

Series: Here Comes Heaven

**Christmas Eve**

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Luke 2:1-20

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Tuesday, December 24, 2024

A reading from Luke chapter 2, verses one through 20: “At that time, Augustus Caesar gave an order to all people in the countries that were under Roman rule. The order said that they must list their names through a register. This was the first registration taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria, and everyone went to their towns to be registered, so Joseph left Nazareth, a town in Galilee. He went to the town of Bethlehem in Judea. This town was known as the town of David. Joseph went there because he was from the family of David. Joseph registered with Mary, because she was engaged to marry him. Mary was now pregnant, so while Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to have her baby. She gave birth to her first son. There was no room left in the inn, so she wrapped the baby in cloths and laid him in a box where the animals were fed. That night, some shepherds were in their fields nearby watching sheep, and an angel of the Lord stood before them. The glory of the Lord was shining all around them, and suddenly they became very frightened. The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I am bringing you some good news. It will be a joy to all people. Today your savior was born in David’s town. He is Christ the Lord. This is how you will know Him. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a feeding box.’ Then a very large group of angels from heaven joined the first angel. All the angels were praising God and saying, ‘Give glory to God in heaven, and on Earth let there be peace to people who please God.’ Then the angels left the shepherds and went back to heaven. The shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened. We will see this thing that the Lord has told us about.’ So, the shepherds went quickly, and they found Mary and Joseph, and the shepherds saw the baby lying in the feeding box. Then they told them what the angels had said about the child. Everyone was amazed when they heard what the shepherds had said to them. Mary kept these things in her heart, and she continued to think about them. Then the shepherds went back to their sheep, praising God and thanking Him for everything that they had just seen and heard. It was just as the angel had said to them. When the baby was eight days old, He was named Jesus. This name had been given to Him by the angel before He even began to grow inside of Mary. This baby was the one that the prophet said would come to be Emmanuel, God with us.”

Well, Merry Christmas. My name is Paul, and I am one of the pastors here on staff, and no, I did not know it would be 60 degrees on Christmas Eve when I chose to wear this sweater this morning, so it is a little bit of a different Christmas here for us, but we are so glad you are here or you are livestreaming with us today as we celebrate the birth of our savior, Jesus. This week I came across my feed an interview with a comedian that I listen to sometimes, and I was shocked to hear him in this podcast interview say that he had just chosen recently to be baptized, and I was a little surprised, because if you listen to any of his content, he is not someone that you would expect to be baptized, and so I listened to a little bit of this interview, and I want you to hear what he said about the reason he chose to be baptized.

He said, “I have never been super religious, but when my grandpa passed away, something within me hit me deep down, and I thought, ‘I will never see this person again, so something has to exist.’ I skew Christian, so I started going to church a little bit more,” and then he goes on to say, “However, I hate church. I find it excruciatingly boring.” I thought maybe there would be an ‘amen,’ but no, okay, we are good. All right, we’ll keep going. He said, “But I want to believe in God, and it is obviously a huge part of the process, going to church.” It just struck me, and then they go on in this interview to talk about his choice to be baptized, and the host really did not get it, and they doubled down and started to mock his decision a little bit, and do you want to know what their critique was? Their critique was this. They said, “As comedians, we have to come up with a new act every time we go on the road, but those church guys, they just have the same act. It is the same story over and over and over and over again. They do not get new material. It is the same stuff.” He is like, “They need to get something new. They need some new material,” and as I was preparing for the message this week, and as I listened to that podcast, I felt like, “I get it. Like what else is there to say about virgins conceiving babies, and what else is there to say about shepherds and stars and angels and wise men? It feels like all of it has been said before. It is so familiar. Those church guys, they need to get some new material,” and oftentimes with stories like the one that we just read, it is stories that we are familiar with, they feel so familiar that sometimes familiarity can kill the wonder in our lives, and the things that we used to look at with awe and wonder and gratitude just become old and lose their novelty. I mean, just take the actual event of Christmas for a moment. I’m sure when you were a child, it carried all sorts of excitement and enthusiasm. You could not wait for the day Christmas came, and now was an adult, though, you might have grown out of that a little bit. Christmas has some nostalgia that goes with it, but all in all, it just comes and goes, and it is not that different than any other day of the year. Familiarity can kill our sense of wonder.

I was thinking about that idea this week, and how do you tell the story that we have all heard so many times? How do we tell the story again and new with fresh eyes? Then it struck me, I found the solution, A-I generated images to try to make the story come to life. Has anyone ever used those before? Does anyone know what I am talking about? All right, so I asked Chat GPT to come up with a couple of images of the Christmas story, of shepherds in the field with the angels. This was the first one. It is just a generic image. You could definitely tell it is A-I. For some reason, there is only one shepherd in front of the whole host, but it is pretty cool, right? It is like that is not bad, and then my wife, she loves Norman Rockwell paintings, and so I asked Chat GPT to do something like Norman Rockwell, and this is what it came up with. How did it do? Is that a little like Norman Rockwell? Well, sort of. Then I thought, what would it look like to see a kid and how they would draw the image? Are there any kids in the audience? Do you guys like drawing pictures of the Christmas story? Yeah. What is wrong with this one? There are no shepherds. Like, what are you doing, Chat GPT? You missed like half the deal. There are just sheep and angels, so I guess they are having a good time, and then I thought, you know what? We need, like a modern contemporary art piece, like a Jackson Pollock, and this is what it spit out. Now, kids, I know you could do better than this, because this is not real art. Is just a mess, right? This doesn’t even mean anything, and all of these A-I images aside, thinking of the ways that we try to depict this story, hear this story, tell this story, maybe you are here today, and you totally agree with the podcast host. Like, yeah, those church guys, like this dude up here with the pop star microphone and the knives out sweater, yeah, they need new

