

Sunday, December 24th, 2017

PRELUDE

Dr. Dan Dykema

*After the Prelude, the liturgist should step to the lectern and say,*

“Would you join me in reading responsively our call to worship, adapted from Psalm 80 and printed in our bulletins.”

CALL TO WORSHIP

(adapted from Psalm 80)

Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock;

**Shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.**

In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh,

**Stir up your strength and come to help us.**

Restore us, O God of hosts;

**Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.**

Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand,

**The son of man you have made so strong for yourself.**

And so will we never turn away from you;

**Give us life, that we may call upon your Name.**

Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;

**Show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.**

Let us worship God beginning with the lighting of our fourth Advent Candle by the Gean family...

**LIGHTING THE FOURTH ADVENT CANDLE**

*John Allen and Kathy should be seated at the front, near the Advent wreath. There will be a lighter and a microphone on the wreath. As soon as they are introduced by the liturgist, one of them should pick up the microphone, & person designated to light the candles should pick up the lighter, and begin reading.*

**READER 1:** On each of the Sundays in Advent, we have remembered a visit from an angel to one of the characters in the story of Jesus' birth and the message they brought. The first candle reminded us of the words spoken to Zechariah, "Your prayer has been heard."

*(Reader 2 lights the first purple candle.)*

The second candle calls to mind the angel's encouragement to Mary, "The Lord is with you."

*(Reader 2 lights the second purple candle.)*

The third candle recalls the appearance of the angel to Joseph with the instruction "Give him the name Jesus."

*(Reader 2 lights the third pink candle.)*

Today we recall an angelic appearance to an unlikely group of persons -- the shepherds.

**READER 2:** Shepherds were often thought of as among the lowest class of society. It was a very common sight-- shepherds on the hillside watching over their flocks of sheep and goats as the evening stars grew bright. The outline of Bethlehem could be seen to the east, silhouetted against the indigo sky. The chilly evening breeze blew gently over the hills & the night was quiet except for the occasional bleating of the sheep. All in all, a very normal night.

But suddenly, all appearance of normality vanished. The night air became electrified as an angel stood on the hillside in the midst of the shepherds. Naturally, they were scared to death.

**READER 1:** The angel made the most awesome announcement, saying, "I bring you good news of great joy." He went on to explain that the long-awaited Messiah had come as a newborn baby, in the nearby town of Bethlehem. The angels encouraged the shepherds to go and greet the newborn King. To ensure that they would find the right baby, they were given a sign, "You will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." The shepherds went, found the baby, and praised God. This certainly was good news of great joy. Jesus brought the gospel of salvation and great joy because he invites all of us to participate in this salvation. By coming to the shepherds, God made sure that forever after, all who heard their story would know that no one

is beneath the grace of God.

**READER 2:** Today we light the fourth Advent candle remembering the angel's words to the shepherds, "Behold, I bring you good news of great joy for all people."

*(READER 1 lights the fourth purple candles.)*

**READER 2:** Let us Pray... God of light, we dwell in a land of darkness and shadows, but even here the bright flame of your love for us has descended. Now that the new day has dawned, we pray that you will keep us awake for your coming. Grant that we may not be blind to your coming or deaf to your pleadings. So prepare us for the manger, that we may also be ready for the cross. Amen.

*The Geans will return to their usual seats in the congregation.  
As soon as the candle lighters are finished, the liturgist should  
step back to the microphone and introduce the hymn..*

Would all of you who are able please stand and join in singing our opening hymn, "Once in Royal David's City", #49 in our *Hymnals*.

*The liturgist should step back from the lectern for the singing of the hymn.*

**\*HYMN OF PRAISE** "Once in Royal David's City" *The Hymnal #49*

*After the hymn, the preacher will step into the pulpit and say...*

**\*CALL TO CONFESSION**

Let us come away from our preoccupation with the things that have kept us from making room for Christ in our lives or from taking notice of his coming. In the confidence of our faith, let us humbly and obediently confess our sins as we pray together the prayer of confession printed in our bulletins. Let us pray...

**\*PRAYER OF CONFESSION**

Loving and merciful God, as we await the coming of Jesus, we confess that we do so with divided loyalties, scattered attention and idolatrous hearts. We want to welcome a baby but not surrender control of our lives to a Lord who expects our allegiance. We like the idea of having something and someone to believe in but do not want those beliefs to demand a change in our behaviors. We are inspired by brilliant stars, angelic song, and the magi's gifts, but are not interested in the risky business of sharing the good news. Our lives are cluttered with parties, packages and pageantry, and in the midst of it all, we have misplaced the truth of the Incarnation-- that you have come to be with us, to know us and be known by us, to dwell not just with us but within us. Forgive us, we pray, and restore to us the joy of being yours. Amen.

