

**Scripture Reading: Luke 2:8-20**

**“Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, 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, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” 15 So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger. 17 Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. 18 And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. 19 But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.”**

# **“Angels in the Christmas Story”**

**I don’t think that I have done many Advent sermons here at Church of the King because that blessing has mostly gone to the other elders!**

- But this year I get to do the Sunday where we focus on JOY, so how tough can that be?!**

**Mike has been giving us a bit of history on Advent each week and I will continue that this morning.**

**Here at Church of the King we believe it is a very important celebration but we are not legalistic or slavish to it or other parts of the Church calendar in how they are handled and celebrated. Many American churches have long ago left the Church calendar behind and that was in part because of abuses in the past: If you look at a Roman Catholic or Orthodox church calendar they have filled every Sunday with some special remembrance of events or Saints and who gets left out is Jesus!**

**The goal of the Church calendar was to give the Saints lots and lots of things to do that would tie them to the Church and remind them that they had to do these things to stay in right standing with their Savior: Works salvation! But throwing the baby out with the bath water was not helpful because calendars and special days do shape how we think and that is why many of the reformers argued that we should keep the essential feast days of Advent, Good Friday, Easter and Pentecost.**

**Some did this more formally and others were more casual and here in America as most drifted from the faith we were left with what Linda and I knew as Children: Many who went to church only on Christmas and Easter. Without faith and the meat of the Word & Sacraments throughout the year these soon became empty rituals.**

**Christmas and Easter are still with us as relics of our Christian past but Jesus has been largely replaced by Santa Claus and the Easter bunny. These are forces of secularism that we must stand against if your children are to properly understand & celebrate the true meaning of these important seasons.**

- So we have works-based church rituals on the one side & secularism on the other and thus we strive to be Biblical in our practices.**

As Mike pointed out last week, the season of Advent is both the beginning and the end of the annual Church calendar: Advent comes as we complete the season of normal time and we reflect on the future coming of Jesus as the judge of the world. As we prepare to celebrate His incarnation on Christmas we look forward to the first coming of Jesus as the Saints of old would have, but not through a glass darkly, but with the full record of the history of his coming!

Epiphany Sunday comes after Christmas and we enter a season of seeing how Jesus was manifested to the world. The season of Lent is a sober time of preparing for Good Friday! Here at Church of the King this is the one day other than the Lord's Day that we hold a formal worship service where we remember the words of Christ on the cross as He gave Himself for our sins. The one time we allow sad faces during communion! Then we have the power of the resurrection celebrated on Easter and fifty days later we remember the sending of the Spirit on Pentecost, with Ascension Sunday celebrated the week before Pentecost. After Pentecost we begin normal time again with a reflection on God's character with Trinity Sunday and that season of growth & maturity brings us back to the next celebration of Advent.

It has also been our practice to have three times of celebration as a Church during each year patterned after the feasts we find in the Old Testament: We have a Memorial Day feast at the Fisher property, our family camp in early September and the Harvest festival in October.

This is the calendar and patterns we are following here at Church of the King and as we move into the second and soon third generations of our children there will be some changes for sure but our prayer is that they will never lose their meaning. We need to make sure our children grow up understanding and celebrating these important events.

If the church calendar is not central then I can assure you that the world has plenty of things to replace it with: They would be happy to have them keep a secularized version of Christmas and Easter calling them winter holiday and spring break! Reformation Day or All Saints Day has been replaced by Halloween and even the American Christian holiday of Thanksgiving is fast being replaced by Black Friday!

- And we now have other special holidays that are peculiar to America:

Let's see how we do with some American holidays that would be strange in other parts of the world:

Kids, when is Valentine's Day?

OK, now how about a tough one: When is the 4<sup>th</sup> of July? Thought you would all get that one, but remember the rest of the world does not celebrate our day of independence.

And what is the BIG national celebration that takes place in January? That's right the Super Bowl...

- Which even many Church services have to now accommodate!

So today we come to the Third Sunday of Advent which by tradition celebrates the Joy of His coming and where we light the pink candle! Mike called it the Pope's candle but I think it is properly known as the Shepherd's candle which is very appropriate for our reading today!

- And of course how can we look at the history of what happened with those shepherds that night without talking about the angels!

Now I promised that when I got to this I would say a bit more about those Cherubim that God placed at the entrance to the Garden of Eden along with a flaming sword to protect the Tree of Life. And I will...

**BUT** first let's take a look at what happened that night some two thousand years ago:

A night that would certainly change history:

- Mary has given birth to the Son of God, Immanuel, God with us!

