

Christmas Eve 12-24-21 7pm

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Close to Home: Invited Home Luke 2: 8-20

Hear now our fourth lesson from the Gospel of Luke 2:8-20.

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

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

Last weekend the news broke that the remaining Christian Aid missionaries who had been held captive in Haiti since October were now free. Five of the 16 that had been taken hostage had been released in November and earlier in December, with 11 remaining in captivity, including 4 children - one just 10 months old. The report of their escape reads like a Hollywood blockbuster movie - or maybe a story in scripture....

Weston Showalter, the spokesman for Christian Aid Ministries shared, "They found a way to open the door that was closed and blocked, filed silently to the path that they had chosen to follow and quickly left the place that they were held, despite the fact that numerous guards were close by,"

Twice when they planned to flee, God told them to wait, Showalter said. But on Wednesday night, the missionaries put on their shoes and packed water in their clothes. They used a mountain as a landmark and followed the light of the moon and "the sure guidance of the stars," he said.

As daylight broke, they found someone to help them make a phone call. Later that day, they were on a Coast Guard flight to Florida. "They were finally free," Mr. Showalter said, through tears.

They used a mountain as a landmark and followed the light of the moon and "the sure guidance of the stars."

A report in NYTimes¹ about their escape revealed that the mission workers sang, prayed and recited scripture verses throughout their captivity. The article did not say what scriptures they shared, but I can't help but imagine them reciting over and over again, "Do not fear; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Do not fear...do not fear...good news of great joy. Those words of comfort the angel said to the shepherds. Those words of encouragement we hear each Christmas... do not fear... words that sometimes can go in one ear and out the other without getting absorbed by our brains.

In 2020, the bible verse shared, bookmarked, and highlighted most often throughout the year, on the YouVersion Bible app² was Isaiah 41:10: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand."

This year in 2021, the most shared, bookmarked, and highlighted verse on the bible app was Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."³

Now the pastor in me delights in this transformation – we have moved from fear to seeking the Lord – precisely what the angels told the shepherds in those fields so long ago. Maybe something good has come from the pandemic and all the societal and political turbulence. Maybe our priorities have changed. However, after teaching biostatistics for so many years, the admonition to my students that "correlation does not equal causality" is ringing in my head.

And yet... at Christmas maybe we do get glimpses of what it can mean to live as a people who transform fear to love. Beyond the surface of the pretty paper and shiny light, we can for a moment to embrace the sweet baby in the manger, and the hope and possibilities that come with this child. We choose not to dwell on the what ifs, but celebrate our common bonds with joy, with hope in the baby Jesus. This hope in the baby Jesus reminds me of a scene from the movie *Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby*. If you haven't seen the movie, NASCAR superstar Ricky Bobby is getting ready for a big race and prays for success, his family and friends, as well as "the bountiful harvest of Domino's, KFC, and the always delicious Taco Bell". Despite some unusual prayer requests, it is the conversation between Ricky and his wife about to whom the prayer is addressed delights me. Throughout the prayer, Ricky Bobby addresses "Dear Lord Baby Jesus". And his wife Carley pushes back, saying that it is a bit odd and off-putting to pray to a baby. But Ricky counters with "Well, I like the Christmas Jesus best and I'm saying grace. When you say grace, you can say it to grownup Jesus,

¹https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/20/us/haiti-missionaries-escape.html?campaign_id=9&emc=edit_nn_20211221&instance_id=48349&nl=the-morning®i_id=48092298&segment_id=77551&te=1&user_id=72392cf48de45e9a400430464aa76f15

²<https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2020/december/most-popular-verse-youversion-app-bible-gateway-fear-covid.html>

³<https://www.jubileecast.com/articles/27110/20211202/what-is-the-most-popular-bible-verse-in-2021.htm>

or teenage Jesus, or bearded Jesus or whoever you want.” And as Ricky continues he prays to the “Dear tiny Jesus, in your golden-fleece diapers, with your tiny, little, fat, balled-up fists...”⁴

On this Christmas Eve, I want to embrace the good news of this baby Jesus. “Do not fear for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Just as the angel Gabriel invited Zechariah and Elizabeth, just as the angels invited Mary and Joseph and the shepherds into a season of trust, so we too are invited to trust in this good news – the good news that “this day” has arrived.

As the creators of our Advent and Christmas liturgy at *A Sanctified Art*⁵note, it is ironic that despite Mary and Joseph not receiving an invitation to stay at the inn, the Christmas story is full of invitations: Mary is invited to carry Christ into the world, Joseph is invited to father him, Elizabeth is invited to foster safety and joy for Mary, Zechariah is invited to prophesy and sing, John the Baptist invites the crowds to repent and change their lives, the shepherds are invited to behold, the Magi are invited to make the journey. And what about us... to what are we invited?

We are invited to trust. This may be one the hardest asks of us – especially in the season of life we find ourselves in. To trust that Jesus matters – to trust that what Jesus asks of us – to love God and love our neighbor matters. To trust that our salvation is a free gift that we do not need to earn or to achieve. And to trust that God will be with us when God calls us into places that might engender fear – to speak up and to act against racism and systemic poverty, to be a voice for the voiceless; to work for human rights for all people; to be a true steward of creation. To trust that God will be with us in times of illness and recovery, despair and loss, tragedy and loneliness. This Christmas we are invited to trust that Jesus is truly Immanuel – God with us.

In a few minutes, we will be invited to dine with Jesus. To partake of that banquet that is a foretaste of the great feast that awaits us. To eat the bread of life and to drink the cup of salvation. This evening we are invited to embrace the love that came down from heaven in the flesh. We are invited to believe in love...for love is the story of Christmas. That God so loved the world that God transformed all our fears: “So do not fear, for I am with you...I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.” The promise we hear in Isaiah is fulfilled this day – the promise of love always with us – in our moments of joy and sorrow, in our moments of uncertainty, of frustration, and yes in our anxieties and fears.

May we reorient our lives so the candles of hope, peace, joy, and love we light each Advent transform our darkness and fear. May we live as people transformed by the grace and love of the one whose birth we celebrate, God with us, Immanuel.

⁴ The clip can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5A0-u85aAYg>; transcript at <http://www.thesource4ym.com/movieclipdiscussions/Discussion.aspx?id=235>

⁵ sanctifiedart.org