

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14[15-20]

This week, as I've been thinking about tonight's message, I kept coming back to the shepherds and the angels – the human beings and the heavenly beings who were the first witnesses to Jesus' birth.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” The Bible is full of references to shepherds. The great King David, the king who was Joseph's ancestor – he began his career as a shepherd. David was also a songwriter. He wrote the most famous song ever: the one in which God is described as a good shepherd, leading his sheep through green valleys and beside still waters. Later in his life, Jesus would describe himself in that way, too.

The shepherds were the first to be told of Jesus' birth. These guys weren't fancy or important people at all – they were minimum wage workers, regular working stiffs on the night shift, doing their job out of sight and out of mind, out in the fields outside of town. Out on the edge of society. Out on the margins.

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” The shepherd's first response is abject fear. Wouldn't it be the same for you, too? I don't think angels look like those little pins you wear on your lapel or the ornament you hang on your tree. I think angels are huge and fiery and altogether alien. Angels show up all over the place in the Bible also, and when they do, they bring messages from God. We are only in chapter 2 of Luke's gospel and already there have been two angel sightings. And now there is not just one but a multitude -- praising God, lighting up the night sky with amazing good news and a song of light and life.

Shepherds and angels. Fear and praise. Earth and heaven. All coming together on this night. This very night.

The King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born in a barn and laid in a manger. The King of Kings and Lord of Lords was born into the family of David the Shepherd, David the King. And like those shepherds that night, we know fear. The news media makes sure that we stay afraid, very, very afraid. Fear of violence. Fear of illness. Fear of traveling. Fear of anyone who doesn't look like you or speak like you or dress like you. Fear of the future. Fear that God seems to be far, far away.

This is the message of Christmas:

God came from heaven to take on human form in order to show you just how much you are loved. It is not about how much you own. It is not about whether you have your life together or not. It is not about how busy you are, how many presents you have wrapped, or how far you have traveled to get home. God took on human flesh out of love for you. God is not out there someplace in heaven that can't be reached. God is right here, this night, this very night.

After the angels sang their song of praise, the shepherds decided to go to Bethlehem and check the story out for themselves. We will hear that part of Luke's gospel in a few minutes. But the important piece is this: the shepherds came back singing their own song of praise to God. It was just as the angel had said: there was a baby laying in a manger in a barn and that baby is the Light of the world.

We are about to sing one of my favorite Christmas songs:

**Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere.**

Go, tell it on the mountain

That Jesus Christ is born.

The folks who first sang this song were slaves in the American South in the years right around the Civil War. They could not go anywhere or do anything on their own because their bodies were the property of others. I'm certain that they knew what fear was. But those slaves also knew that God was doing something absolutely new. The folks who first sang this song could not contain the joy and excitement that they felt at knowing the good news of Christ's birth. Like the shepherds, they "glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." (Luke 2:20)

Shepherds and angels. Fear and praise. Earth and heaven. All coming together on this night. This very night.

To you is born this day in the city of David the Shepherd, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. *Born to you.* Along with the shepherds and all the folks who have to work tonight. Born to you, along with Mary and Joseph and all the folks who never imagined that their lives would turn out this way. Born to you, no matter what it is that you fear. Born to you, along with the angels and all the multitudes who are gathered in churches and homes around the world to sing praises to God.

Born to you: a savior who is Christ, the Lord