**\*SILENT CONFESSION**

*(Pause for about 30 seconds of silence.)*

**\*THE ASSURANCE OF PARDON**

The grace of God has appeared once for all, bringing salvation and manifesting the glory of our Savior. Jesus wrapped himself in human flesh and gave himself for us so that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own... Friends, believe the Good News!

**In Jesus Christ, we are forgiven! Thanks be to God!**

**\*GLORIA PATRI**

*The Hymnal #579*

***Glory be to the Father, & to the Son, & to the Holy Ghost;  
As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be,  
World without end. Amen, Amen.***

**\*PASSING OF THE PEACE**

Because of Child of Bethlehem we have hope. And in that hope we will find peace that passes all understanding. Let us share Christ's peace with one another. The peace of Christ be with you.

**And also with you.**

*Share the peace of Christ with others as you will.*

*After a few moments, liturgist will step into the lectern and say...*

"At this time I want to invite all of our younger friends to come forward for a Word from the Lord prepared for them by Pastor Mike."

*The liturgist will take a seat.*

CHILDREN'S SERMON

(All Singing)

"Making Room"

*Jesus friend so kind and gentle, little ones we bring to thee;  
Grant to them thy dearest blessing. Let thine arms around them be;  
Now enfold them in thy goodness, from all danger keep them free.*

AN ADVENT VIDEO

"The Shepherds"

*As the children leave, the Preacher will step to the pulpit and say,*

Each Sunday of Advent we are using a short video produced by "The Skit Guys" to help introduce the morning message. This morning we will hear part of the story of the Nativity from the perspective of the Shepherds.

*The Preacher will take a seat.*

*After the video, the liturgist will return to the lectern & say....*

THE INVITATION TO THE OFFERING

In the stillness of this holy place, let us give back a portion of our blessings in a manner pleasing to God. As we celebrate the coming of Christ into our lives and our world, let us give joyfully and generously as so that Christ may enter the lives of others who still sit in darkness. Let us continue our worship with the presentation of our tithes and offerings....

*The liturgist will sit down until the Doxology begins to play.*

THE OFFERTORY

Dr. Dan Dykema

\*DOXOLOGY (In Unison)

The Hymnal #592

*Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him all creatures here below;  
Praise Him above ye heavenly hosts;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.*

*After the Doxology, the liturgist will return to the lectern and say...*

\*OFFERTORY PRAYER

Let us pray... Our Father, you came to us through the miracle of the Incarnation. The Christ Child reminds us that you are with us, today and forever. Wherever we are, you are there also. In gratitude for your presence in our lives, we offer our gifts to you, O God of grace, that others might know of your glory through Christ our Lord. Amen.

THE AFFIRMATION OF FAITH

"The Apostle's Creed"

Let us remain standing and reaffirm our Christian faith using the traditional words of the Apostles' Creed printed in our bulletins. Let us say what we believe...

**I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth; And in Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord; who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead and buried; He descended into hell; the third day He rose again from the dead; He ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God the Father Almighty; from thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the Holy Ghost; the holy catholic church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body and the life everlasting. Amen.**

*Invite the congregation to... "Be seated," and take a seat.*

SPECIAL MUSIC

Dr. David DeSeguirant, Soloist

*After the soloist finishes, the Liturgist will return to the pulpit & say....*

SCRIPTURE READINGS

Our first lesson this morning is taken from the second chapter of Peter's First Letter, beginning at the fourth verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page 1058 of your pew bible.

"Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God's sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

For it stands in scripture: "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and he who believes in him will not be put to shame." To you therefore who believe, he is precious, but for those who do not believe, "The very stone which the builders rejected has become the head of the corner," and "A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall"; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy but now you have received mercy."

*The liturgist will take a seat on the chancel or with the congregation.*

*When the liturgist finishes, the preacher will step into the pulpit & say...*

Our second lesson this morning is taken from the ninth Chapter of the Prophet Isaiah, beginning at the second verse. You are encouraged to follow along and you can find the passage on page #593 in your pew bibles.

Listen once more for the word of God...

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.

Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder, the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as on the day of Mid'ian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire.

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this."

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

**C: Our thanks be to God!**

THE SERMON

“The Arrival”

There's one word that describes the night of Jesus' arrival—ordinary.

The owner of the inn had awakened earlier than most in the town. After all, the inn was full, all the beds taken. Every available mat and blanket had been put to use. Soon all the guests would be stirring and there would be a lot of work to do.

One's imagination is kindled thinking about the conversation of the innkeeper and his family at the breakfast table. Did anyone mention the arrival of the young couple the night before? Did anyone comment about the pregnant girl on the donkey? Perhaps someone raised the subject, but at best, it was raised, not discussed. There was nothing that novel about them.