**Now if Hollywood were writing this story the birth of the King of Kings would have come with a great deal of pageantry probably right there in Jerusalem! We all know that was NOT what happened!**

**God chose to have Jesus born in the very city the Prophets said he would be born & in very humble surroundings:**

- **As Francis & Edith Schaeffer rightly point out a smelly stable is not a fitting place for the birth of a King, no less the Son of God, but it is a perfect place for a lamb to be born!**

**And thus the announcement of this important birth was not sent to Caesar or the High Priest as the civil and religious leaders of the day, it was sent to humble Shepherds.**

**“Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. 10 Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. 11 For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”**

**Now it is important to notice the flow in what the angel said: He brings glad tidings and great joy!**

**He brings this good news because a Savior has been born...That Savior is Christ the Lord...**

**AND they will know this because he will give them a sign to look for...We will consider that a bit more this morning when we come to the Table.**

- **So was God trying to be a bit secretive about the coming of Jesus?**

**He has him born in a small village with no announcement in the Jerusalem Post or the Roman Record.**

**And yet we know from Matthew’s Account that the religious leaders in Jerusalem KNEW where the baby would be born and told King Herod!**

**We also know that the Wise Men came from the east knowing that a Savior had been born, details of which they may well have had because they were passed down from Daniel or his friends!**

- **The birth of Jesus was no secret!**

**It came at the right time and at the right place and even though it was first announced to these rural shepherds, the witness of that Angel and their obedience is today proclaimed around the world with nativity scenes and Christmas carols!Even in some VERY pagan settings!**

**And there was a grand celebration that night, but again only for these faithful shepherds...**

**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, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"**

- **As we have often said in our journey through Genesis, God is telling His grand story of salvation and this is certainly one of the high points that brings Him glory.**
- **And it brings peace on the earth!**

**Now here is where we have to be very careful to understand the message and those who carried the message!**

**The Bible does not give us a great deal of detail about the angels nor the heavenly hosts. The Hebrew and Greek words translated as Angel means messenger so it can sometimes mean one of the heavenly cherub as in this case, it can mean Church leaders as was the case in Revelation chapters two & three and it can even mean the Lord Himself as when He came to council with Abraham about the destruction of Sodom.**

We can know a bit about this angel from the end of chapter three in Genesis and other Old Testaments picture of that sad event. Man was driven out of Eden to protect him for a time from the Tree of Life, so he would not live forever in his fallen state.

We would be left to speculate if that was the only reference but we see cherubim as guardians again as the Law is given and Moses is told how the Tabernacle was to be built. The Tabernacle and the later Temples were to be dwelling places for Jehovah God just as He was present in Eden.

**BUT** His presence was in the Holy of Holies where only the High Priest could enter once a year after offering sacrifices for his sins and the sins of the people: *the people could not enter!*

At the center of this room was the Ark with a mercy seat guarded by two cherubim as described in Exodus 25:17 “You shall make a mercy seat of pure gold; two and a half cubits shall be its length and a cubit and a half its width. 18 And you shall make two cherubim of gold; of hammered work you shall make them at the two ends of the mercy seat. 19 Make one cherub at one end, and the other cherub at the other end; you shall make the cherubim at the two ends of it of one piece with the mercy seat. 20 And the cherubim shall stretch out their wings above, covering the mercy seat with their wings, & they shall face one another; the faces of the cherubim shall be toward the mercy seat.”

We also see these cherubim on the veil that hung in front of the Holy of Holies Exodus 26: 31 "You shall make a veil woven of blue, purple, and scarlet thread, and fine woven linen. It shall be woven with an artistic design of cherubim. 32 You shall hang it upon the four pillars of acacia wood overlaid with gold. Their hooks shall be gold, upon four sockets of silver. 33 And you shall hang the veil from the clasps. Then you shall bring the ark of the Testimony in there, behind the veil.”

Now obviously Moses is given enough detail to instruct the craftsman about how these golden cherubim were to be made and to properly picture them on the curtains and the veil.

- We have neither of those images today, nor the instructions so we have to do some speculating about what angels actually look like!

Almost all the angels we picture have wings so we get that part right! The part I don't think that we get right is their majesty and power. As we consider how the angels appear throughout the Christmas story we should notice a common theme: When the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias he had to say, ‘fear not’ and he did the same with Mary. When the angel appeared to Joseph we again hear ‘fear not’ and here in our text the angel, even when he was by himself had to tell the shepherds, ‘be not afraid.’

