

Texts: Luke 2:1-14

Subject: Birth of Jesus

Theme: Echoes

Christmas Eve; Dec. 24, 2019, Reformation Lutheran Church, Las Vegas, NV

Grace and peace to you from God our father in heaven and the Lord Jesus,
Amen.

In an ordinary moment, something extraordinary breaks in.

It struck me again this year that we have a hard time relating to this Christmas story in our current culture and context. Most of us know this story, of a family traveling a long distance, with a pregnant mother, to find there was no room in the inn, they settled in the stable, and the baby was born. We think we know Christmas. We love the movies - our family has watched *Home Alone* about a dozen times this month. Jacob is a big fan of *the Grinch*. We know the songs - they've been on the radio since Halloween. We schedule parties and dinners, visit the attractions, give gifts, gain weight, rack up debt. We come to church - do we know what Christmas is really about?

I've walked a field before with farmers, but never met a shepherd. I've even been to a goat farm, but that's not really the same thing. We live a city that is so bright you can see it from space. It might be hard to imagine these shepherds doing their work outside in the dark. It also might be hard to conceive of how they were considered in their time. Maybe you can envision that vocation as dirty, their days and nights as lonely, their everyday existence as laborious - they did hard work. In Mary and Joseph's day, this was a job no one else would choose to do. You were likely born into to it, driven to it by some family tragedy, or had to take it up because you could do no other work.

In the story, we can hear echoes of King David - but it was a bit different when young David was a shepherd - nearly a millennium before Emperor Augustus, and the

time when Quirinius was Governor. David was a boy born into the work, he was the youngest son, and tended the herd as part of the family's estate. Samuel was a prophet then, and went out to anoint David as the future King - while Saul was still in power. David would be known by many as the prince of peace, the promised King of Israel.

In Mary's time, the emperor had conquered the known world, and by power and authority, suppression of human rights and liberty, brought about a kind of peace - as long as those under his power submitted to his rule. The Empire built roads and monuments, and proclaimed Caesar as Lord - hailing *him* as the prince of peace. All the people had to pay taxes. Rolf Jacobsen shares that this was the reason the census was taken - to find out: "who's here, what do you got? Are you eligible for military service or not?" In the coming year, our nation will take part in a census, for many of the same reasons.

To be a shepherd was to be one who didn't count. They were not heading to the city of their birth to be registered. They might be foreigners. They owned nothing. They were ineligible. They barely existed. They were stereotyped as *liars, degenerates, and thieves*. They were sinners by the practice of their own profession. Towns wouldn't allow them in. They were unable to take part in worship, to give sacrifices, to offer prayers, and were considered unclean. Out there in the field, they were home. It was the only place for them.

What would that be like for us? If we had been kicked out of our homes, barred from finding decent work, forced to do a job no one else would do, unable to take part in civil society, to worship, to shop, to celebrate - what would Christmas be then? If we were unaccepted, uncounted, unclean. It's not hard to imagine someone here in our city,

sleeping in a city park or behind the bus station, maybe out in a field or parking lot - doing what they had to do to earn money, unwelcome in a restaurant or place of business, kicked out of the strip hotels, shuffled away from the doors of a church, banned from private property.

Could we imagine the lives of ones who have lost all hope, given up on success, and struggling just to breathe, to stay warm on a cold wet night? After losing all hope for the future, what would it be like to encounter an angel?

BAM! There in the night the whole heavenly choir sings in the presence of these outcasts: *a child is born - HE is the one who will save the world!* Of course they are afraid - that's quite a startling image.

*"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth
peace among those whom he favors!"*

All those who have *not* been favored, who have *not* known God, who have been *cast out*, are welcomed into God's grace, through the divine announcement of the birth of the Savior. Into their ordinary and painfully difficult existence, God announces new life, salvation, forgiveness - and hope is reborn.

"God with us" is born into the world. Not with fear, not with a shout - not even with angelic choirs in that stable. There in the lower room, with the animals, with only the assistance of her partner, Mary bears the Christ child. In tenderness, in mercy, Jesus is born.

Into our time and history, Jesus is born. To bring a new reality, for those who have been cast out, for all who have felt unwelcome, for ones who have owned nothing, for we who have suffered for so long. The true prince of peace was born, while

emperors ruled, and people were oppressed, and lives were lost. In the midst of pain, and struggle, war, and famine. New life came into to the world.

The shepherds leave their fields echoing the praise of the angelic choir - they sing! You *know* those shepherds could sing - of the glory of God - they heard the promise and now had to go and share the experience - whether they were welcome or not! They went to see this amazing gift of hope, peace, joy, love — His name is Jesus! He's here!

The world is still dominated by tyrants, people are still sent from their homelands, still abused and oppressed. But in ordinary moments, we might witness something extraordinary. The candles we light, the songs we sing, the meals served, the neighbors greeted, the children laughing - in these moments echo the truth of Christmas - Jesus is here! We are sent from here rejoicing and praising God for the blessings in our lives, for the promise of forgiveness and new life, for abundance to share, for the creation, for good news. This is Christmas - we are not forgotten, we are not uncared for, we are not alone. May it echo in your hearts and in your homes: *God is with us - Christ the Savior is born.*

Amen.