

“The Durability of Christmas”

Luke 2:1-14

Christmas Eve, 2020

The Nativity story from Luke’s Gospel never gets old. Year upon year, we read it and hear it with delight. A public reading of the scriptural birth story of Jesus perfectly caps the Season of Advent; as we gather together to hear the ancient text the tree lights seem brighter, the music seems richer, and the message comes through to us loud and clear—Christmas is here, again, as it has been for more than 2000 years and as it shall be without end. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the people in Luke 2, verses 1-14:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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 Savior, 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.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Shepherds and Angels. Pairing these two caricatures, Matthew creates a power continuum of polar opposites. Angels are divine; they are God’s own messengers. They carry God’s heart and voice out into the world. Their power comes directly from God and they evidence it in the way they break through the skies and break into dreams of unsuspecting recipients, disturbing their lives in dramatic fashion.

Shepherds, in contrast to angels, are far down the list as social beings in the first century pecking order. They scrape out a meager existence from the land; unwashed, uneducated, poor, and isolated, they are left out of society circles and religious blessings. Rarely do they have family on which they can rely for support and sustenance.

Shepherds often resort to thievery to sustain themselves. They are not known to live by any particular moral or religious code; they probably have never heard of the Jewish God of Abraham and Moses. Why on earth do the powerful angels from heaven choose some random, nameless, no-account unsophisticated shepherds to be the first after his parents to see the Baby Messiah?

The shepherds, unaware of the majesty of God, are terrified when the angels break into their world. But one voice says to them, 'Do not be afraid.' Easy for the angel to say! Having no prior frame of reference, the simple people have to think this is the end for them. Nothing in their experience prepares them for this otherworldly experience; the angel of the Lord appears before them, and all around shines such fierce light and energy that the shepherds must cast their vision aside to prevent being blinded by it.

"Do not be afraid." Do not be afraid. Christmas is coming. Nothing can stop this extraordinary event, says the angel, "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people." As social outcasts, the shepherds must be looking all around them to see who it is the angels are talking about, for surely this good news is not meant for them. They are not righteous people. They have no money to offer—no real estate, jewels, fancy prayers, power or influence.

They don't worship this God. Why would the God of the Jews break into their lives with a blessing for *them*? What's the catch? There *must* be a catch. What could these strange beings possibly want from impoverished shepherds besides a few scraggly sheep, a blanket, or a head covering? What good could this God have in store for them when God's angels don't bring what the shepherds need to live on-- food or money?

The angel announces that a baby boy has been born nearby, the promised Messiah for all the people. The shepherds are invited to see him; they have tickets reserved in the VIP section of the holy show! They are commanded to see the newborn babe for

themselves and so they go. The shepherds go in the cold of night as they are directed to see this new thing of which the angels sing.

They are invited to see and led to believe. They, and we as fellow sojourners, are invited to see and led to believe. Year after year, including *this* year, the year of our Lord 2020, the angels break into our routine and invite us into the Christmas experience. So, since you asked: in spite of our present pandemic drama, no, we are not *canceling* Christmas.

Think about it-- there have been endless dramas in the two thousand years since Jesus was born: the world has suffered through war, pandemic, natural disasters, discoveries, and doomsday predictions. Yet, Christmas has never been cancelled. It always comes. We are invited to see and led to believe, generation after generation.

This is the durability of Christmas. This is why we gather every Christmas Eve: to hear again and again the blessed story of hope, faith, joy, and love fulfilled. The blending of the four emotions of Advent creates our delicious Christmas Peace and its flavor never dulls.

The angels come every year. Shepherds blaze the trail for us to the newborn Messiah, to God's covenant promise of faithfulness and eternal love. Mary and Joseph and the stable animals all come 'round, our very own nativity scene unfolding before our eyes and ears each December 25th. We are comforted by the durability of Christmas, and this year, we need it more than ever.

When Cindy Lou Who sings, "Where are you, Christmas?" she prays for all of us tonight. When Dr. Seuss created her character in 1957, he could not have anticipated the kind of year we have had in 2020. He could not have predicted that we would be huddled in our homes hiding out from a killer virus. He could not have envisioned that we would be attending church virtually on our computers and tablets and not in person, that many of our families, including our church family, would make

the hard decision not to gather in person this year. Even the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center in New York this year was not quite up to snuff. Perhaps the tiny owl found inside the branches of the tree it was a bit confused about where her forest has gone.

Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade was held without any spectators; it just wasn't the same event as when Broadway and Times Square is jam-packed with holiday revelers. Yet, Santa Clause made his appearance, *as he has every year since 1924*, bringing the parade to a close with the same jolly laugh, steady optimism, and joyful noise that we have come to expect. Macy's parade Santa Clause represents for adults and children alike the durability of Christmas.

Dr. Seuss taught generations of children to read, while giving them important social lessons. His writing is a testament to durability in its own right. For more than 60 years, Dr. Seuss wrote his books and drew his cartoons for us. In "How the Grinch Stole Christmas," he taught us that Christmas is not about what we have or what we get, but rather, it is about Love—how to live it, how to recognize it, and how to gift it to others. It is also about the durability of Christmas in the face of any attempt to destroy it.

After the Grinch has stolen all the town's Christmas decorations and presents, innocent little girl Cindy Lou wants to know if there will still be a Christmas. She looks out her window at the heavens and asks them what Christmas is all about, can it withstand the test of time? Can the Christmas Good News break through the storms of life and bring good news to all the people?

Did you put up Christmas lights and decorations this Advent, even though it's just you or your primary family this year and nobody will be coming to see them? I did. I *wanted* to. If you didn't, it's not too late to put something on display, to take *something* out of its box that symbolizes Christmas for you and set it out in plain view. It's not too late to hear the angels' beckoning song, to channel your inner shepherds

and walk with them to see for yourself the Christ child, the Messiah, the Good News for all people—including you. It's not too late to answer Cindy Lou Who's question, "Where Are You Christmas?" with an affirmation that it is *right here*, right like it has always been, right here in your life, right here in your church, right here in your very soul.

Rumi, the 13th century poet, said, "Close both eyes to see with the other eye." Close both your eyes until you can see the miracle of the shepherds' experience. See them leading their small flock by the light of the Bethlehem star. See them quietly reflecting on what the angel has told them. It's too big a happening for them to even process, much less to talk about as they walk. The shepherds want to believe this thing the angel has promised; they don't believe that any of this could really be happening, but they need to believe in something outside—something bigger—than their own stories.

Close both your eyes until you can see your own 2020 Christmas unfolding before your other eye—your heart's eye. See its promise and durability with your heart's eye and when you can, then open your other eyes and follow the shepherds with you this night to where God's star leads.

Christmas is as durable as we allow it to be, for we are the heart and voice of the angels, we are the hope of the homeless, we are the faith of the faithless, we are the joy of the joyless, and we are love for those who have forgotten how to love and be loved.

May it Be So. Merry, merry Christmas!

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