No, it is doubtful that anyone mentioned the couple's arrival or wondered about the condition of the girl. They were too busy. The day was upon them. The day's bread had to be made. The morning's chores had to be done. There was too much to do to waste time thinking about the impossible.

God had entered the world as a baby. The long awaited Messiah had finally arrived. Yet, were someone to chance upon him in Bethlehem stable that morning, what a peculiar scene they would behold.

The stable stunk just like every other stables does with the pungent odor of urine, dung, and sheep hanging in the air and penetrating every nostril. The ground was hard, the hay scarce. Cobwebs clung to the ceiling and a mouse scurried across the dirt floor.

A more lowly place of birth could not exist.

Off to one side had gathered a group of shepherds. They sat silently on the floor, perhaps confused, but most certainly amazed. Their night watch in the hills above the city had been interrupted by an explosion of light from heaven and a symphony of angels.

Near the young mother slumped the weary father against the wall. If anyone was dozing, he was.

He couldn't remember the last time he sat down. And now that the excitement has subsided a bit, now that Mary and the baby are comfortable, he propped his back up against the wall of the stable and felt his eyes growing increasingly heavy. He still hadn't figured it all out. The mystery of the event still puzzles him. But he hasn't the energy to wrestle with such questions. What's important is that the baby is fine and that Mary is safe. As sleep descended on him, all he could remember was the name the angel gave him to call the child . . . Jesus.

Wide awake was Mary. My goodness, how young she looked! Her head rested on the soft leather of Joseph's saddle. The pain had been eclipsed by wonder. The baby at her breast was not just her son-- he was also her Lord. At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God was and what he was doing was a new teenage mom in a smelly stable. She remembered the words of the angel and Mary knew she was holding God. the God of the Universe was absolutely dependent upon her for his well-being.

We've heard the story so many times. Re-enacted it in plays. Heard it read from pulpits. Do we need to do it again?

Do we really need another Christmas? We sing the same songs, put up the same tree, and shop for the presents every year. And nothing seems to change. Is the message of peace on earth, good will toward men still relevant? Still possible?

Last year we couldn't wait to get past the election and all of its stress and strife. We told ourselves that maybe the holidays this year would be better. Maybe people would try a little harder to get off Santa's naughty list and on to his nice list. Maybe people would be kinder, or at least, more civil. Maybe we would all listen more and scream less.

But now the world stands ready to turn another calendar page, leaving December and Christmas behind and moving on to embrace a whole new set of challenges and conflicts in the new year before we have really addresses this one. We will face a whole new set of headlines blaring about school violence, election recounts, nuclear brinkmanship, and threats from petty little dictators. One has to wonder, do we really need another Christmas? Is the message of peace on earth, good will toward men still relevant? Still possible?

How could we make the old story more spellbinding, more attention grabbing?

Hollywood would recast Christmas. Joseph's collar is way too blue. Mary is green with inexperience. These two ingenues' star power doesn't match the roles they've been given to play. They're too obscure,... too simple. The story warrants some headliners. A square-jawed Joseph. Perhaps a young Harrison Ford type. And Mary needs a beauty mark and trip to a plastic surgeon to reduce reduce and perk up that nose, and of course a consult with a top cosmetic dentist for glistening teeth. She needs to look more Julia Roberts-ish. And what about the shepherds? Do they sing? Maybe it will be something from Jay Z or the Pentatonix?

Hollywood would recast the story.

The highly evolved and sophisticated class would sanitize it. No person, however poor, should ever be born in a cow stall. Hay on the floor. Animals on the hay. Don't place that baby in a feed trough; the donkey's nose and God only knows what else has been there. Don't wrap the newborn in rags. They smell like sheep. Speaking of smells, watch where you step.

A good public relations firm would want to change the venue. They would move the birth-- maybe to a big city. Perhaps they could find a more appropriate setting with the leased backdrop of a Roman palace or a Greek villa. Surely the Son of God deserves a royal entry. Less peasant, more pizzazz. Out with the heads of sheep, in with the heads of state. Add a brass band and a little ticker tape. OH... and why not a parade with the new Messiah as the Grand Marshall!

Fortunately, human beings didn't pick the hour or design the setting. God did. And God was content to enter the world in the presence of sleepy sheep and a bone weary carpenter. No spotlights, just candlelight. No crowns, just cows chewing their cud.

Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager with the help of her husband and

with an audience of shepherds.

It may have been an ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds, but God loves to dance amidst the common, and that night He did a waltz. The night was ordinary no more!

