

Christmas Eve

The shepherds said to one another: “Come, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.”

The angels get our attention first in the Christmas story.

And perhaps they should. After all, angels are the messengers of God. And you know that in Luke’s Gospel, when these messengers speak, the message is first of all “Do not be afraid.” That’s the word that came to old Zechariah as he ministered in the Temple in Jerusalem. That’s the message that came to young Mary in Nazareth.

And this is the message that comes to the shepherds watching their flocks by night near Bethlehem: “Do not be afraid.”

The angels get the shepherds attention—and they get our attention as well.

For a few minutes tonight, however, I want to turn your gaze and your thoughts away from those grand, heavenly messengers and toward those motley, earthbound shepherds who first heard the good news.

After the angels leave, when the glory of the Lord no longer shines around them, the shepherds say to one another: “Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.”

Next to the mighty emperor Augustus, the shepherds are nothing. But they possess two qualities that lead us to return to *their* story year after year: great curiosity and great courage.

Curiosity is one of the hidden themes of the Christmas story.

Sometimes this curiosity borders on incredulity.

Zechariah responds to the angel Gabriel’s message by asking: “How can I be sure of this?”

Mary replies to the good news from the same messenger: “How can this be?”

The shepherds possess a greater curiosity. Whatever fear they might have had when the angels appeared and whatever doubt they might have harbored are quickly set aside. “Let us go and see...”

Perhaps seeing *is* believing—but the shepherds set out toward Bethlehem with what seems to be both faith *and* the hope that their curiosity will be satisfied.

Maybe we can understand this, because we live in a town for the curious. People come here from across the state, across the nation, from around the world to ask questions:

Why do people act this way, vote this way, think this way?

Can we put these two things together—and what will happen if we do?

How do I build this or fix that?

Do I dare to write about this?

What will it sound like if we play these instruments?

The hope is that this curiosity will be satisfied, that at least some of the answers to some of the questions will be found.

We live with our questions and curiosity. Perhaps we are all shepherds—earthbound, yes, but seeking, searching.

My hope is that in addition to curiosity, we, like the shepherds, might know courage as well—for they are courageous. They go into the unknown. In the dark, heedless of the dangers the night holds, they make their way to Bethlehem. Because of their courage, they are able find out what is going on in that little town.

Because of their courage, they find, not Augustus, the powerful, but a child, the vulnerable. This child comes into this world as all children, not in control. This child comes, as all children, dependent on the love and care and goodwill of others. That is to say, he comes as one of us, knowing the weakness that we know. And in that weakness, there is a strength that is greater than Augustus, greater than all that destroys, greater than all that we would fear.

In faith, we say that this child, vulnerable and powerless is the very *incarnation of God*. As astonishing as it seems, God takes on human flesh, bridging the great chasm between the human and the divine. The powerful becomes powerless, taking on our human vulnerability. This is good news because it means that the One we call Emmanuel, God with us, understands what it is to be human; and understanding, empowers, encourages, and calls us into the future. We might find courage because we see that God becomes one with us that we might become one with God.

In unlikely places—in Bethlehem, in Iowa City—God creates possibility.

In unlikely people—in shepherds, in you and me, in all of us, God creates new possibilities.

God does not come in power to establish a reign of peace. God comes to make peace a possibility through *our* actions.

God does not come with fierce judgment to bring justice to this world. God comes to make justice possible through *our* actions.

God comes among us in Jesus—I think you're probably getting this now—to make *us* people of possibility.

This is what Christmas invites us to become: curious and courageous people of new possibility.

Christmas invites us to bring our curiosity and our courage, not just to the manger, but into the world—to look without fear at what is so that we might seek with hope and joy what might be.

Look tonight and, along with the rest of this weary world, you will see in this infant Jesus a very human child, vulnerable as we all are. Our own hearts whisper a deep longing: this child is the one whose birth announces that at the center of all existence is a love that will not fail, a goodness that will stand. This is the love of God who comes to us in Jesus Christ, shares our life

and suffering, knows our fears and sorrows. This is the love of a God who desires our good, who will be our strength.

So we take heart, even in troubling times.

Be curious.

Be courageous.

Find out what is going on that you might glimpse as well the good that might be—and be a part of bringing it into the world.