

Sermon 12-24-09 Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Mark E. Sloss

Isaiah 9: 2

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.

Luke 2:1-20

1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

15 When 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." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Well we're here. This night that we've been waiting for has arrived. It's Christmas. Now in this moment I invite you to turn your focus away from all the frenetic activity of this season. Let's turn our attention away from all the fancy decorations, the parties, family gatherings, last minute shopping and gift-wrapping. Let's instead zero in on what this night is really all about. God is up to something tonight. 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. Can we slow ourselves down enough tonight to catch a glimpse of that light? Can we slow ourselves down, and enter into the wondrous story of God's coming into our world? Can we slow ourselves down enough to discover what God is up to right here and now in our very midst?

God, it seems is always up to something, breaking into our world when we least expect it, and in unexpected ways as well. Imagine if you were one of those shepherds in our Lukan story, out in

the fields, keeping watch over your flocks by night. When suddenly the night is interrupted with light and an angelic messenger bringing the good news that God was up to something very special. Before the night is over you've traveled to a stable, and caught a glimpse of this newborn babe, returning to your field with songs of praise on your lips for all that you've seen and heard. Imagine that you are one of those simple shepherds to whom God has revealed this good news. Perhaps such imagination will help us tune in to what God is up to this very night.

The story of Jesus birth is so full of contrasts:

- There is squalor and there is splendor.
- The stinkiness of the stable and the aura of the angels.
- The darkness broken by the glorious light of the Lord.
- The political might of an empire census versus one born to bring peace on earth.
- The lack of hospitality shown Mary and Joseph, sidelined to a stable, and the utmost central importance of this birth.

The story of Jesus birth teaches us to look for what God is doing in unexpected places with unlikely people and in unexpected ways.

It's true that God is present in the CEOs of great corporations. But Christmas teaches us to attend in particular to God's presence in the poor, the outcasts and forgotten ones. I know that some you were out looking for God earlier today in the faces of children being fed by Kokomo Urban Outreach. Others might find God stirring this night in the unlikely space of a hospital room, saying goodbye to a loved one whose days of life upon this earth are almost over. Maybe it will be in a long overdue reconciliation at a family gathering. And just maybe, just maybe it will be a small new pinprick of light shining somewhere deep in the darkness of your own heart.

The story of Jesus birth gives us reason to *slow down* in order to discover what God is up to in our lives this night. How is it--that Jesus seeks to be born anew in you this very night?

Where in you does the angelic message most resonate? "To you is born this day – a savior who is Christ the Lord." Where in you does this message become like a pinprick of light penetrating the darkness?

Charles Dickens, *The Christmas Carol*, is a much-loved story of this season because it highlights the vast transformation that Christmas can bring in a human heart. Though, I doubt that any of us will undergo the degree of change that takes place in the life of Ebenezer Scrooge, be assured that change will happen tonight. God is up to something. Hearts will turn. Reconciliation will happen. In the very midst of our human selfishness, the waylaying love of God breaks through to us. Deeper relationships with this one who is the source of all light and love will be forged.

Catholic theologian John Shea was talking to a group of people about such deep connectedness with God, and he shared how Meister Eckhart, a theologian, once said that each person has a vintage wine cellar but they seldom drink from it. Most people live unaware of the possibility of this deep connection with God that they carry within themselves.

Afterwards a man came up to him and said, "I think I know what you were talking about. Let me tell you my story. I was a schoolteacher and at Christmas the kids always brought me gifts. They brought them in different types of boxes but after a while I was pretty savvy about what the gifts were. There would be a thin handkerchief box. I knew it was a handkerchief box and so instead

of opening it, I usually just put it in the closet and then when I needed a handkerchief, I went and got it and opened it up. Well, one time I needed a handkerchief and I went and opened up a thin handkerchief box but there was no handkerchief inside. Inside instead was an antique pocket watch. I had an antique pocket watch all this time but I didn't know it because it was wrapped in a handkerchief box."

Tonight I invite you to unwrap your greatest treasure, a gift that changes every aspect of our lives. It changes all our relationships and how we view every situation and circumstance. It is the light that shines in the darkness, and no darkness will ever overcome it.

Tonight we'll each light a single candle to remind us of this gift. Unlike some Christmas light displays of a million lights or more with a goal it seems to dazzle us and eliminate the darkness for miles around, a single candle is much more humble. It won't eliminate the darkness, but instead reminds us that the darkness does not have the final word. It is a defiant symbol of hope.

As you light your candle tonight, in your mind's eye let its light guide you in the shepherds footsteps to the stable. Glimpse anew the newborn Christ bringing peace and salvation to all the world. Let its light flood this place with love, hope, joy, and peace. And when you extinguish that external candle, let an internal one be lit. Deep down in the wine cellar of your soul may the light shine in the midst of any darkness of your life.

If you spend some time basking in the glow of that light, then I think that you'll soon discover just what God is up to on this very special night.