It seems strange to us that the announcement went first to the shepherds. They didn't ask God if He was sure He knew what He was doing. Theologians would have consulted the writings and midrash. The elite would have looked to see if anyone was watching. The successful would have first run the numbers. But the angels went to the shepherds-- men who didn't know enough to tell God that messiahs aren't found sleeping in a feed trough. God comes to the common—because His most powerful tools are the simplest!

No so long ago this baby had overseen the operation of the universe. The rags keeping him warm were the robes of eternity. His golden throne room had been abandoned in favor of a dirty sheep pen. And worshiping angels had been replaced with kind but bewildered shepherds.

Meanwhile, the city hummed. The merchants were unaware that God had come to visit their planet. The innkeeper would never believe that he had just sent God into the cold. And the people would scoff at anyone who told them the Messiah lay in the arms of a teenager on the outskirts of their village. They were all much too busy to consider such a possibility.

Those who missed His arrival that night missed it, not because of evil acts or malice; no, they missed it because they simply weren't looking.

Luke takes us through the whole story of shepherds and angels, of Jesus being born, & then being wrapped in swaddling clothes & placed in a manger.

Then he adds something we could easily miss. And I think he adds it because he knows someone will ask, "Why was he born in a stable?" Almost as an afterthought, Luke says, "Because there was no room in the inn."

There it is, and it bothers us. Luke doesn't condemn the innkeeper. He doesn't even comment about him. He doesn't say, "He was bad," or "He was good." He doesn't say, "He was right," or "He was wrong."

Not much has changed in the last two thousand years, has it?

God made so little of his Son's coming. Is that a mistake?

Or is that the message?

The crowded inn that shut out Jesus stands as a symbol of crowded, cluttered lives in the middle of a dirty, dingy world, short on love, short on light, short on so many things that make life joyful, peaceful, and happy, and that still have no room for Him. It's not that we're bad people, it's just that we're busy people, & we've got our own problems, our own crosses to bear.

Perhaps our world, and your life, resembles a Bethlehem stable. Crude in some spots, smelly in others. Not much glamour. Not always neat. People in your circle remind you of stable animals: grazing like sheep, stubborn like donkeys, and that cow in the corner looks a lot like the woman next door.

In taking on human flesh and entering our world, God told us in no uncertain terms that there is nothing he will not do and no place he will not go. If he is willing to be born in a barnyard, then expect him to be at work anywhere— bars, bedrooms, boardrooms, and brothels. No place is too common. No person is too hardened. No distance is too far. There is no person he cannot reach. There is no limit to his love. When Christ was born, so was our hope.

Actually, I think we need Christmas more than ever this year.

We could use a season that is dedicated to giving, not receiving; to caring, not criticizing. Put away our differences. Put up the Christmas tree. Take comfort in the familiar story and the ancient carols. Our world, like that of Bethlehem, is difficult and crowded. Our days can feel as cold and uncertain as that midnight manger. Let's find hope, once more, in the arrival of the infant King.

God became one of us so we could become one with him. That is the message of Bethlehem. That is the promise wrapped in his arrival.

**PASTORAL PRAYER**

Let us pray... Dear Heavenly Father, this time of year is especially hard on some of us. As we

watch people bustling around in preparation for joyous activities, some of us are reminded of the people we have loved and lost and we are overwhelmed by our sense of loneliness. The holidays remind some of those who are absent from our lives and those absences blind us to your own warm and loving presence with us.

So we pray dear Jesus, that when all is darkness and we feel our weakness & helplessness, your would give us a renewed awareness of Your presence, Your love, & Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love & strengthening power, so that nothing may frighten or worry us.

There are many things that we could do to be a blessing to others. Show us how to invest our time and efforts wisely. Show us how to be a blessing to others, even though we feel pain ourselves. And then O Lord, as we reach out to others, may we find our own hearts filled with your joy.

Keep us always in the knowledge that Christmas is not about us and our problems. It stands as a reminder of your gift of love to the whole earth. Let the power of His love be felt through each of us, until we ourselves are called home to live in joy with you forever, or until the whole world receives and give thanks for the gift of the power of the Holy Spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who taught us to pray saying...

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Would all of you who are able please stand and join in singing our closing hymn, #2100 in our *Sing the Faith* Hymnal Supplement, "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne".

\*HYMN OF DEDICATION "Thou Didst Leave Thy Throne" *Sing the Faith* #2100

\*THE BENEDICTION

\*CONGREGATIONAL RESPONSE "Good Christian Men, Rejoice"

Good Christian men, rejoice, with heart and soul and voice;  
Now ye hear of endless bliss: Jesus Christ was born for this!  
He has opened the heavenly door, And man is blest forevermore.  
Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!

\*POSTLUDE

Dr. Dan Dykema