

Unto Us Hope is Given  
Luke 2:1-20  
Christmas Eve 2017

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I've been thinking about the shepherds this Christmas. Pondering over this well-worn and read story of Jesus' birth, I find myself returning to the shepherds; the shepherds who were "keeping watch over their flocks by night," as the story goes. I've been thinking about these ordinary people doing their ordinary work. Each of them with ordinary joys and concerns on their minds as they stood in darkness, tending their sheep. Some have just celebrated a birthday of a loved one, others just buried theirs. Some are rejoicing in a much-prayed-for healing, others are much-praying for the same. Some are lost in their thoughts, alone; and others are chatting, maybe they're complaining about the state of the world. How are we going to get ourselves out this mess we're in?

I'm thinking about these shepherds preoccupied with their lives, caught in their thoughts, and I'm wondering what propelled them to go. When here in the midst of their ordinary night, an extraordinary thing happened. An angel appears before them. And a massive flood of light all around them. We put a positive spin on this scene in our story-telling, but it must have been terrifying. If you've been outside at night, with no town nearby and only stars for light, you know that even the light of your phone can hurt your eyes. *This* light though, out of nowhere, in the pitch black, rural sky would be blinding. And frightening. If nothing else, startling, to these working shepherds.

With them cowering in fear, their hearts beating loud enough to hear, their eyes wide, the angel had to tell them not to be afraid. That was the first thing she said. *Do not be afraid*. I can't really imagine that was immediately calming. Has that worked for you? When you've been scared and someone says, "Don't be afraid"? Kind of like when you're crying and someone says,

"Don't cry." In my own experience, that doesn't work. Although you want it to. *Do not be afraid*. You want to be able to flip the switch to turn off your fear. Or your worry. But, what's more customary is that your "fight and flight" sponse kicks in. You run. Or, you shut down. You freeze. And you pray for it to be over.

But for these shepherds there was more. There was a promise. Of a *Savior*. Someone to save them. A *baby*?! And then a multitude of angels appeared. More light filling the night sky. They were singing. Proclaiming *peace*, of all things.

And then it was over. The angels left them. And the shepherds are jolted back into what is no longer an ordinary day, and an ordinary shift in the field. I imagine someone saying softly, "Did that just happen?"

And with some unable to take their eyes off the sky, and others staring at each other, one brave soul says, "Let's go see. Let's go see what in world this is about." And the miracle for *this* moment is that they actually do. That something propelled them out of their fear, and their routine, and their sense of responsibility to this field and these sheep. Something in that promise of the angels propelled them forward.

For in that moment, they had hope. Hope that this might be true. Hope that maybe peace would be realized on earth. Hope that a Messiah had been born; that this crazy story about a child in the hay in Bethlehem might be what their hearts longed for - a longing that maybe they couldn't name or might not admit to even their closest friend; a longing that could only be satisfied if this promise were true. They had *hope*, and a glimpse of something more that propelled them to go and see.

This crazy story about this child in the hay in Bethlehem continues to disrupt our routines today. On any given day it might sound like a fairy tale. If we had to explain it to a stranger - I mean really explain it - all we could fall

back on for "proof" would be whatever historical verification of the actual birth we could find, or we could recite the analysis of some sophisticated theologian, or if nothing else we could succumb to sugary sentimentality of a Hallmark made-for-TV movie. But none of that suffices. Just like none of that explains what brings us here each Christmas Eve; what propels us through our frenetic, or for some lonely, or ordinary December days.

Because the hope that propelled the shepherds toward Bethlehem, and the same hope that brings us to Christmas, is an experience. It's an experience of knowing deep inside that there is something more. That God *has* broken into the world and continues to do so. If the shepherd's experience had only been one of sentimentality, or an astrological explanation of the angels and light found in a book or on the internet, they would have stayed in the fields, they would have completed their night's work. And that story would have been passed down only in their families; a "remember that time?" kind of story that endures a few generations, if it's a good one. But it would *not* have been a story that startled the world, that spread to millions and millions, generation after generation. It would not have been a story which consumes us a full month of the year and brings us out on a cold night to gather, and light candles, and sing.

No, because this story was an experience that we continue to experience...a moment of hope. And it's the same experience we have when we stop from the rush of December; when we've crash-landed into Christmas; when we've survived the demands on us - or the depression that we had no demands; it's the same experience when we return to church this night, and the familiar hymns begin to play, and we sit with our neighbor – stranger and friend - and gather with family, some of whom we hardly like, and we hear the story again... and the lights go down and candlelight appears, and we are

reminded again that we have hope. That there is something more. That the kingdom of God is indeed realized on earth.

Sometimes it feels like we are doing our best to drown out Christmas. But the light of Christmas cannot be snuffed out. As we sit in the light of this familiar story, and we reflect on our own lives, every once in a while we realize that the glimpse of the kingdom that we experience this night was with us this year, a difficult time we got through only by God's grace. A paralyzing grief that finally released its grip. A difficult decision made clear. It might have been heart-bursting joy of a new child or grandchild, the stunning beauty of a sunset, or the stillness of the lake waters ...or maybe when God surprised you with a new friendship that touched your heart and brings you joy. It is in those experiences, those glimpses of the kingdom of God, that we come to know deeply that there's something to this "God-with-us." In those experiences, we get to the manger and recognize the hole we were trying to fill, or the answer we were seeking, is *here and now*. Right in front of us. It's a promise we don't have to wait for. A hope realized.

Those are moments of hope that propel us forward; forward through the ups and downs of our lives. That remind us that God is real. In the flesh, *with* us. Bringing about a kingdom that always overcomes darkness.

Unto us a child is born. Unto us HOPE is given. Glory to God in the highest.  
And on earth, *peace*.

May it be so.