

“Empowerment: Shepherds”

Luke 2: 1-20

This is a beloved text, one that we have waited for since the beginning of Advent. It is a text filled with good news for all of God’s children. It is a text filled with grace and love, a reminder that Emmanuel, God with us, was with the world then and is with the world now. I invite you to listen once again to this text and hear the promises of God’s love once more.

Read text:

There is a shared lesson among preachers that tells them to rise up to the challenge and preach the good news always, and use words if necessary. And that is exactly the challenge that preachers face each and every time they share this particular text. It is so well known, so well loved that one can’t help but think, “Do we really need another sermon on it?” Do we really need to have someone tell us again about extraordinary gift that is Jesus’ birth?

And as I lived with this text this week and listened to the news that filled our TV’s and radios, the answer is yes. We as people of faith need another sermon on this text. The world needs another sermon on this text. We as the Body of Christ,

not just the preachers, need to share once again another sermon about the amazing gift that is Jesus' birth. This text empowers us as the people of God to rise up to the challenge and preach the good news that is for all of creation and use words if necessary.

We as people of faith, as people who know and have experienced the true gift of Jesus' birth in our lives, need to reclaim this story as Gospel and begin living out the good news of peace and goodwill that this text brings, begin living out the good news of God's grace that this text brings, begin living out the good news of God's love that this text brings so that no one around us can ever say that they have never experienced the presence of God in their lives. We as the Body of Christ need to rise to the challenge and preach the good news of this text and use words if necessary.

So in answer to the question, yes, we need another sermon on this text because unfortunately, it has been shared so many times that it has simply become background noise during the Christmas celebrations. Because unfortunately, it has been acted out in so many cute children's Christmas pageants, that it has lost its edge. We need to hear again this message of God working in the world because unfortunately, since we have such an idyllic image of the stable that night so long ago, that this text, this story has lost its scandal. It has become so tame, so precious

momented that all this text can do is sit on our mantels and simply become part of our Christmas decorations.

It is time for us as people of faith, as the Body of Christ, here on earth, to release the chains of cuteness and to really invite the scandal of the Christmas story into our lives so that we will be able to rise to the challenge, empowered to preach and share the good news, using words if necessary.

Because in reality, it is the scandal of this story that truly sets us free. It is the scandal of this story that truly empowers us to share the life changing and life giving message of God's love and grace with all of God's creation. It is the scandal of this story that truly allows us to become the people that God calls us to be.

The scandal that God loved us so much that God sent God's only Son, to be born in a dirty and filthy manger, as a new baby, weak and vulnerable so that all of God's creation might have new life, so that all of God's creation would be united and not divided, so that all of God's creation would be welcomed and embraced as one of God's very own. The scandal that God came so that we might live. The scandal that our God came not in power and might but weak and vulnerable, wrapped in bands of cloth, laying in a manger, welcomed by shepherds, and embraced by outcasts.

What scandalous news! What glorious news! What life-giving news!

That's the scandal and that is the good news that frees us, the good news that empowers us, the good news that calls us to become the people God created us to be.

The power of this text is that this good news of God's grace and peace is not just shared with us in one word or phrase. This news of God's love is shared with us throughout the whole text, throughout the whole story, from the beginning of the Bible until the very last page. That's why we love this story. That's why we tell it over and over again, not because it is cute but because it is powerful and it changes lives. This story, our Story, God's story, frees us and empowers us to become the people God created us to be.

We love this story because it is a constant reminder that our God loved us so much that God sent God's only Son so that we might live. We love this story because it is filled with God's grace and God's love. We love this story because we know that it is only part of the story, the part that reminds us that God came to us, took on human form and shared with us in the brokenness of life, the hurt of life, the joys of life, the wonders of life, the part that reminds us that God never left us.

The wonderful thing about this story is that it is truly about the many and varied ways that God comes into our lives over and over again, the many and varied ways that we experience God's love in our lives over and over again, the many and varied ways that God worked in our world over and over again. It holds

the promise that God is still working in our world, time and time again. The power and wonder of this story is not found in just one incident or one story line. It is found in the whole picture, the whole picture of how God restores, renews and brings healing to a broken world and serves as a reminder that we can find God in the many places, in the many people, in the many connections that fill our lives.

So even today as we take a look at this beloved text, we say it about the birth of Jesus text. We know it as the part of the Gospel of Luke that tells us about Jesus' birth but is it really only about the birth of Jesus?

The funny thing about this text is that if we really read the text, we could miss the whole birth all together. Luke only gives the birth of Jesus about two lines, two lines out of twenty. In the scheme of things, that is not many.

