

December 25, 2023
Christmas Day (II)
Grace Church, Muncie
The Rev. Dr. Paul Jacobson, *Rector*

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalms 97

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

In the Name of God, whose coming we adore. Amen.

Merry Christmas, everyone! Today, we hear what might be everyone's favorite Christmas story: the shepherds and the angels. At other times of the year, we may not think much about it, but we have only to look up to the East side of the nave to be reminded. There is Harriett Maitlen Thomas' beautiful painting of the song of the angels.

You can be a fan of Part I of Handel's *Messiah*, or of Linus explaining the true meaning of today in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, or of the countless versions in between, but this section of St. Luke's gospel has a special place in our hearts.

This morning, as a kind of Christmas present to you, I want to share some thoughts of someone who loved to preach about the Nativity – Martin Luther. Luther preached about the Incarnation for thirty years, as many as a dozen times a year. And sometimes we have three versions of a single sermon. On Saturday, he wrote what he intended to say. On Sunday, his students took down what he did say. And on Monday, he wrote out what he wished he'd said.

When I was in Divinity School in the early 1980s, the major event of every December was to gather in the Common Room to hear Professor Roland Bainton deliver what he called, "Martin Luther's Christmas Sermon." Professor Bainton, Rolly as we called him, was 85 the first time I heard his virtuoso recitation. He even got a writeup in the *New York Times*.¹ He sifted through all the versions of Luther's Christmas sermons, selecting a paragraph here and a paragraph there, weaving together a wondrous story.

Bainton was something of an imp, especially when talking about Luther:

"As for the miracles, [Luther] accepted everything implicitly. He believed in the Virgin Birth, but he said it wasn't a very big miracle. It wasn't half as big as getting Eve out of Adam because after all Adam wasn't built for it. But isn't any birth a miracle? Where'd the little fingernails come from?"

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/12/16/nyregion/christmas-a-sermon-by-luther.html>

[But] the great miracle is nothing of the physical character. The great miracle which fills Luther with uncontrollable wonder is that when God had created the world and bestowed every benefit upon humanity, and they rebelled against him, that then instead of wiping out the human race, God sent his Son to die for their redemption. This transcends all reason; not logical reason, but emotional reason. What person would ever do anything like that? It just exceeds all comprehension. This is the great wonder."²

So, listen to the words of Luther, as gifted to us by Roland Bainton.

God comes to the people who are doing their job

Now there were shepherds abiding in the fields by night, watching over their sheep. That's a mean job. Looking after sheep is a mean job at any time, especially at night. But there they were, doing that which was assigned to them. And that's the kind of people God comes to. Oh it's the dirty devil, there are few people like that today. Everybody wants to be somebody else. The peasant wants to be a prince and the prince wants to be a king and the young married [person] wants to be unmarried and the unmarried [one] wants to be married and the maid wants to be a princess. It's to the people doing their job that God comes.

God comes to those who worship him

And the glory of the Lord shone about them. The whole hillside was ablaze with light. And they were sore afraid. And the angel said, "Fear not. Behold I bring you glad tidings. For unto you this day is born a Savior who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you: that ye shall find him in swaddling clothes, and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts." A multitude! All the angels in heaven. And there are more angels in heaven than there are blades of grass on earth. And they were all singing, singing, singing!

I wonder why one of them didn't go and give Mary a hand. You'd think one of them could have taken her a feather bed or a pan of warm water. But there they were, all of them singing. They were so happy they just had to break out of heaven and sing to somebody. They would have had a bigger celebration if God had let them. I don't understand it. But there they were.

And when they disappeared, the shepherds said, "Let us go even unto Bethlehem." They believed! I wouldn't have believed. I would have said, "This doesn't make any sense." All the heavens to open up and the angels sing a cantata just to a few shepherds on a hillside! Why if a king were born, surely the angels would have gone to Jerusalem and sung for Caiaphas or for King Herod. That they should do it for us out

² Roland H. Bainton, "Luther's Christmas Sermon" with some language edited. Available at <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2005/august/1714.html>

here, it doesn't make any sense. We must have been dreaming. Besides, if I'd been God and wanted to save the world, I wouldn't have done it that way. I just would have called in the devil and twisted his nose and said, "Let my people go."

But God is amazing. He sends a little baby as weak as an earthworm, lying in the feedbox of a donkey. And that little baby crunches the devil's back and overcomes all the power of hell and sin and death.

And the shepherds went to Bethlehem and they did not recoil when they saw the squalor, but knelt in adoration. And then they told the whole countryside, round about, what had come to pass. Thirty years later, when Jesus appeared, no one remembered. But Mary kept all these things in her heart.

And then we read, "And the shepherds returned." That certainly must be a mistake. It ought to be, "And the shepherds shaved their heads and put on cowls and went into a monastery." But no, it says, "They returned." And where to? To their sheep! And a very good thing for the sheep that they did.

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Well, God bless Martin Luther and Roland Bainton. But this is more than a lovely story. The angels and shepherds call to us still, reminding us that God's invitations are always to be multiplied, increased, and shared. The angels announced good news of great joy to simple people doing their jobs. And they believed, and they went, and they returned, telling all who would listen about this wondrous birth.

On this Christmas morning, in a world where the smoke and darkness of anger and violence seems to be permanent, let the shepherds tell you about how God did not give up on humanity; about how God became made flesh. The shepherds believed the angelic message and went with haste to Bethlehem. But they didn't stay there, and neither can we. The world around us is starving for the story of God-on-our-side.

Just as God called the humble – Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds – to tell the story of the light breaking through the darkness, so God calls each of us to bear witness to the light, hope, and love of Christ; to play our part in telling the world the news of this great and mighty wonder.

Come to Bethlehem and see Him whose birth the angels sing;
come, adore on bended knee, Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.

Gloria in excelsis Deo!

A blessed Christmas to you all. Amen.