- Now these people were not afraid because angels were scary like zombies or orcs!

They were afraid because their appearance was powerful and likely because they would have been familiar with their appearance from the curtains at the Temple! They knew these were in fact God's messengers. Thus I have to give the word of warning that I try to give each year...

Beware of those cute little cherubs! [show examples & explain that we do not have to throw them all away, just make sure we use them as teachable moments!]

So the angel is joined by a heavenly host... 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, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

In a moment we are going to respond with the singing of Angels We Have Heard on High which celebrates this event and other Christmas carols which speak of the heavenly host singing and I think we are on solid ground with that even though the text does not say specifically that they sang.

**There are other examples in Scripture of song & speech being used interchangeable, like the song of Moses being spoken or where ‘Deborah & Barak sang on that day saying’ in Judges Chapter five or King David when he ‘spoke to Jehovah the words of this song.’**

- **What a glorious sight that must have been and again given only to these few shepherds!**

**So I want to close with a reflection on why the news proclaimed that night was such good news and it takes us back to the garden.**

- **Man has fallen into sin and the way to the tree of life has been barred and now is now protected by Cherubim & a flaming sword.**

**This picture is continued in the Tabernacle and Temple where man’s access to God is still blocked by those Cherubim awaiting the sacrifice that could take away sin.**

**We see Angels announcing the birth of Jesus and we see them comforting Jesus in the wilderness and again in the Garden of Gethsemane.**

**We must remember that when Satan quoted Psalm 91 to Jesus he was trying to tempt Jesus to sin, but it does not mean that the Scripture was not true:**

**Psalm 91: 11 For He shall give His angels charge over you, To keep you in all your ways. 12 In their hands they shall bear you up, Lest you dash your foot against a stone.”**

**The angels did comfort and protect Jesus throughout His earthly life...**

- **And as He rightly told Pilate, He could have at any time called upon vast legions of them to help Him.**

**But Jesus prayed to His Father,**

**Thy will be done not mine because He knew that being the sacrifice for sin was the very purpose for which He had come as we will discuss more fully next week as we consider the faith of Simeon.**

**It must have brought great sorrow to the hosts of angels as they had to watch the Son of God be humiliated & tortured, scorned & beaten, crucified & buried!**

**And yet where do we see the angels again in the grand story of salvation?**

- **That is right, two of them standing on either end of the slab on which Jesus was laid: Like in the Temple!**

**And we must not forget one of the final things that took place on the day that Jesus, who had been that baby in the manger, was crucified...**

**The veil of the Temple was torn from top to bottom: The veil that prevented the people of God from approaching His presence with cherubim woven into it to remind God’s people of the guards at the Garden.”**

- **But now the Tree of Life was available to man once again!**

**People could come to Jesus as their Savior, repenting and turning from their sin so they could now stand in the very presence of our Holy God in the full righteousness of Jesus, the Son in whom He was well pleased.**

**We see the heavenly host singing again in Revelation chapter five, but now they are singing, along with the Saints of all the ages a new song!**

**9 And they sang a new song, saying: "You are worthy to take the scroll, And to open its seals; For You were slain, And have redeemed us to God by Your blood Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, 10 And have made us kings and priests to our God; And we shall reign on the earth." 11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands, 12 saying with a loud voice: "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain To receive power and riches and wisdom, And strength and honor and glory and blessing!"**

- **That brothers and sisters was the JOY that was proclaimed to those shepherds keeping watch by night!**

**Communion Meditation: by John Calvin**

*“and this shall be a sign to you!” Luke 2:12*

“The angel meets the prejudice which might naturally hinder the faith of the shepherds; for what a mockery is it, that He whom God has sent to be the King, and the only Savior, is seen lying in a manger! That the mean and despicable condition in which Christ was might not deter the shepherds from believing in Christ, the angel tells them beforehand what they would see. This method of preceding, which might appear to the view of men, absurd and almost ridiculous, the Lord pursues toward us every day. Sending down to us from heaven the word of the Gospel, he enjoins us to embrace Christ crucified, and holds out to us signs in earthly and fading elements, which raise us to the glory of a blessed immortality. Having promised to us spiritual righteousness, he places before our eyes a little water: by a small portion of bread and wine, he seals the eternal life of the soul. But if the stable gave no offence whatever to the shepherds, so as to prevent them from going to Christ to obtain salvation, or from yielding to His authority, while He was yet a child; no sign, however mean in itself, ought to hide his glory from our view, or prevent us from offering to Him lowly adoration, now that he has ascended to heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father.”