

Isaiah 9:2-7

² ^[b] 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.

³ You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when dividing plunder.

⁴ For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their shoulders,
the rod of their oppressor,
you have broken as on the day of Midian.

⁵ For all the boots of the tramping warriors
and all the garments rolled in blood
shall be burned as fuel for the fire.

⁶ For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

⁷ His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,^[a] the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,^[b] praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”^[c]

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:8-20

Terrified

Kerra Becker English

The shepherds were terrified.

I find it difficult to grasp that word – terrified.

I don't do horror movies or Fright Fest at Kings Dominion.

I'd rather not put myself in situations that I know will be scary, even when the consequences are purely for the adrenaline rush. I don't stand too close to the edge of high places, and it's super rare to get me on a roller coaster. No bungee jumping or sky diving on my Christmas list.

I have just enough extra regular anxiety already, thank you very much.

But when it comes to Christmas Eve, we tend to gloss over that word like it isn't even there.

It's a silent night, a holy night, a restful, peaceful, soothing night of fuzzy socks and warm pajamas.

It's a hot cocoa and dream-filled sleep night.

Except that's not what the story says.

It says: They were TERRIFIED.

It's too easy to go to the calming words of the angels, "Don't be afraid" as if that instantly did the trick.

Yes, it's good news.

Yes, it is a great joy.

Yes, it is a pronouncement of peace on earth for all people.

But THIS is a world-changing event, and you better hang on for dear life, shepherds.

I know, I know. I love the hymn “Silent Night.” Even though “Shepherds quake at the sight,” it sings like our very own Christmas lullaby – because it is.

We are going to sing about those scared shepherds tonight as we always do.

And I will go home, just like you will and sip some eggnog, and put on my warm socks, and light up the Christmas tree.

Even so, I hope you will remember, the story speaks of something other than calm and tenderness.

It was raw. It was messy. It was a holy disruption, and the shepherds happened to be along for the ride. They were doing their typical shepherd things. Most of the time, I suspect their job was pretty boring. Make sure the sheep weren't getting into too much trouble. Keep an eye out for predators. Chat with the other shepherds. Rather uneventful. Little did they know, this night, they were about to board a roller coaster and get the front car to the ride of their lives.

Bill Brown – one of my former professors and mentors situates the Christmas story just like I would expect him to – between creation and crucifixion – and he insightfully says how this story *really* goes as only a professor of the WHOLE Bible from cover to cover can.

He says: *Between creation and crucifixion, between the breath-filled Word ushering in the universe and Jesus' final breath exhaled at his execution, is Christmas. It is God's birth cry, the cry of Christ's immigration into the life of flesh, laden with lament and protest yet bursting with irrepressible exuberance. Such is the vulnerable cry of the incarnation, not the negation of God's glory but the negation of all attempts to negate it, from Herod to the present. No "silent night" was Christmas. The louder, the better.*

The LOUDER, the BETTER.

Christmas does not only represent this birth and all births as amazing and holy offerings of life.

Rather, Christmas is the fullness of God, as Bill puts it, “immigrating into the life of flesh.”

It is the self-imposed limitation of God becoming human, and the exuberance of the human bearing the fullness of God.

Would an awakening like this happen quietly?

Could an awakening like this happen quietly?

Why does an awakening like this become the story of terrified shepherds to tell?

They heard the angels and they were struck by wonder. Then - they were terrified.

The life events that change us tend to share those characteristics: Wonder and fear.

What room for wonder is there in Christmas if it's always about the same old traditions happening in the same old ways, with no room to hear anything new?

What room for quaking fear is there in Christmas if our greatest fear is forgetting a present someone wanted, or not getting the cards out in time?

For us, the season becomes standard, routine, repetitive.

For us, the season becomes a competition, did we do "enough" this year?

Let's stop that – at the very least for this moment.

Telling this story is a chance to change our perspective – to at least give voice to another wild and crazy option.

The wild and crazy option is this – that Christmas comes in the way we say we believe it comes.

It doesn't begin when the stores set out the Christmas hoopla as soon as Halloween is over.

And, it isn't over when the last present gets unwrapped tomorrow morning.

Christmas comes when we can look into the eyes of another, and see in them the face of God.

This is the promise of good news, great joy, peace on earth for all people everywhere.

That's the wonder.

It's also the fear.

We are amazed that God could be so close, and that's the very same thing that terrifies us.

If God is truly with us, and I believe God is truly with us, the roller coaster ride has begun.

We are on it for the whole ride.

It will be scary and it will be thrilling, and it will leave us shaky and breathless.

It means this whole existence is far more than what holiday traditions we keep.

It means that whether or not we have the brightest or flashiest Christmas lights on our block, the God of all that is, and all there ever was, and all that will ever be finds home in the very regular lives that happen in our homes.

If God's messengers are correct, and peace on earth comes through this unlikely, yet prophetic sign, then the world may just be changed through us. It might be changed by OUR joy, by OUR love, by OUR witness, by OUR amazement, by OUR wonder, and by OUR willingness to be interrupted in the humdrum sheep-watching of our lives, to pay attention to the glory of God that might be showing itself to us if only choose to listen and to look and see. They heard there was good news in the world, tonight, and they decided because of their wonder and in spite of their fear to go check it out. Imagine that. And then go do the same. Amen.

Prayers of the People:

Gracious God, tonight is the night when heavenly hosts sing "Alleluia!" and shepherds hear first the good news of great joy for all people. Tonight, heaven and earth meet, the majestic and the lowly collide and all creation resounds with your glorious, grace-filled Word. Tonight, the pain and joy of birth begins, and we tremble at the beauty and vulnerability, the tenacity and fragility of nascent life emerging in our midst.

As we abide with the Holy Family, watching, waiting, listening and longing for the cries of infant Jesus to resound through the darkness of our world, overshadow us with your divine hope that spurs us to justice, your inexplicable peace that quells violence, your complete joy that shatters despair and your perfect love that casts out fear.

Tonight, we rest in the sure and certain knowledge that no matter where we are or what we face, no matter the state of our hearts or the anxieties on our minds, no matter the headlines or the undercurrents, Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God, is with us. Amen.

John 1 – 1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, ^[a] and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.