

In the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen

Good morning and Happy Christmas to you all! I hope you all have had a good beginning of your day and that your day will be filled with friends and family, love and cheer.

I come from a family of story tellers. Now, some would say that is just a euphemism for “liars”. But, I remember sitting around and listening to stories of my grandparents’ lives, my parents’ lives, and the lives of our ancestors. I had an uncle who was an amateur historian for the Civil War and he could tell you stories in a way that you could almost see the battles happening in front of you. And, my father. . . . well, with my dad, you never quite know if he was telling you the truth or pulling your leg. He used to take milk with him to work. He convinced everyone that he and my mother had a goat at home, and it was goat’s milk. Dad is quite the story teller.

In a sense, the Gospels are all about story telling as well. Our holy scriptures tell the story of how God spoke all that is into existence and how God so loved the world that God sent God’s only son to die for us. And Luke’s gospel tells us the story of God’s Son’s birth.

Well, it does in a way. We read 20 verses of the 2nd chapter of Luke’s Gospel this morning, just like we did last night, just like we did in years past, and just like we will in years to come. But, if you take a hard look at the Gospel passage, Jesus’s actual birth is only 2 verses:

While they were there, the time came to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her first born and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7)

That’s it. That is the sum total of the actual birth story. Just two verses. It seems that the real drama of this passage comes after the birth, in the telling of the story.

It is shepherds who receive the angelic proclamation. Shepherds, who are regarded as lowly, despised people who graze their sheep on other lands. Shepherds who were not only filthy but were ritualistically unclean. Shepherds who were not the cream of the crop.

And yet, we hear echoes of the prophet Isaiah in this angelic proclamation. Isaiah writes, in the 61st chapter, “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the prisoners.” Jesus himself will use these words to begin his own ministry.

And what do these lowly shepherds do when they hear the angels sing? They decide that they must go see what has been told them. They have to confirm it. They must bear witness to the glad tidings they have heard. They leave their flocks by night to find this child, this savior, this son of David.

Their response to the angels does not come without risk. They risk losing their sheep to predators by not guarding them. With the loss of sheep comes the loss of wealth and possibly employment. They risk being told by the good city folk to leave, that they are unwanted, that they are dirty, that they are not the right sort. They risk everything that they knew about the world up to that point. They risk meeting the Messiah, the long awaited one.

When they find the baby Jesus, they tell Mary and Joseph what has happened and what they had been told. They tell their stories of an encounter with the divine. They tell about how they met Jesus. And, when they have told Mary and Joseph about what they saw and heard, they return to their fields,

praising and glorifying God. By telling their stories, the shepherds become something different. They were changed. They became, dare I say, evangelists.

My guess is that some here perhaps do not react well when they hear the word evangelist or evangelism. I don't know about you, but I immediately conjure up images of men with way too much hair product, on television, asking for money. Or, I see people standing at street corners, shouting the "Good News" in angry tones. It is not a word that immediately grabs my soul.

But evangelism, in its truest sense, is "the telling of the good news". That is it. And each of us here can be, and are, evangelists. And, just like the shepherds, when we have met this God, our lives are changed. They are never the same. And neither are we.

I'm not suggesting that you try to convert people over Christmas dinner. I'm not asking you to inquire if people have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. What I am suggesting, and what I do know, is that everyone here has a story to tell. A story about an encounter or encounters with a God that loves them deeply, without reservation, without condition, without end.

So, tell your story to others. It is your story of meeting the God of Light that can be a gift to those in these dark days. It is your story of knowing a God of deep love that can heal the breaking hearts around you. It is your story of a God that transforms that can give permission to others to leave whatever prison cell holds them. It is your story of redeeming love that can anchor another person who knows God but may be adrift these days. It is your story that bears witness to the miracle we celebrate this day. A miracle that tells us that God, came down to earth to be with us, to live as one of us, to die for us.

We are the ones who hear the angels' words today. And, I invite you all, when you leave this place, to tell your stories and to proclaim the good news.

Howard Thurman, a noted African American theologian, pastor, educator, and civil rights leader, captures this spirit in a poem he wrote. It is called "The Work of Christmas"¹.

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart. Amen.

1. Thurman, H. (2001). *The mood of Christmas*. Richmond, IN: Friends United Press.