material, right? That was like a deep cut reference, if you did not get that. I am glad there was laughter. I can do that in the next service and see if it builds, and if it does not, then I will cut it out for the last one. You might just be here thinking, “Yeah, those church guys, church is boring, but I do not get the story. I have heard it, and it does not do anything for me. It does not make a difference.” For you, coming to a Christmas Eve service is no different than putting lights on a tree and drinking eggnog and spending time with family. It is just what you do at this time of year, because there is some sort of nostalgia to it, but it is not really that different than watching Christmas movies.

If that is you today, and if you are just done with the story, it does not matter to you, I just want to say Merry Christmas, and you are welcome here with all of your questions, your doubts, and your stories. I get where you are coming from, and you are welcome in this space, and not just for Christmas Eve, but any time you want to come, but there are others of us who are here today because we believe in the story. When we hear the story of angels in the fields talking to shepherds, or Mary conceiving miraculously, it is not just lights or nostalgia for us. It is hope. It is the story we believe in, and we come together on Christmas Eve to light candles, not just because it looks pretty on our Instagram accounts, but because it is a reminder to us that light has broken into the world, and it has overcome the darkness. We believe that God is writing the story of redemption, and for some reason He has chosen to invite us into that story, and so we celebrate Christmas Eve because it is an essential part of the process of what it means to believe in God, even if it means retelling the story that we have heard a thousand times again. So, whether you are the skeptic or you are here today because you need hope, my hope for you is that you would hear the story with fresh ears, that you would see the story in some new light, and that God would maybe reveal Himself to you in a way that you did not expect.

Our story begins in the gospel of Luke, chapter 2, verse 8, and if you do not have a Bible, and you want to follow along, there are Bibles in your seatback. Larry always said you are free to participate in our steal a Bible program, okay, so you can just take that home with you if you need a Bible, but Luke 2, verse 8 says this, “and there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night, and an angel of the Lord appeared to them. The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” They were terrified, which is a really important detail, because what you need to know about shepherds is they were not cupcakes. They were blue collar workers. They were in the fields protecting sheep to fight off bandits and wild animals and other shepherds who would try to steal their sheep. I mean they were the tough guys. They were the cowboys of their day. Think of Rip Wheeler on Yellowstone. They are like him, okay, and they are terrified in this moment, which tells you something about what they are seeing.

We do not really know what the angels looked like in this story, but we have other places in scripture where angels are depicted, and we are told what they look like. Some of us, when we think of angels, we have this image in our minds of a fat baby with wings. That does not sound very terrifying. Maybe a little weird, but it is not scary, right? But have you seen some of the A-I generated images of what angels actually look like and are described like in the Bible? Here is one. That would be terrifying, right? If you saw that pop up in the night sky one night, you would be a little like, “What is that? What happened?” There is something that is very scary about this moment, and so yes, they are frightened, and the angel who appears to them, again, we do not know if he looked exactly like that, but angels are

frightening. It is one of the most common responses to them, and the angel picks up on the fear, and he says, “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, and this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” The angel said, “You have nothing to fear. I am not here to cause harm. I have great news for you shepherds.” What does he say the great news is? He says that in a little town of Bethlehem there is a baby who has been born, who is not just like any other baby. He is actually the Son of God, the king who was promised, the one who has come to set things right. He is a baby who has invaded this world from heaven. It is an announcement, a proclamation that heaven is breaking into our world, that heaven is coming down to us.

There is this misnomer about Christianity, and what many of us think, the idea we have about Christianity and following Jesus is that the story of Christianity is that we need to clean up our lives in order to get to heaven and that the whole story is about people trying to figure out how to sanitize themselves, clean themselves up, in order for God to accept them, but it is actually a complete reversal of the story. The story the story of Christianity, the story of Jesus is not about trying to get to heaven. The story about Christianity is that heaven came to us. It is not about cleaning the mess of our lives up. It is that heaven invades the mess, that heaven comes down to us. What the angel is telling these shepherds is that God enters into our messy world because He loves us, that He chose to step into this world to bring salvation through the mess of the ordinary details of life, like shepherds in a field or a mother in labor, the powerlessness of a newborn who needs his diaper changed. The Christmas story is a story about God in the mess. I do not know if you have ever spent time around people who work with livestock, or if you yourself have spent time around people who work with livestock, but it is messy. I think Yellowstone romanticized the idea of cowboys, but if we could smell things through our TVs, that show would be way less popular. If you go to cow towns, everything smells like cows or sheep. It is nasty. That is who these people are. They are not the people who are put together and well-to-do, but God comes to them with a message of his salvation. He does not need them to clean themselves up. God does not need the sanitized versions of ourselves. He invites us to come as we are to Him, and He jumps into our mess.

