

The best and the worst thing about being a pastor this time of year is that I have to sit down, stop wrapping presents, stop baking cookies (nah, I wasn't baking cookies. Don't need to because so many of you kindly bake yummy things and give them away!) My musician friend whom many of you have met posted a funny image on FB of a kid who is being asked by another kid if his family was ready for Christmas. The kid bursts out crying and says, "My mom is a musician. She's never ready for Christmas, but it comes anyway." The blessing of being busy with the sacredness of Christmas is that you are really not terribly tempted to get obsessive about Christmas details at home. That's because you are obsessing over Christmas worship details at church. And it is a blessing to be challenged daily in December to focus on the real gift of Christmas. Here we all are, to slow down and remember the reason for the season - this amazing gift, the one that Mary wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. There is something truly amazing about Almighty God becoming a helpless, little baby. There is a mystery we cannot explain when the fullness of God combines with the fullness of Mary's humanity to create this human-divine Christ child.

Before we read the story which will be read countless times today all around the world and from three different translations in this congregation today, let's stop and think for a moment about how odd this story of the Incarnation really is. An unwed young mother, Mary, a virgin, visited by an angel. A devout fiancée, Joseph, who hung in there despite all the glares from others. It's good he listened to the voice of God coming through his dreams, telling him not to abandon Mary because ancient law allowed for her stoning. And this child, given by the Holy Spirit, must be carried in the womb, all the way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That's a walk from here to Tampa. No wonder the poor girl went into labor. Good chance Mary and Joseph were in a group of family members on that journey, not traveling alone. There could have been a donkey but it is not in the story, until Jesus rides it into Jerusalem the week of his death.

Part of the amazement of the nativity for us is the idea that the Son of God was born not in a hospital but in a room full of animals. But actually it was pretty normal for them. We learn from linguistic scholars that the inn may not have been the stable of a first century hotel but the upper part of a regular house. The lower part was where the animals came inside at night for protection. So Jesus was born in ordinary conditions – not extraordinary – in an ordinary house, in the lower part of the house, where the animals came for food and rest at night.

I think the most amazing part is that the first birth announcement went not to important people but to a bunch of migrant shepherds! Reading from the Common English translation, let's hear the afresh the story of the humble birth and be amazed with the shepherds who received first news.

Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists.² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria.³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled.⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea.⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby.⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.⁸ Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night.⁹ The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.¹⁰ The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you-- wonderful, joyous news for all people.¹¹ Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord.¹² This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger."¹³ Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said,¹⁴ "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."¹⁵ When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to

Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." ¹⁶ They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. ¹⁸ Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. ²⁰ The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told. (CEB)

Luke tells us that an angel of the Lord with the glory of the Lord shining all around dares to stand in front of some Jewish sheep-herders and make *them* the *first* human beings on earth to hear the news the a savior has been born, that Israel's Messiah has come? Why not somebody important? What about Emperor Augustus, doesn't he need to know? Or Quirinius? Or the chief priest? Or a Pharisee or scribe? Or, how about having it first announced during worship at the Temple. At least the angels should announce to Mary and Joseph themselves there after the delivery. They had been visited by angels, but not by the multitude of heavenly hosts. But the heavenly army of angels visit shepherds. They are beyond amazed. They are scared, terrified. But the angel insists that they should not be afraid, because it is good news.

Prior to this in Luke's story, the verb "feared" came from the angel commanding NOT to fear (1.13); from the angel Gabriel to Mary commanding that she not fear (1.30); Jesus as he calls James, John, and Simon commands that they NOT to fear their career change to catching people (5.10); Jesus tells Jairus NOT to fear that his only daughter has already died (8.50); Jesus commands his fearing disciples NOT to fear dying as they proclaim the Gospel, but instead He tells them to fear losing their soul by not proclaiming it (12.4-7); Jesus COMMANDS his disciples NOT to fear giving up all material goods to gain the Kingdom of God (12.32).