In fact, all we know according to Luke is that the birth of Jesus went like this: when the time came, Mary delivered her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. That's it. No more details about the amazing gift that is the birth of Jesus.

And actually if we take a look at how Luke tells the story, the birth of John the Baptist, the one who is supposed to prepare the way for the Messiah, the one who plays a minor part in the whole Gospel of Luke, his birth, gets more description than Jesus'. For John the Baptist's birth, we hear about the time in the

Temple. We hear about the recovery of Zechariah's voice. We hear that the child grew and become strong in spirit. John the Baptist's birth gets more than two lines.

But for Luke the birth of the Messiah seems to be a minor detail in the whole story line for Luke. Why is that? Why only give two lines to such a life changing event?

the answer is that for Luke and for all of creation the birth is just the beginning. The birth is just part of the whole picture. The birth is just one of the many ways that God works through Jesus to bring healing and wholeness to God's creation. The birth is just the beginning of how the Kingdom of God will be experienced here on earth.

Luke wants us to realize that the story of the God's love and God's grace is not limited to just one word or phrase or even one incident. It is about the many and varied ways that God continues to work in the world to bring new for all of God's creation. The whole story is about how God works through the powerful, how God works through the extraordinary, and how God especially works through the ordinary to bring about the Kingdom of God here on earth. For God, the story of peace and goodwill, the story of love and grace never stops nor is it limited to one event, an event that took place in a stable some two thousand years ago.

You see, it is us as readers who have divided this story into parts. Scene one: Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem. Scene two: Mary gives birth. Scene three:

enter the shepherds. Scene four: enter the angels. Scene five: the picture at the manger with Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and angels, all gazing at the baby in wonder. Five different acts, each nicely divided, each scene standing on its own, each scene disconnected.

But that's not the case at all. For God, and for us as the people of God, each of these scenes make up the whole picture of God's work in God's creation. Each one, building upon one another, each one, supporting each other, each one showing us the varied and many ways God continues to work in the world.

And the best part of it is that these scenes are not made up of famous actors or powerful people. Each of these scenes are filled with ordinary people, all working together to bring about God's Kingdom in this world, people who society pushed to the margins because of the type of work that they did, people who had babies out of wedlock, people with questionable lineage. God worked through ordinary people first to bring forth the Kingdom of God. And God continues to work through ordinary people still today to bring forth the Kingdom of God, people like you and me, just ordinary people who would be overlooked because there is not really anything special about them, but they are doing extraordinary things like, offering comfort to those in need, delivering Christmas boxes to families who would not have a Christmas dinner, ordinary people who collected toys so that children would not wake up on Christmas morning without any gifts,

ordinary people who collected blankets so that people would be warm on these cold winter nights. God works through ordinary people still today, just ordinary people doing extraordinary things, while experiencing and sharing the good news that God is still working in this world to bring peace, to bring wholeness, to bring healing for all of God's creation.

That's why we tell this story over and over again. That's why we love this story at this time of the year. That's why this story never gets old. It is a story that reminds us that our God loved us so much that God came to be with us. It is a story that never stops or ends or is only good for a certain time of year. We tell this story, our story, God's story, not because it is cute, but because it empowers us to be the people that God created us to be. It challenges us to rise up and share the good news, using words if necessary. It reminds us of the scandal of our faith: that God is with us in very ordinary ways, in the midst and the substance of our ordinariness. We tell this story over and over again because it reminds us that our faith in God means an end to our distinctions and an end to our divisions.... It means that all the world is God's and everything and everyone is holy, that love is the substance of our living, that hope is the very work of our hands, and that ministry is every moment.

The birth of Jesus is only just the beginning. The birth of Jesus is just one of the ways that God continues to work to bring healing and wholeness to God's

creation. The birth is just the beginning of how the Kingdom of God will be experienced here on earth. The birth is just part of the story, part of a story that never ends, part of a story that is as old as time, part of a story about how much God loves us that God came to be with us, born in a dirty, filthy stable, weak and vulnerable, wrapped in bands of cloth, laying in a manger, welcomed by shepherds, and embraced by outcasts.

This story that we share today, the story of God, our story as the people of God never stops and is not limited to a certain time of year, nor is it limited to just one event, an event that took place in a stable all those years ago. This story of love and peace, this story of hope and goodwill calls us as the people of God to rise up and preach the good news of God's grace and God's love always, using words if necessary.

May we be empowered and inspired to leave this place, glorifying and praising God for all that we have seen and heard. Amen.