FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT—*Joy*

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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*What the Shepherds Saw* Luke 2:1-21

It is always wonderful to include the children in the telling of the story of Christ’s birth. We all enjoy seeing them “dressed up” and reciting some of the verses from Scripture—usually the Gospel of Luke. Luke was the most descriptive of Jesus’ birth. He is the only one who tells us about the shepherds. It is Luke who tells us about the shortage of regular accommodations for weary travelers, like Mary and Joseph, and so he is also the one who tells us about Baby Jesus in the manger.

What Luke did not have to tell the first to hear the Nativity Story is that the first people to meet and worship Jesus were a bunch of nobodies—this is who shepherds were. We tend to romanticize them, but shepherds were not considered part of “polite society.” Most probably did not own land or have a skill or a trade. Yet these are the first ones to know God’s good news. For that reason, I would like to dwell on these “nobodies,” the shepherds.

To begin with: shepherds wrangled sheep and it was hard, dirty work. They guided them to good, deep pastures and sweet water. They nursed them when they were sick or injured. They even protected them from predators like wolves, bears, lions, and even other human beings - sheep rustlers.

On that first night, when Jesus was born, there were shepherds all over the countryside, as Luke describes, *“living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock* *by night.”*[2:8] Indeed, if they were good at their job, given all of the dangers that could fall upon the flock, they were probably sleeping with one eye open, or in shifts; making sure that there was nothing in the dark that was going to bring harm or danger.

It was in that darkness that the heavenly commotion appeared—a “darkness” like the one the prophet Isaiah wrote about:

*2 The people who walked in darkness
   have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
   on them light has shined.*

In an instant, bringing blinding light into the fields as far as they could see, the shepherds were suddenly in the presence of angles who made their announcement, sang their praises to God, and then…they were gone.

The fields were suddenly dark once more. After such an experience, the shepherds might have been confused, amazed, even stunned. Which is to say: they could have been too shocked or frightened to do anything. The darkness in which they had been dozing would have been transformed into the kind of darkness that descends on the mind and senses in times of great fear and confusion. Such darkness immobilizes the human mind and body.

Such fear can also turn into ourselves. When we are frightened, we pull ourselves, our families, our tribes closer. We hunker down so that we will be ready to fight off whatever we perceive to be a danger.

This did not happen for those first people who heard of Christ’s birth. Instead of being frozen in place, something had happened to their hearts and minds that had changed their fear into belief. Perhaps it was the very specific descriptions the angels gave them of how to find the baby. Perhaps it was the angels’ song of praises that made them suddenly feel like “somebodies,” and not the social undesirables they were usually treated as being. We do not know.

What we do know is that Luke began the chapter by talking about the kind of power that ruled the land. It was Roman power, and it was brutal and proud; it could bend the whole of the known world to its requirements.

And yet, when God came to live among us, it was not among the rich and the powerful. It was not by way of a royal procession in the middle of the city. It was not in broad daylight when people would be out on the street to see the spectacle.

When God came to live among us, the first people to know about it were exactly the opposite of what earthly power seeks. It was among common people who were overlooked or ignored.

This is what the shepherds saw as they knelt beside the manger. They saw someone like themselves, someone who would know what it was like to struggle and suffer. They saw a Messiah that was not going to be like Caesar who exerted brute force as a means of rule, and to maintain Rome’s domination over all others. He was also not going to rule like Herod, who governed by treachery, murder, and paranoia.

What the shepherds saw was the hope of the world. They saw this in an infant unprotected by wealth or political power. They saw an infant, whose vulnerableness invited compassion and concern as a response to his person. This is who he was and is. This is how he saves us—by showing us God’s courage and God’s faith that we could (and can) live without fear of one another. He showed us this by entering the world like one of the most common of us—this is where and how he met us, how he meets us still.

In her weekly meditation, author and theologian Diana Butler Bass asks the question: “Where is the beauty of Advent in the midst of the world’s pain?”

She responds by observing our own time and events, and she writes that: *“The Christmas story insists that God is born in the midst of rubble, under the shadow of empire, into the deepest places of human oppression, suffering, and trauma.”*

To that end, Butler Bass reports that:

*In Bethlehem, the Lutheran Church decided that its Christmas nativity scene this year would be different by placing the symbolic Baby Jesus in a manger of rubble and destruction to reflect the reality of Palestinian children living and being born today.*

What the shepherds saw that first Christmas is what we are entreated—that is: the Spirit pleads—that we see and know each other as Christ came to know us: as human beings—brothers and sisters who are deserving of one another’s compassion.

This is what the shepherds saw. They saw the Christ Child, and despite the fact that he was the Messiah, they also saw the darkness all around him. They must surely have also seen the darkness that would gather around the seats of power already in the world—the Caesars and Herods, and the like. Their power and status threatened, they would spread the darkness even farther than before.

And we are like them and their times. This year has been no different. It has been a year of darkness. In the midst of already dire global conditions—wars in several areas around the world, mass shootings that kill and injure people going about their lives, climate events that bring floods and fires. Sometimes it seems like an endless nightmare—a darkness that will not lift, like the darkness God brought to Egypt during the time of Moses—“a darkness that can be felt.” [Ex.10:21] As one writer has described it: “Once again, something palpable seems to have blanketed the world with all the unknowns, fears, and uncertainties nightfall brings. And as with most nights, we’re weary.”

Perhaps that is the problem: we keep trying to “wait out” the dark, or we wait for it to lift and go away. Perhaps it is time to stop doing that; stop trying to dispel the dark. Perhaps it is time to learn to see in the dark—like the shepherds did.

What they learned is what we, too, can learn: that Christ is the light that the darkness will not overcome. It will still gather close around us, but our promise is that it will not be overcome.

We know this because we see it all the time in the midst of darkness. We see many people who are still putting their lives on the line for others in some of the darkest and most dangerous places on the planet. There are even groups of them. They gather themselves together in organizations. The groups I would like to mention are:

* Doctors Without Borders—who work even in the midst of war;
* Oxfam International—who work all over the world to bring clean water and other vital necessities to communities around the world (and in our country, too);
* Our own church—the UCC—has missionaries in many of these dangerous dark places, too, and we are a part of their ministry.

We can join these people, or many others, in those dark places because Christ’s light has come into the world, and our promise is that it will not be overcome. So, let us do what the angels told the shepherds to do. Let’s try not to be afraid of the present darkness, or any other. Holding the light of Christ up before us, let us go on, rejoicing and embracing the good news of Christ. Amen.