And the angel continues: "This will be a sign for you: you will find an infant, wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger." A baby, some rags, and a feeding trough. That's what the angel of the LORD standing in the glory of the LORD gives some no-name shepherds as the evidence of the greatest news ever

brought to this world. “The shepherds hurry to the feeding trough, and there, they bring the amazing news to Mary and Joseph. Can you imagine the sense of relief and confirmation for them? How many times did they wonder if they were crazy for listening to angel voices in the night? Confirmation they receive: This ordinary baby is the ultimate sign of God’s favor for humankind — Savior, Messiah and LORD all rolled into a sticky, wrinkly newborn” lying in the dirty hay. Amazing.

So the shepherds resolve to go and personally see what the Lord has MADE KNOWN to them (2.15), they in turn immediately MAKE KNOWN to others that the Incarnation has happened in an infant (2.17)! And all who heard it are amazed. I have never noticed this verse before. Who was there? People in the house, people in the neighborhood, animals, Mary and Joseph. All who heard it were amazed.

At Peace Church our Mission Statement begins this way: Our Mission is to make God known.... Our mission is the same as the Shepherds – to tell all around us what has been made known to us by God and to help them hear the joy, the hope, the peace, and the love of this news.

The shepherds’ revealing of the Incarnation begins to happen right here in this scene, because Mary herself hears it (2.19)! It’s as if they immediately begin to tell about it to whomever is around. That’s what happens I guess when you have a terrifying and amazing experience. When you share it, others are amazed too.

Let’s think about the faithful actions of the shepherds. They see and hear. Shepherds are not so preoccupied, so busy with their own sense of self-importance. They have time under the stars to listen for the voices of angels. Do we? They have a spirit of openness to being amazed by the work of the Lord. Do we? The shepherds do not hesitate to go, as the angels told them. They do not form a committee to study and explain this appearance of angels. They do not make a long range plan to visit the child at some later date. They apparently do not even worry about their sheep. They had experienced a life-changing visitation from the heavenly hosts, so they were afraid and amazed and went hastily.

The shepherds were the very first evangelists. They told the news which they had received and all who heard it were amazed. In their courageous, naive amazement the shepherds found confirmation of the message the angel had brought them. In their courageous, naive amazement they were able to be the first visitors to the newborn Savior of the world. Because of they had time to see and hear and go, they observed first-hand the helplessness of a God, who chose to come among us as one of us.

As the story of Christ's life unfolds in Luke's Gospel, there is more amazement. Mary and Joseph's AMAZEMENT at Simeon's prophesy while holding Jesus (2.33); the home-town folk's AMAZEMENT at Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth (4.22); the disciples AMAZEMENT at Jesus' control over the storm (8.25); the crowd's AMAZEMENT "at all that Jesus was doing" shortly after He healed a boy (9.43) and after he healed a mute man (11.14); Peter's AMAZEMENT at finding Jesus' linen clothes in the empty tomb (24.12); the disciples' AMAZEMENT when they saw and touched the risen Jesus' bodily wounds (24.41) after the walk to Emmaus.

Along with amazement, there are many times in the story of Christ that the message is "Do not be afraid." There are many times when fear is coupled with amazement, and somewhere in the middle of holy fear and amazement is a mature Christian place of strong desire, the awesome experience of love. If you don't know what I'm talking about, think about the first time you fell in love or had a big crush – fear and amazement all rolled into one. Take some time tonight and tomorrow to revel in the love that has come into our weary world. See the glow of this light, feel the warmth of this grace, and like Mary, make room for the fullness of God's great love to dwell in you. Just as you moved your ordinary household items, to make room for a tree and for decorations, as you re-arranged your schedule to make room for parties and your budget to make room for gift – giving, make room for love. Make room in your hearts and lives for the love of Jesus Christ. Be amazed and awestruck at a love so pure and good. With Mary ponder what this means and with the Shepherds, go forth to make this God known, so all around might know this love.