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December 22, 2024

Scripture: Luke 2: 8-14

Sermon: Shepherds' Awe

Prayer...

Introduction:

Thus far in the Advent Season, we have explored waiting and prophecy related to the coming of Jesus, we have reflected on Mary the Mother of Jesus, we have also meditated on Joseph, the Father of Jesus, and his dream. Today, we come to the narrative of the angels and the shepherds.

It is interesting to note that the main characters in all of these stories are angels and humble human beings. Before we reflect on the experience of the shepherds, I feel like pausing to remember angels.

It dawns on me that the Advent and Christmas season, similar to Easter Season is an invitation to believe in and remember angels.

Some of you know that my wife Karen is a Professor of Church History for Fuller Seminary and is also an ecumenist who wrote a book on ecumenical dialogue between Catholics and Pentecostals. Karen grew up in the Assembly of God. How she wound up marrying a Presbyterian is a long story and a good one, but my main point in highlighting Karen's expertise today is to say that part of the attraction that we both have to Catholicism and Pentecostalism is that they both have no problem in terms of church culture in believing in angels.

In our Protestant Reformed Presbyterian world, we also believe in angels in theory because we trust that the Bible is God's Word, but culturally some Presbyterians and other Christians struggle with doubts about the reality of angels and whether they are active in our lives. I certainly think doubt is part of the journey of faith, so if you are someone who struggles with doubt about angels or the incarnation of Jesus and the virgin birth, I do get it. Sometimes I

struggle with doubt too, but what I love about Christmas time is that we are invited to be in awe of the mystery of angels, a virgin birth, and the incarnation of God's Son. Frankly, our minds cannot handle it, but if we let them, our hearts will transcend our minds, so that we may stand in awe of the beauty of God's presence made known in Jesus. In today's story shepherds are in awe of angels proclaiming the good news of the birth of the Savior of the world.

I have shared with this congregation before that a couple of years ago, I actually saw an angel hovering over my bed for the first time. It was translucent and seemed to move to me like a jelly fish swimming. The angel was beautiful. I could not decipher a gender, but she or he felt loving. I began reading more about angels during that time and what I have learned is that some people see them quite frequently. Now, I am aware that some people may wonder if I was having a psychological episode. Maybe, but I really don't think so. Thankfully, I am married to a Pentecostal who also believes in

angels and has experienced them. Instead of a psychological episode, I think my awareness of angels is simply a gift of grace and a small window into a spiritual reality that is always occurring. I personally believe angels are actively doing God's work everywhere and that we each have a guardian angel.

I think that we live in a society overly influenced by Enlightenment philosophy. The Enlightenment is a period of history that began in Europe during the late 17th century and continued into the 18th century. Scholars believe the Enlightenment was influenced by the humanism of the Renaissance, the Scientific Revolution, and the Protestant Reformation. Many good things came out of the Enlightenment, such as scientific discoveries, reformations of the Church, and medical improvements, but what also came with all of these good things, was a cultural influence that we swim in today. What is this influence? Today, we live with a deep seated doubt of the spiritual world. If you identify as a Christian or a spiritual person

of some kind, you might have a basic belief in Jesus and in angels, but in terms of experience we sometimes struggle to believe that anything we cannot see is real. We have been taught in different parts of society that what is real is only what we can see. Part of the role of the Church is to remind us that the spiritual is real and some of it you see and some of it exists, but you do not always see it. A common example is that even though we do not see the wind, we can feel it. Our spirituality is similar, we may not always be blessed to see angels, but we can feel them. When we experience love, God is there. I think angels are also often there. We just need new eyes and open hearts to feel and experience God all around us. This is why our church is also a spirituality center because our goal is to help people not just intellectually learn about God, but to experience our Creator both when we worship in a church building but also through the week, when we learn to experience and see God in the day to day as we commune with nature, celebrate the

arts, and embrace God's presence in Holy Scripture but also in all of creation. Can I hear an Amen?