I think the second thing we see from the story is not just that God chooses to come into our mess, but also that God chooses to come for everyone. Heaven comes for everyone. The angel says, “I bring you good news of great joy for all people.” All people. The message to the shepherds was not just personal to them. It was universal. It was him saying that God has come for the entire world. The shepherds were not the VIPs of their day. They were the ordinary laborers, the overlooked, the blue-collar workers, and God chose to give his first announcement of his coming Son, the king that was promised, to them. Why? Because heaven is not reserved for the powerful or the privileged. It is reserved for the humble, the forgotten, and the ordinary. Heaven comes for everyone. God came into the world for the bruised child and the broken man. God entered into the world for the mother who has had countless miscarriages and for the husband who is powerless to help her. God chose to enter into the world for the divorcee and for the adulterer, for the person who cheats on their taxes, and for the person who gets mad at the people who do. God has come for everyone. He did not come for the best or the brightest. He came for the last, the least, and the lost. The shepherds remind us that no one is too small, too unseen, or too unworthy for God’s love. Heaven came for them, and it comes for us, because that is what the angels said.

They say, “Unto you, a child has been born,” and yes, absolutely they are talking to the shepherds there, and it is this universal application, but the last time I checked, you would be a part of that, and so what we have to understand is that heaven comes for you. “Unto you a king has been born,” that this message is not just for everyone out there, but it is for you, that God gladly left a bright and shining heaven, plunging head-first into the darkness and mess and mud and muck of this world, into unbelief and into tragedy. He did not stand out in the light and beckon you out of the darkness. God invaded the night, and He came in search of you. What you need to understand is in this world, oozing with pain and wrath, with guilt and pockmarked with graves, God gladly and willingly was born to make you his own, and the deeper you fall, the more He is willing to dig. The darker your despair, the more He will shine a light, because God enters your mess, because He loves you. So, no matter the hurt, no matter how screwed up your life is, no matter what stupid decisions you think you have made, no matter how filthy or vile or useless you believe you are, God was born for you. Heaven came down for you, and if you have ever wondered about the truth of that statement, or if that just sounds like some fairy tale to you, all you have to do is to look at the manger and look at the cross to see the depths of his love.

One of my favorite Christmas moments, and we have not done it in a few years, but for a few years it was almost an annual tradition for us. Steffi and I would go downtown to the symphony, to listen to Handel’s Messiah, and it was always like, I mean it is just one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written, and we would go downtown, we would have dinner, and then we would walk over to the performing arts district, and it was just this amazing evening. It felt like you were in a Christmas movie, like there was snow coming down, and not like a Hallmark movie, but like a real Christmas movie like *Die Hard* or something. It was good, and you were like, “Yes, this is what I want for Christmas,” but my favorite part of those nights was not necessarily the dinner, although I love eating dinner with my wife. It was not necessarily actually the music. My favorite part is what happens right before the music starts, because when you walk into the room, and all of the different musicians are warming up and tuning their reeds and their strings and running through different kinds of passages that are hard for them, the most beautiful thing about that is it just sounds like absolute chaos. You have the murmur from the audience as everybody is waiting for it to begin, and there is just this dissonance, this mess that is in the air, but then the conductor steps up, and he lifts his wand, and a hush falls over the entire crowd and the entire room, and it is that moment that I love, because as they burst into the symphony, this dissonance, this mess of the room turns into perfect harmony. It always feels like a moment to me where heaven is touching Earth. It is beautiful, and to me, that moment so perfectly encapsulates so much of the Christmas story. When I think about the mess of this world, when I think of angels in the sky and breaking into the silence of the night, announcing this beautiful, good news that a king has been born that will cause great joy for all people, that is where heaven meets earth.

Every year we come together on Christmas Eve, and we light candles to remember that moment that God broke through to the darkness of night, and light shone forth, and darkness could not overcome it. Our kids in the room, have you ever experienced when it gets really dark, and you know that just a little bit of light, a candle or a flashlight or the light from your parents’ phone, it can make a huge difference in the darkness? That is the story of Christmas, that at Jesus’ birth, the night sky became like the afternoon sun. In the end of his story, we are told that the afternoon sun became dark as night when He was crucified.

It is as if the whole story of Jesus is pointing us to the reality that God is breaking into the darkness, that He is the light that illuminates everything, and so as we come together tonight to light candles and to sing Silent Night, my encouragement to you is to remember that story, that as we hold the light up, and as we praise the king who has come, it is the announcement, is the proclamation, it is the beauty of the good news of a great joy to all people that Christ has come, and that He will come again.

22:22 minutes

---

Edited by Tom Kenaston

Message #816