

The Greatest Sermon

Luke 2:1-21 ~ December 24, 2013 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Now that was a Christmas Eve sermon! Think about it... The sky filled with a host of angels. The night wrapped in infinite stars, planets, and galaxies splayed across the heavens. Time, locked in a universe creating continuum with space, was waiting in anxious anticipation for this incredible moment. It was the moment when God would announce an event even more profound than gravity itself. It was the explosive spiritual big bang creating a new universe of love between God and His fallen creation. It was the announcement of the birth of God’s own son, Christ Jesus, our Lord.

I can’t help but wonder if that preacher angel had a few butterflies as he stepped into his sky-born pulpit. I wonder if his mouth was dry and his knees knocking a bit as he sorted out the notes for his sermon. There was a short prelude by the Angelic brass choir. There was an opening hymn sung by the Hosts of Heaven and then it was time for the sermon. It was time to say it boldly and clearly. It was time to speak a marvelous truth to a waiting world. And so that great angel preacher opened his mouth and said:

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

That was it, about fifty words. It was the best sermon ever preached! Not a single listener was late for any opening kickoff that day. Better yet, the good news of great joy had the power to restore the potential for God’s intended destiny of every human who ever lived or ever would ever live. The true meaning of the child born unto us in the city of David rang like a bell in every gravity well throughout the galaxies. God had acted according to His nature, His divine tendency to love and preserve his creation and nurture it toward its intended purpose. Because he so loved the world, he sent his son, not to condemn the world, but so that in the name of Jesus the world might be saved. That is what that knee knocking preacher of an Angel was announcing in the skies over

Bethlehem on that Christmas night so many years ago. In three sentences he turned the very state of reality on its ear with the greatest sermon ever preached.

But you know ... if we'd have been with the angel choir that night looking down on earth; if we had been peering over that nervous angel preacher's shoulder at the congregation gathered to hear this fabulous sermon, we might have been puzzled. We might have wondered if the publicity got messed up, or maybe Google had its map coordinates pointing in the wrong direction. Because right where we would have expected thousands of upturned faces like a stadium full of spectators, or streets thronging with celebration; right where crowds of people should have been standing, waving their arms, flicking their lighters at the greatest rock concert ever imagined; right there instead of the expected multitudes were only a few terrified shepherds trying to hide behind some mangy sheep. It's not at all what we would have expected, is it?

At first it seems like an unpleasant surprise. Here we have this incredible angel Choir and the greatest sermon ever preached and we wouldn't actually have let most of that first congregation in the door of our church. I mean the sheep, of course. The shepherd's themselves would have been fine. We'd have been glad to welcome them in here. But they probably would not even fill up a whole row of chairs. And yet those were the people to whom God decided to have the greatest sermon preached. They were not even one stop on the itinerary of a traveling show. They were it. They were the whole kit and caboodle. The Bible tells of the angels doing this only once. The greatest sermon was preached once. It was preached to a few shepherds on a hill above Bethlehem.

And why did God do that? What do you suppose he was up to with what seems like a ridiculous approach to publicity about the birth of his son, Jesus? Well there is an answer to that question. The answer is that God's Word is enough. The three sentences, the fifty plus words preached to some timid shepherds out in the country at night was enough. That's all it took. The word of God is powerful beyond our ability to understand. And in this instance, God's word was spoken in a way that was sure to erase any credibility those poor shepherd's had with their friends and family. What could they say? "We saw angels and they said that the Messiah had come. We went and saw the promised messiah of God lying in a manger in a stable in Bethlehem."

"Oh sure you did?" What else could their family and friends say? Who would believe them? Every one would think that they were crazy. They had heard the greatest sermon ever preached and they couldn't convince anyone that they were not insane or

drunk. But God's word was enough. It was powerful enough to be the truth. God's word is powerful enough to create truth in its own path.

How miserable it must have been for those poor shepherds. The truth of God's action in the world was planted in them like a seed in good soil. Their faith blossomed and grew beyond their own self-understanding. What else could have happened when one has an experience like those shepherds? And yet they were powerless to make anyone else believe them. They couldn't take anyone up on the hill and show them. The Angels were long gone.

They might have been able to show them Joseph and Mary, but a poor homeless couple with a brand new baby is a circumstance for pity, sympathy, and community action. It couldn't be the family of the messiah. Joseph and Mary were just kids with a kid. How could they be the holy family of God's choosing? Without the angel choir to back them up and that crazy angel preacher, how could the shepherds make anyone believe the truth about Jesus Christ? But still we know that their faith forced them to speak the truth and God's method left them helpless before the scorn of the world. They could speak the truth about what they had seen and heard, but their witness would wither before the ridicule of nonbelievers. What hope was there for them?

Every hope, they had every hope there was! They had the most powerful thing in the world! They had the true Word of God alive in their hearts. They had their encounter with the angels, they had the world's greatest sermon, and they had the late night visit to the stable. Together these experiences would guide them like the star guided the magi. God put those few individuals on the path to bear witness to the greatest news ever to arrive on earth. They had it in their hearts and on their lips. They had the very word of God. They could say to anyone they wanted:

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

The world's greatest sermon was totally and completely theirs. They could preach it anywhere they wanted and to whomever the Spirit guided them. The very power of God's word was their own. Without a doubt they preached that great sermon again and again and again. And its power has spread to the entire world. Scorn and ridicule have no power against the Word of God. It has the capacity to take root in the heart by its own might. Like a virus it can infect us with the truth. It can infect us with truth that

has the power to save us for eternity. We know this because the shepherd's story has become one of the best loved and widest spread stories of humanity. Its power remains to this day. It has the power to work faith in the hearts of those who hear it. And because those shepherds continued to preach that great sermon year after year, generation upon generation of an entire church has come to believe the truth of God's incarnation in Christ.

That is why you sit here today to hear this testimony to the power of God's word. Sent on the lips of Angels, this word has passed to you from the lips of shepherds. It has passed from the lips of disciples and apostles. It has come from the mouths of people in every walk of life, bankers and shopkeepers, soldiers and physicians, beggars and kings. It has come to you from every walk of human life. It has been spoken to you by people that you know. It has worked its power in your heart and by its power you now believe. You believe in the baby wrapped in swaddling, lying in a manger. You believe in Jesus who is truly God, begotten of the father from eternity, and who is truly man, born of the Virgin Mary. You believe that he is your lord. He is your savior. He is your master and your friend. You believe! That is the power of the word! It is a power straight from the lips of angels and shepherds, down through the generations of faith, and by God's Grace it has come into your own heart. That is the source and substance of your faith. It is a faith that saves you. It is a faith that grant's you eternal life.

But what will you do? What will you do with the boiler fire of faith stoked in your heart? Like the shepherds you face a scornful world filled with ridicule. It is a world that is no more ready to believe you than it was to believe the shepherds. So what will you do? How about preaching the greatest sermon? You can preach it too. And it is as powerful today as it has ever been. So when your heart overflows with the wonder of God's eternal love for you just say:

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.

AMEN