Friends, I feel the Holy Spirit and the Angels crying out today saying we are here. Just put down your phone, go outside and feel my love for you. I am here in the blowing wind. I am here in the smile of a child. I am with you as you gaze into the mirror long enough to see your own beauty. Rest in my love sweet children and like children or like the nervous shepherds in the fields that night, stare up into the sky and expect me to meet you.

Most Sundays I remind us to say together at the beginning of our worship service, "Good morning Holy Spirit." Why? Because I want us to remember the Holy Spirit is here and every time we say "Good morning Holy Spirit" we give access for God to touch our hearts.

Together, God can reveal herself or himself to us. Remember God has a feminine and masculine nature because we are created in the

image of God, so here at this church we talk about God as Mother and Father.

During my Advent sermons, I am reminding us that each character within the birth stories about Jesus, is someone relatable. The shepherds were laborers who had a very important job. They needed to care for the sheep. The sheep were needed to feed the people and sometimes a Passover lamb was chosen from the sheep. Jesus himself later in the Gospels identifies both as the lamb of God and as a shepherd.

We can appreciate the Shepherds because they model how we might all stand in awe of the Holy. We all are invited to share our spiritual encounters with others. Sometimes we keep them too private, which makes it easy for people to doubt that they exist. Shepherds were the first evangelists. They shared the good news with Mary and Joseph and others. The good news of great joy that Jesus is born and is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Like

shepherds we are to experience God's love in tangible ways and then to share the good news of Jesus' birth, life, death, and resurrection.

I was reflecting this week on who might be examples of modern shepherds today. My first thought is that we actually have a lot of real shepherds of sort around Newberg. I have friends who own sheep and goats and shepherd them around. Anne Poe has a relative who owns Alpacas, which similar to lamas are part of the camel family.

Another example of a modern day shepherd might be someone who works at a night job that can be demanding, such as a nurse doing a nightshift at a hospital, or a security guard protecting someone or some property.

Eventually in my reflection on modern shepherds, I found myself reading once again about our mission partners Bob and Gracie Ekblad who started a mission organization called Tierra Nueva and

the People's Seminary. In one of his reflections, Bob describes their ministry as one of shepherds who seek out vulnerable sheep. This is what Bob says,

“Through our weekly staff prayer and The People's Seminary we seek to continually equip and strengthen our staff and others as shepherds adept at seeking, finding and gathering people affected by incarceration, addiction and immigration. We seek to follow Jesus in laying them on our shoulders, rejoicing, and bringing them into circles of safety and friendship, joining with the heavenly host:
(Bob quotes Luke 15:7)

“In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents

Friends, we all can identify with the shepherds. We all are invited to be evangelists who share the good news of the birth of Jesus and his life, his death, and his resurrection. Take time this Christmas season

to explore the spiritual world. Dare to believe in angels. Dare to imagine that a real living God who is defined as love is walking with you on this journey. Whether you are going through a hard time or life feels like it is somewhat comfortable, know that God is with you.

Emmanuel, God is with us and the angels are pointing to Jesus and they too are with us. They do not want us to feel alone and as we have shared before, sometimes angels take the form of other human beings who care for us. Sometimes we can embody the love of angels to one another as we make a phone call or care for a friend or stranger during this Christmas season.

Everything my friends is spiritual and this church is a spirituality center that points to the reality of angels, Jesus, Creator God our Mother and Father, Holy Spirit and God's presence and activity with us and within all of creation. The world is alive with the presence of God and together we can witness to this world the reality of the

incarnation of God in Jesus and the reality of God's love for all creation.

We can have a worldview that finds hope in life, in death, in times of peace and times of turmoil. Like the shepherds we can be in awe of God's activity in our world and help other see what is truly real is God's presence in and around us. May God give us grace to humble ourselves before the Christ child once again. May we share our spiritual experiences and show Christ's love to the world.

AMEN.

Luke 2:8-14

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

The Shepherds and the Angels

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,[a] 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,[b] praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”[c]