

Do not be afraid (repeat 3 times)