

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church, December 20, 2020 – Advent 4

Hymns: 159 - O Come All Ye Faithful (1,3,4); A Candle is Burning (vs 4); 143 – Infant Holy, Infant Lowly; 136 - The First Noel (1,2,6); 165 - O Little Town of Bethlehem

Scriptures: Luke 2:8-20

Sermon Title: Christmas Changes Us

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favour rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

(Luke 2:8-20 NIV)

Christmas has changed over the years. Even Christmas services have changed. Here at Zion, for instance, it may surprise you to learn that prior to 1977, we didn’t have Christmas Eve services. Following Scottish tradition, we had New Year’s Eve services, often called Watchnight services, but Christmas Eve? Church was closed.

That is, until the Rev. Dr. Gordon Matheson came in 1977. He thought it might be nice to have something on Christmas Eve for “the young people,” so they pulled together a service for about 40 youth. Maybe some of you were there. The next year, it was a bigger service; soon, they were holding the big Christmas Eve services, with extra chairs set up to handle the crowds.

This year, of course, under Covid restrictions, things will be different again. And not for the better. What we need to remember, though, is that while the way we celebrate Christmas has changed, and will change again, the important thing is not how we change Christmas. The important thing is how Christmas changes us. Because from the very beginning, Christmas changes people. It always has.

It changed Mary, you can be sure of that. One minute she was just another in a long line of young women, another Jewish girl wondering what life would bring, what marriage would bring, what family would bring. She was betrothed, so she knew who her husband was to be, but the conventions of society back then meant that she didn't know him well. Their meetings had been carefully chaperoned, their conversations monitored, their families reaching agreement without much consultation with the couple themselves. He was a good man, she knew; a builder, who could provide for a wife and family. He seemed quiet, but that was hard to tell. Any man would be quiet with a prospective mother-in-law and several frowning aunts monitoring every word.

Nothing about any of this was any different than it was for any other girl in the small rural communities of Galilee. Until the day it changed.

The angel: "Fear Not." News of great joy. Then panic – a child will be born. To her. To Mary, who had never even known a man. And not just a child. Not just any child.

"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For nothing is impossible with God."

"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:31-38 NIV)

And from that day – from that first Christmas day – Mary was changed. She was never the same again. Because Christmas changes people. It always has.

It changed Joseph. You can be sure of that too. One minute he was just another in a long line of builders, another Jewish man wondering what life would bring, what marriage would bring, what family would bring. He was betrothed, so he knew who his wife was to be, but he didn't know her well. She was a good girl, he knew, a fine young woman, but whenever he tried to speak with her, her terrifying mother and aunts would lean in and frown, and he'd clam up.

Nothing about any of this was any different than it was for any other young tradesman in the small rural communities of Galilee. Until the day it changed.

First came his once-future-father-in-law with the news, red faced, hands wringing. "She's pregnant." What, how and who were a mystery, and "No, Joseph, no one suspects

you.” And then came the sleepless nights, his plans and future a shambles. And then came the angel.

“Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” --which means, “God with us.”

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. (Matthew 1:20-25 NIV)

And from that day – from that first Christmas day – Joseph was changed. He was never the same again. Because Christmas changes people. It always has.

It changed the shepherds. You can be sure of that too. One minute they were just another in a long line of shepherds, joining the thousand, thousand year tradition of those who wandered the hills, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Life would be for them as it had been for their fathers and for theirs, and for their sons after them. Heat. Cold. Dry. Rain. Rocks. Sheep.

Nothing about any of this was any different than it was for any other shepherds in the small rural communities of Judea. Until the day it changed. First came the angel:

An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all on whom his favour rests.” (Luke 2:9-20 NIV)

And from that day – from that first Christmas day – the shepherds were changed. They were never the same again. Because Christmas changes people. It always has. It changed Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men; it changed Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon, Anna, and who knows who else in the first Christmas cast of characters, whose stories we haven’t time to tell. It even, for a short time, changes our stories, changes us.

Don’t you love that Christmas feeling in the air, when it seems as though everyone is just that little bit nicer, little bit kinder, little bit more generous? Don’t you love it when, for a few days at least, it seems as though the world is a better place to be, as though hope and

peace and joy and love are not just dreams, but real? Even this year? And isn't it sad when it all comes to an end, when the lights are off and the tree comes down and the bills come in and January seems the bleakest month of the year? Don't you wish it could all just be a bit more like Christmas – people a bit nicer, a bit kinder, a bit more generous – the world a bit more hopeful, peaceful, joyful, loving – don't you wish it could all be changed, that we could all be changed, for more than just twelve days in bleak mid-winter?

Well, think back to that first Christmas. It changed Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the rest, but not just for a night, or a weekend, or even twelve days. It changed them forever. It changed them for good. *“His Kingdom will never end,”* said the angel to Mary. *“He will save his people from their sins,”* said the angel to Joseph. *“I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people,”* said the angel to the shepherds. *“Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”*

For all people. Born to you. Good news; great joy! A Saviour, whose kingdom will never end. For all people. For you. Forever.

Christmas, you see, isn't just a story. Christmas isn't just a wish. Christmas isn't just long ago and far away. Christmas is forever, and for all. Because Christmas is God coming to us in hope, and peace, and joy, and love, in the person of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Jesus, whose kingdom will never end. Jesus, who saves his people from their sins. Jesus, born to save the sons of earth; born to give us second birth.

And the wonder of that birth isn't just that it came to a virgin in a stable cave in Bethlehem. The wonder of that birth is that it can happen again, right here, today, if we just make room not in an inn, but in our hearts. For God offers to us the Gift of Christmas every day; God offers to us the Saviour, who is Christ the Lord.

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav'n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

Don't settle for a change that comes but for a season. Ask God for the change that lasts a lifetime. Ask God this Christmas to come into your heart, your life, your family, your home, with hope, with peace, with joy, with love. Ask to be, like Mary, like Joseph, like the shepherds, forever changed. To be never the same again. To live the rest of your days, every day, with the presence of God born within you, shining through you, bringing peace and goodwill to all. Open your door. Open your life. Forever.

From this day forward – from this Christmas day on – you need never be the same again. Because Christmas changes people. And Christmas can change you. Amen.