

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
December 9, 2018 - Advent 2  
Calm and Bright  
Title: Glories Stream - Joy  
Scripture: Psalm 86:9-11  
Luke 2:8-20

I know that it's not Christmas yet but sometimes it seems that the Christmas story can get lost in the busyness of Christmas. In years gone by, the Advent season was a time of preparing for Christ's coming and the 12 days of Christmas – the 12 days after Christmas were a time to celebrate and soak up all the magic of Christmas. For the most part, we have lost the celebration of the twelve days of Christmas and we start celebrating Christmas in the days and weeks leading up to the actual day.

There's so much going on Christmas Eve that we hear the Christmas story but don't really have time to spend with it. Today we are going to pause and spend some time thinking about the shepherds who were the first to come to see Jesus.

It was an ordinary night for them out on the hills outside of Bethlehem; when suddenly it wasn't. I've had the opportunity to travel to Israel twice. The first time in 2002, Bethlehem was like a ghost town. Tensions were high, and the streets of Bethlehem were deserted. To enter the city, we had to leave our bus and our Israeli tour guide and walk past a military check point and board a different bus. When I returned in 2014, the city was so busy and so built up that I had trouble believing I was in the same city. The military checkpoints were still there and were even more difficult to navigate. The cathedrals were crowded and our tour guide who was Palestinian and lived in Bethlehem met us after we entered the city because navigating the checkpoints took him a couple of hours each way.

My biggest memory of Bethlehem is from that first visit when the city was deserted, everything was boarded up and the streets empty. What I remember most was looking at the deserted hills outside of the city. I could picture the shepherds out there on the hillside watching their flocks at night. I could imagine that night so many years ago when an ordinary night became extraordinary.

Luke tells us that the sky was suddenly filled with light and an angel appeared to them and they were terrified. Of course, they were terrified. Imagine how most of us would react if something similar happened to us in the midst of an ordinary day. Throughout scripture, it seems that the first words out of the mouth of most angels is “Do not be afraid.”

The shepherds didn’t immediately take to the drama of the moment. They were scared. We often think of the Christmas story as beautiful and light, and in the Hallmark world, it is also often sappy and sentimental. It’s filled with good feelings.

But have you ever noticed in the Hallmark movies that there is also a tension – a perceived betrayal, a misunderstanding, fear of getting close, grief that won’t heal, or something else that threatens the “all is well” ending. In the original Christmas story, we like to think of the sentiment that we are talking about at the beginning of our worship each week, a Silent Night, a Holy Night, a time when all is calm and all is bright.

But throughout the story, there is also fear. The fear has to be faced and dealt with before there can be calm and bright. We are likely to find some fear every week in our lead up to Christmas. Last week, there was the justified fear that the Jews had of the Roman government. We talked about peace – a peace that is not just about the absence of violence, but a peace that cannot exist in the same heart as fear.

Remember that the shepherds were part of that same culture. They had plenty to fear. “One commentator describes the likelihood that these were possibly not only the “lowly” in terms of job importance, but these may have been the lowliest of shepherds... the hired hands, not owners of the land or the sheep... the indentured slaves or lowest-wage earners working the night shift and literally “living in the fields.” Already it is dark when the critters prowl but then something that felt absolutely apocalyptic was shaking the earth where they stood.

“Fear can make us feel like we are on the edge. If we are jumpy already, anything that reeks at all of difference or change can feel like a threat. We get hyper-aware and, on the look-out for the bad stuff we hear about every day, on the news, on our phones, seemingly everywhere.”<sup>i</sup>

“When people are frightened, intelligent parts of the brain cease to dominate”, Dr. Bruce Perry explains, quoted in an article published on the Time magazine website. When faced with a threat, the cortex responsible for risk assessment and actions ceases to function. In other words, logical thinking is replaced by overwhelming emotions, thus favoring short-term solutions and sudden reactions.”<sup>ii</sup>

We use the term “knee-jerk reactions” to describe some of that sudden response. These responses can be crucial when an immediate response is absolutely necessary, when we are in real danger and need to react immediately. But we often also go to that short-term sudden solution when we have been frightened by something that has happened and are looking for ways to prevent a similar occurrence in the future.

