

So, too, with the shepherds on Christmas Eve. “There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night” (Luke 2:8). In the class-conscious culture of the first century, shepherds stood at the bottom of the social ladder. These men and boys would be poor laborers, with little education, living hand-to-mouth. They are often depicted as tough characters, rough and a little shabby. And they probably didn’t smell too good, hanging around sheep all the time. These shepherds tended the flocks of sheep being raised for temple sacrifices, keeping them fed and watered, and safe from predators and poachers. This was a 24/7 job. No time off. No living wage. No benefits. No room for error. No respect from the community for this demanding, manual labor.

So, it is more than a little surprising that to this ragtag band of laborers, “an angel of the Lord appeared...and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9). We would expect the angels to appear to King Herod, in the palace or the halls of power, or to the high priest or to the Pharisees; to people who held some authority or some standing in the Jewish community. But it is to lowly shepherds, keeping watch in the fields that the angel appears.

And these shepherds were “terrified.” Why? Because the “glory of the Lord shone around them” (Luke 2:9). The Hebrew word for God’s glory is *shekinah*, a physical manifestation of God’s presence, usually as radiant light. *Shekinah* also carries a sense of “heaviness,” as in the weight of God’s holiness and dignity as it is brought to bear upon the world. The Greek word is *doxa* (see Luke 2:9) and is more difficult to define because of its wide range of meanings; but when applied to God *doxa* (doxology, praise to God) means a glorious condition, or an exalted state. So, what the shepherds confronted that night was an angel of the Lord who blazed like a thousand suns, conveying all the majesty and power of God. No doubt they were terrified!

So, the angel said what angels always say to frightened human beings: “Do not be afraid; 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” (Luke 2:10-12).

There are a lot of surprises in this announcement. Let’s tackle them in reverse order! The shepherds will find a baby in a manger. The Jewish people, long oppressed by enemies (Assyrian, Babylonian, Greek, and Roman) hoped for the rise of a warrior-king like King David who would vanquish Israel’s enemies. They certainly never envisioned a helpless babe in a lowly manger bed. Yet, this newborn child is the promised and long-awaited Messiah, sent by God to rescue God’s people. As confirmation that this child is the Messiah, he is born in Bethlehem, the city of David, as foretold by the prophet Micah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

The surprises keep coming as the angel tells the shepherds that this child is born today, right here and now, and that the fulfillment of God’s promised deliverance is beginning. This deliverance is for *all* people, not just the Jews, or the noble-born, but to *all* people; and this good news will bring great joy. As they stand fearfully before an angel of the Lord, the shepherds are promised great joy! Fear and joy in the same experience.

As the shepherds wrestle with this good news of great joy, “a great company of the heavenly host” appears. It is not just one angel now, it is a whole squadron of angels, filling the sky, singing God’s praises for what God is doing in Bethlehem on behalf of the world. They sing: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom God’s favor rests” (Luke 2:14). It is to lowly shepherds and to others whom the world scorns that the God of highest heaven comes. It is for the downtrodden and the oppressed that God reserves special concern. It is to the sinners, not the saints, that God brings salvation. God’s favor rests on all those who have need and who come in true humility seeking God’s help.

## Fearfully and Joyfully

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 19, 2021

Luke 2:1-20

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Now, here is yet another amazing moment in this whole story: the shepherds decide to go and see this for themselves! After the shock of a company of singing angels, the shepherds recover their wits enough to hear the joy implied in the angels' words. If God's Messiah is truly here, they had to see him for themselves. The shepherds went, and they talked to Mary and Joseph, and they found the baby lying in the manger just as the angel told them.

Their fear turned to joy, the shepherds "spread the word" and "returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen" (Luke 2:17, 20). Even if they did not fully understand it, the shepherds knew that something significant was happening and they could not wait to tell others about what God was doing. The shepherds experience great joy because the promise is fulfilled just as the angels told them. Despite their initial fear, the shepherds became the new heralds of God's glorious, good news of great joy for all people.

There are times in life when we experience fear and joy at the same time. The fear and joy of going away to college. The fear and joy of getting married. The fear and joy of starting a new job. The fear and joy of having a child. The fear and joy of skydiving. When we learn to harness our fears, we can find joy in new and challenging situations. Too often, we live only in fear. Fear manifests itself as our everyday anxieties where we find ourselves living in the regret of the past or grasping at the future. Joy manifests itself in presence – God's presence – that point at which we shed the past, let go of the future and are just there, where we are, in that moment. God is in control of the future, and that future looks bright for those on whom God's favor rests.

Prayer: Glorious God, you are worthy of my praise. When Jesus came to Earth, even the heavens praised him. Give me a heart of praise for you. Make my attitude contagious for others, so they too will see your glory. In Jesus' name, Amen.

A colleague recently shared her experience about skydiving with a friend named Joe (not his real name) who has Parkinson's disease. As Joe's tremors became more noticeable and the control over his body diminished, Joe sought experiences that freed him from the terrors and the tremors that plagued him. Joe read about a skydiving program for people with differing levels of ability. In this case, Joe would be strapped to an experienced instructor who would pull the chute cord and guide the duo to an easy landing.

Now, jumping out of a perfectly good airplane is about as exciting to me and as an IRS audit or a root canal. I have no desire to experience freefalling. But Joe thought this sounded terrific. In fact, he was so excited, he convinced several other friends (including my colleague) to jump with him. The day arrived, the skydivers suited up, received their safety training, and took off into the heavens. As my colleague tells the story, when the moment came to jump, they were all terrified. Stepping out into the nothingness of space gave them all a moment of pause. But jump they did, and for every one of them, especially Joe, it was a thrilling, liberating, joy-filled sensation. For a few moments, Joe forgot about Parkinson's disease and lived in the moment. He was fearfully and joyfully alive!

This Advent we are studying the fear-filled moments that come to God's people when God does something new in the world. We studied how Zechariah and Elizabeth were afraid to hope in God's promise of a child. We studied how Mary made peace with her fears and accepted her part in God's grand design. We studied how Joseph swallowed his fears and his plans, committed himself to God's plan. For each of them, fear-filled moments gave way to joy-filled lives.