

Luke 2:1-20

2 In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 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. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 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 in the guest room.[a]

8 Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 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: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,[b] the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,[c] praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”[d]

15 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.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told

them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, 19 and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

Homily: Make Haste

Walking through the aisle at Lowes a few weeks ago, I noticed some stellar inflatable Nativity sets. They were magnificent, easily fifteen feet high, and nearly just as wide. And one day, I'd love to have one on my lawn!!!

But what I really love about those Nativity inflatables is HOW happy the shepherds look. They are having a blast!!! And then I started noticing other Nativity sets. One I purchased while in Bethlehem, and one my friend Cecil Greene made for my oldest daughter Mary Allen on her very first Christmas, and another given to us by Jacqueline's grandparents. To be fair, these aren't as cartoonish or jolly as the inflatables at Lowe's, but their characters are joyful, and they are SO peaceful. They recognize God's presence, and such a recognition leaves them with fullness, and wonder, and restful bliss.

The images of joyful nativities filled my mind as I read Luke's familiar words. The shepherds are living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And then... an angel of the Lord stands before them, and the glory of the Lord shines all around them, and they are *terrified*. And in their fear, they cling to one another. And I am struck by that word *terrified*.

Mr. Webster says that to terrify someone means to: “cause extreme fear.” Synonyms include petrify, horrify, frighten, scare stiff, strike terror into, transfix, or my favorite: “scare the pants off of.”

And it begs the question, “How do a group of people who are SO paralyzed with fear, become SO full of joy in a matter of a half-dozen verses?

Well, for starters, God’s presence is alarming – how else do you describe something that is SO big, and SO good, and SO mysterious, and SO life-altering? And suddenly it wants your attention?

Remember our setting. Authority is not gentle in any age, but especially in Roman-controlled Palestine. Power discards what is considered as less than.

Like Zechariah and Mary before them, the shepherds brace themselves for something unpleasant. And like Zechariah and Mary before them, the shepherds hear familiar words: “Fear not.”

Fear not, because God is not like Caesar. Fear not, because God is present. Fear not, because God looks with favor upon those deemed lowly. Fear not, because God doesn’t come to dominate you, or to scare you into submission, or to make you feel less than. Fear not, because God has come to love you. And God has come to make good use of your lives. And God has come to transform you.

God brings good tidings of great joy: A savior, a child, reminds you that God’s presence has been and will always be with you.

“But don’t just take my word for it,” the angel says. “There’s a manager in Bethlehem. And you should go and see it.” And the shepherds go. “With haste,” the text says. I love that.

And there they find two new parents, each one not too far removed from being terrified themselves. And these mangy shepherds and exhausted parents, gaze at new life. In the birth of a child, they realize that God has given them (and you, and me, and EVERYONE!!!) space to become God’s people.

The shepherds make haste and proclaim all that they have seen – no longer exiled to their fields, they became messengers of hope.

Mary and Joseph make haste into parenthood, protecting, nurturing, and rearing one who will help illumine God’s vision of hope and love.

And it seems, that tonight, friends, we too, have an opportunity to make haste.

All across our city, God invites us into new possibilities. There are neighbors who are paralyzed by the status quo – some the victims of systemic poverty, others the victims of dependency upon systemic wealth; some are lonely, some are depressed; some struggle with addiction, or illness, or grief, or broken relationships, or just the quicksand of blah. And they, and we, are all too often despondent, resigned to what IS or what HAS to be.

But we, Millbrook, we have the opportunity to live into what God tells us WILL be – a world bound up in love, respect, and dignity, for ALL people. A world that starts with a rebirth in each one of us.

I am reminded of Charlie Brown's Christmas Special. Linus plays a shepherd. Lucy casts him for the part, and she is really annoyed that Linus refuses to let go of his blanket. "It just won't look right," she says. But Linus persists, "Well, this is one Christmas Shepherd who's gonna keep his trusty Christmas blanket with him." And so he does.

At the end of the special, Charlie Brown asks about the true meaning of Christmas. And it's Linus that steps into the spotlight. He recites the Luke 2 story by heart. Musician Jason Soroski notes that in the middle of his speech, Linus drops his blanket. Empowered by the truth of Christmas, Linus no longer clings to the thing that offers a false sense of security.

Millbrook Baptist Church, we cling to what we know. We know a world that gives us our status, that tells us people are predictable, that tells us everything can be calculated.

But on Christmas Eve, God talks to old priests, and unwed teenage mothers, and mangy shepherds, and even city-slickers in Raleigh. And on the surface, God's presence, and the new world God is making manifest can be terrifying. God's gonna turn the world up-side-down, or maybe right-side-up. And in response, our first reaction, just like Linus, is to cling to our security blanket.

But if we listen closely, we'll hear words of comfort: "Fear not!" And perhaps these words will encourage us to leave our blankets behind and make haste to be part of God's new and enduring world.

May it be so! And may it be soon! Amen.

Make Haste
Bob Stillerman
Christmas Eve, 12-24-2024
Luke 2:1-20



Benediction:

Friends, on this, the night of Christ's birth:

May you find hope! Hope in mothers who secure futures for their children.

May you find peace! Peace in a God who loves and delights in you.

May you find joy! Joy in the company of friends, new and old.

May you find love! Love in the hospitality of others, Rooms to be had, whether mangers in Bethlehem or sofas in Raleigh.

And may you find God's presence in something audacious, unimaginable, unexplainable, unbelievable:

A child has come!!! Emanuel. God with us!

Amen.