Some of you will remember the Station Nightclub fire in Warwick where over a hundred people were killed. One of the knee-jerk reactions proposed in the legislature after that was that all places where people

gather would need to have sprinklers. This would have included all of our existing churches. Fortunately, eventually calmer heads prevailed, and the distinction was made between a nightclub and a church sanctuary and the activities and likely risk-taking place in them.

When we find ourselves responding in fear, we are not able to see the possibilities that are in front of and around us. When we get overwhelmed it becomes easier to think constantly about how to solve whatever problem seems to be front and center and to stop seeing the good around us. At times like this, we miss out on the joy that is around us.

The shepherds were filled with fear, but the angel immediately identified their fear and told them not to be afraid. The angel announced that this was an occurrence and a message not of fear but of great joy. This was good news for everyone – not only for the shepherds – but for all people, everywhere.

Eugene Peterson, in The Message, put it this way. “Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them and God’s glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I’m here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David’s town, A Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you’re to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.’”

The message, if it could be believed, was really the best news that anyone could imagine. It was the announcement of the birth of the one they had been waiting for – the one who would change the world. Luke continues to tell us that suddenly the angel was no longer alone but there were a large number of angels praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.”

Once again, here is the announcement of peace that is to come, and a joy that is almost unimaginable. Once the angel choir left, the shepherds talked it over and decided to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves what the angels had told them about.

Fear was replaced with excitement and anticipation. Fear was replaced with joy. Panic was replaced with praise.

There are times in our lives when it feels like the world is shaking and we don't know where to turn. Sometimes the dark night seems overwhelming. Sometimes the changes seem to be coming with a speed that makes us feel like everything is out of control. At those times, we may well experience the fear of the unknown. We may be afraid that our new life will be so different from our previous life that we can't recognize it. We may look for the comfortable, familiar, and comforting and instead what we see looks strange and feels uncomfortable.

We may not have a multitude of heavenly angels showing up to bring us good news, but still the message of the angels that night comes to us in other ways. The angels brought the good news that the Messiah had been born. The angels brought the good news that God was always with us and would always be with us. The angels bring the good news that God's strength is with us in the times when we feel that we have the least strength.

Most often the angels that we encounter do not look like heavenly beings. They look like our family members, our friends, the people with whom we worship and people we encounter throughout the day. They may come carrying casseroles, offering a ride, or offering to babysit. They may come in the form of a phone call or a note. Sometimes they look a lot like that person who asks how we are doing and really wants an answer.

In the places of fear, messengers of peace, joy, love, and hope come to us being witnesses that there is life beyond whatever is happening today. When we are able to see the messengers of God around us, we are better able to begin to see the joy around us.

In our daily lives, we are exposed to many messages of fear. The daily news can often leave us unsettled. The small messages of fear that we encounter daily can seep into our lives and block out the experiences of joy and beauty that we need to sustain us.

Mindful of that, I have made it a practice to not watch nighttime news. I check the news throughout the day. Typically, I watch the early evening news, but as the night advances, I have decided not to put into my spirit the conflict, tragedy, political debate, or a variety of other things we see and hear on the news. As I prepare for sleep, my spirit does not need to engage with things that will burden me or cause unrest.

At the end of the day, I try to look back over the day and think about the places where I have seen or experienced love in action, places where I have seen the beauty of God's creation, times when I have heard someone speak to another with respect.

As we think about a silent and holy night, I want to invite us to try something this week. We need a silent night here; so, let us silence the onslaught of exposure to messages of fear. Let us open ourselves to see and experience the beauty, peace, hope, and love that sustains the joy of life.

The shepherds hurried to Bethlehem and found what the angels had told them. Luke tells us that they told everyone what the angels had said about this child and that they were amazed by what the shepherds said. The shepherds returned to their lives and their flocks on the hills but with a

different attitude. They returned glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen.

May we share what we have seen, heard, and experienced with others and let us give thanks to God. My prayer is that our fear will be replaced with joy and that our panic will be replaced with praise. My prayer is that in the middle of our lives, we will experience the true joy that comes only from God.

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<sup>i</sup> McFee, Marcia. From Fodder for sermons for Advent 2, "Calm and Bright". [www.worshipdesignstudio.com](http://www.worshipdesignstudio.com)

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.learning-mind.com/impact-of-fear-on-the-human-brain/>