

24 December 2019 – Christmas Eve

I speak to you in the name of He who Is, who Was and who is Yet to come. Amen. PBS

Shhhhhh...can you hear it?

The sound of the angels...can you hear it?

Hmmmm...keep listening...

In our first reading, we from our friend Isaiah who tells us once again about anticipation and about waiting patiently. The reading is about the restoration of the Lord's City. We've spent quite a lot of time in Isaiah over the past four weeks and we hear a little bit more tonight...

We hear from Paul writing to Titus in Crete. Paul has some very good news to share...he writes "when the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Saviour appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Saviour, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. (Titus 3.4-7, NRSV)

In other words, we don't receive God's love and mercy because of anything we do. We cannot work our way into the kingdom. It is a gift, lovingly and freely given. Pretty cool, eh? We are not only Children of God, Siblings to Jesus, we are Heirs to the hope of eternal life. Best Christmas Present EVER!

Let's turn our attention now to the Gospel. One of the best known Gospel's which was used in A Charlie Brown Christmas. One of the best Christmas stories told. Linus, dressed as a shepherd says "lights please" and then a spotlight is on him. He recites the story of the angels visiting the shepherds. And ends with Peace of Earth, Good Will To All Men.

The Gospel begins with the announcement that a decree was issued from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. And so Joseph, a man of good standing and his beloved Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a baby, started out for Bethlehem, the City of David. Joseph was from the House of David, hence why they had to go to Bethlehem.

They had to return to their hometown. Joseph and Mary were engaged and as such, she would become part of his family. Anyone here ever been pregnant? What's it like to walk when you're nearing nine months of pregnancy. Not moving quickly are you?

Anyone here 13 years old? Are you ready to have a baby? Calm down Dad, it's just a question...It is believed Mary would have been about 13 years old when she was having a baby. This wasn't unusual. Most girls at the age of 13 were married and starting families. The life expectancy, at that time, was about 35.

So here's Mary, nine months pregnant, and she's walking with Joseph. She's not setting any land-speed records. So by the time they get to Bethlehem there isn't a room to be had anywhere. Kind of like Fernie in peak ski season. No rooms at the inn.

So they end up in the stable and with no great description Mary gives birth and lays the baby in a manger. What's a manger? Fancy word for a food trough. Not quite so romantic now, is it?

The baby is wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger (Luke 2.7, NRSV) and just like that He's born. No great ceremony. No NIC-U. No baby shower. No diapers. No blankets. No Baby Registry. Just Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus and a bunch of animals.

The Angels are a big part of the story of Jesus birth. They appear to Mary, then Joseph, then the Shepherds, then the Wise Men and back to Joseph again.

The gospel tells us a beautiful story "Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' (Luke 2.9-12, NRSV)

Did you notice the first thing the Angel of the Lord said? Do not be afraid. Want to know why?

We think of angels as these cute little cherubs with little pink cheeks, tiny baby angels with adorable wings as depicted by Hallmark and Disney. These are NOT those kinds of angels.

These are grown men with a wing span going on forever. Floating in the sky. Illuminated brightly. Terrifying! Long before the time of CGI, George Lucas and Steve Spielberg.

Imagine you are the Shepherd. You live out of town with the sheep because you want a quieter life. You can't leave the sheep alone, so much of the time you are out in the fields with them. There's a lot of time to think. To ponder the meaning of life. To watch the clouds and the stars in the sky.

The one night – out of the darkness comes a brightly lit angel. A grown man sized angel with wingspan to match. Good God! And you are terrified! Then this great big man-sized angel speaks and says "don't be scared, I've got some awesome news for you".

There's a very special baby, THE baby that we've been waiting all our lives to set us free. Yes, THAT baby. He's been born and is in a barn down the hill with his Mum and Dad. You'll find him wrapped in cloths and lying in a food trough. Go check it out. Oh! And before you go, my friends and I want to sing you a song." And they do!

Then, as soon as they appeared, they ascend into heaven, still singing.

You rub your eyes to make sure you really did see what you think you saw. You check with your friends and yes, they saw it too. "Well, what are we waiting for?" you ask your friends and off to Bethlehem you go.

An angel appeared to Joseph to tell him his partner was having a baby that was God's and he was going to raise this child as his own.

An angel appeared to the Shepherds to tell them about the Baby Jesus being born.

An angel appeared to the Wise Men to tell them not to return to Herod. Instead to go home by another road.

An angel appeared to Joseph to warn him to take his family to Egypt so the Baby Jesus life would be spared.

In each of these cases, the angels appeared and were heard. Whether in person or through a dream the angels communicated directly with many people.

Yet before we go any further, let's go back to the first visit of an angel. The angel Gabriel went to Mary and told her that she, an ordinary girl, was going to have an extraordinary baby who's name would be Emmanuel; God-with-us. She would name him Jesus or Yeshua and he would be known as Yeshua and as Joshua by his friends.

Mary was a young girl who was given a tremendous responsibility. This would have been difficult enough to do surrounded by her family. Yet instead, she bravely goes with Joseph to Bethlehem at nine months pregnant. She gives birth in less than ideal conditions, yet does not complain. She bravely gives birth with only Joseph by her side.

And as she receives the visit from the Shepherds who come filled with awe and wonder, Mary reflects back. The Shepherds are telling everyone within earshot what they have seen. They are telling everyone they see about this magnificent and incredibly holy baby. People are coming to see this beautiful newborn blessed child.

And what does Mary do? "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." (Luke 2.19, NRSV) She had been told that she would give birth to the Son of the Most High. (Mark 18.30-32, NRSV) The angel tells her she is blessed and is favoured. He then tells her not to be afraid. Mary is the Light-Bearer; she is the Theotokos, the God-bearer.

Even after her cousin Elizabeth recognises her as the Handmaid of God, Mary follows the instructions given her with courage and with grace. She is to be blessed among all women. She is to be remembered for eternity as the one who brought God to earth. God's love came down to Earth through Mary.

And after the fear of possible rejection by Joseph --

After the harrowing journey to Bethlehem --

After giving birth in the crudest of conditions --

After hearing the glorious cries of her newborn Son --

After seeing the Shepherds giving thanks for the miracle of birth --

Mary pondered all these things in her heart. She knew her life had now changed forever. She was a Mother. She had given birth to the most remarkable child.

And as we remember her bravery,

As we hear the angels sing,

May we ponder the words of the angels in our hearts, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!' (Luke 1.14, NRSV)

Gloria in Excelsis Deo!!

Amen.

The Reverend Andrea L. Brennan, Pastor
Christ Church Anglican, Knox United Church
Fernie, BC

Christmas Day 2019

Isaiah 62.6-12

Psalm 97

Titus 3.4-7

Luke 2.1-20