

## Wesley United Methodist Church

December 24, 2015

"O Holy Night."

Luke 2:1-20

You are probably familiar with the story of the woman who went to the post office to buy stamps for Christmas cards. She said to the clerk, "May I have some Christmas stamps?" The clerk said, "What denomination?" The woman said, "God help us. Has it come to this? Give me 6 Catholic, 12 Presbyterian, 10 Lutheran and 22 Baptist."

It never ceases to amaze me that around this world on this night among Christians of every nation, and yes, every denomination, people of every age and race and language are bowing and giving thanks for a baby born long ago in Bethlehem of Judea.

Christmas Eve means different things, depending on your age. For our children it is the most exciting evening of the year as you await the arrival of Santa. We love to see our children's bright and shiny eyes as they see all the presents under the tree.

It would be nice...to keep our children forever young, forever joyfully anticipating the arrival of Santa, forever believing that the world is a place completely filled with beauty, and love, and joy, and peace. But they must grow up and learn about life in the real world. The real world sees Christmas merely as a time to turn a profit on a year's commerce. So, yes, in a sense we would like to keep them forever young.

There is another temptation, however. That is to keep the babe in the manger forever the same. This is the temptation to come to church on Christmas Eve and worship this babe and then to return to our real world lives and to ignore the fact that the Bethlehem babe became a man, a man who turned over the money-changers' tables in the Temple, the man who lives his life for others, the man who loved the unlovable, cleansed the leper, washed the feet of his disciples, gave his life for the ungodly and on the third day was raised from the dead.

There is the temptation to forget that this man Jesus calls us to know him all year long, to love our enemies, to do good to those who mistreat us, to seek to live the kingdom life every day that we walk this earth, always seeking to live as he would have us live. It's all right if sentimentally we want our children small so they can forever be a delight to us, but it is not all right if we want to forever keep the Christ child small so he won't inconvenience us, make demands on us.

In Luke's version of the Christmas story some shepherds were living out in the fields near to the place that housed the manger in which the Christ child lay, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

I don't know about you, but I sure would have loved to have been on that hillside that night to hear the angels sing. What an amazing sight and sound that must have been.

Almost everywhere you look today is sometimes seems that everyone is plugged into some kind of music. On the street, in airports, walking alone, people are listening to music. Some people are listening, believe it or not, to religious music. Some are listening to church hymns. Many more are listening to contemporary Christian praise songs. But all the music on all the

iPods in the world cannot compare to the music that the angels were making that holy night as they sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

No wonder then that the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem..." They went to where the angels had told them and when they had seen the Christ child for themselves, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about him, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

Probably their friends listened to them with skepticism. I know I would have. I mean, shepherds? Really? You mean those unsophisticated rubes with no education, no breeding? Who could take their words seriously? And angels? Who's ever seen an angel in real life? A baby lying in a trough where donkeys feed? Separate these events from the historical figure Jesus, and they would never stand on their own. But because of who he was and what he taught and how he died and how he rose from the grave, it becomes the most beautiful story ever told.

Luke tells us Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. As for the shepherds, "they returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

What a night that must have been! I wonder what happened to those shepherds? There's no mention of them again in the scriptures, but undoubtedly they were changed men.

Later when the Magi came, they were astrologers. They studied the heavens for signs. So they saw the star that led them to Jesus. But for the shepherds it was completely out of the blue, as we say. They were simply going about their everyday lives, watching over their sheep, when the angels' song burst into their lives. But that's the way life is and that's the way God works. Sometimes we find God, or better said, God finds us because we are searching for him. At other times God takes us totally by surprise.

Some of you came this evening sincerely searching for God. Others of you came for the singing of the carols, to be with your family in a safe and loving place. Or maybe you came simply to keep the warm glow of the Christmas season alive just a little longer.

I pray that whatever your reason for being here, something might happen this night that will cause you to hear the voice of an angel saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

And the suddenly I hope you will hear in the quietness a great company of the heavenly host...with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." And I hope you will leave this place a changed person. That is my prayer for you this night.