

Glad Tidings!@
December 30, 2012

Luke 2:8-20

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There is much advantage to being married to a retired preacher. Fred is quite a reader and does a lot of reflection and writing and last week he was sharing his thoughts with me about the word "Tide." "Christmas Tide" or "Tidings."

We heard that term today in the reading from the New King James Version. The angel said, "I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people."

Fred's was thinking how the "tide" of the season is like the ocean tide – it comes in with a swell and then it recedes back out. But then it comes in again. It doesn't stay in or out. It continues to come!

The word "Tide" or "Tidings" is an old Low German word that means "News." And the angel said, "I bring you good news (or in the old English term, "glad news" or "gladsome news.")"

The tradition of the church uses the term "tide" throughout the year. We have "Eastertide" ... that great message of resurrection we celebrate each year at Easter. And "Eventide" (meaning the good news message in a service during the evening).

Christmas Tide. Glad Tidings! It means we have a joyous message of good news that has come to us in Christ, the Lord, who was born in Bethlehem and was wrapped in bands of cloth and was found lying in the manger.

And that was the sign, the angel told the shepherds. The way you will know him is that you will find him in a manger in Bethlehem.

What? The Son of God, born in a stable? Lying in a cattle's feeding trough? That's scandalous! How can this be? Already, it seems he had a rough start, doesn't it?

And in Luke, we don't get the royalty, the wealthy kings finding him by their studying astronomy or by the light of a star. We don't get gifts fit for a king either. Or angels all around the stable singing for joy.

Instead, in Luke, we find shepherds out in the field. They are the ones who get the first good tidings. They get to hear the news first. They, of all people, get a visit from the angel, telling them what has happened. They, of all people, are the first ones to see for them this Savior of the world. They are the ones the angels rely on to start spreading the news.

Now, you might think that's not so unusual. After all, don't we have a vision of green pastures (as in "The Lord is my shepherd"), or we as think of David, the shepherd boy who was called to become king of Judea, God's favored servant?

Today, I can't think of shepherds without seeing little Keaton Banks in his shepherds costume for the Miracle in the Manger children's Christmas program that we saw last Sunday.

And the thought of angels bring to mind a couple of little tiny angels that are not so sure they want to stay with the rest of the group, running ... sometimes stumbling up and down these stairs. Such a sweet image to remember!

But, things were different for those shepherds in the hills outside of Bethlehem in the day when Jesus was born. Shepherds were not looked at as being cute, or having any favor among society.

People looked down on them, despised them, and considered them dirty, dishonest, rough and undesirable. They were in the lowliest of lowly class of people.

They must not have had a real good sense of self-confidence. Or maybe they were just who they were and didn't care that much about what people thought. Regardless, that was their status in life.

Can you imagine that night; that wondrous, amazing night? I wonder what they were doing, don't you? Maybe some were sleeping, huddled under a dirty, rough wool blanket, trying to keep warm, get a little sleep before it was their shift again.

Perhaps there were a few who were sitting around the fire telling stories or jokes or ... complaining about the government and the burdensome tax laws that were keeping them from ever getting ahead.

(We wouldn't know anything about that today, would we?)

Perhaps they were talking about how some people were saying that peace had come to the Roman Empire with the rule of Caesar Augustus, yet what a joke that seemed to these poor shepherds and their families.

Or maybe they were just sitting there in the quiet of the night, stars twinkling overhead, thinking about their wives and children at home. And maybe, just maybe, some of those shepherds were actually wives and children!

But suddenly, there was an interruption! An angel appeared before them and was speaking directly to them, telling them of a different peace on earth and of good will

that was coming to all people; announcing to them that the long awaited Messiah – the Christ – was born!

Wouldn't you have loved to have been there? Wouldn't you love to be peeking out (once you got over your own fright) and watching the terrified amazement in the shepherd's faces? Suddenly, they were all fully awake, completely attentive!

This is a night full of wonder! Wonder that the Lord would send his messenger to them – lowly, despised, poor shepherds. Wonder that an angel had burst into their world before them! And wonder in the tidings itself – the news that a Savior had been born and that it was *his* arrival – not Caesar Augustus – that would bring peace on earth. Somehow in this tidings is joy in knowing that God is here and in control.

But that wasn't all! After the one angel made the announcement, the whole sky filled with a choir of angels singing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will to all people."

Yes, shepherds, that includes even you. And in fact, in Luke, you get the honor and the responsibility of being the first to see Him. You get to tell his parents what you saw and heard. They are so busy with their new, firstborn baby, they didn't realize that out in the fields the news was exploding.

You, shepherds, get to be the first to spread the tidings of great joy to others. Oh, they could have decided it was just some mirage. Or, to think others would not listen to them – mere shepherds that they were. But no, they became the first evangelists, telling their story, repeating it over and over.

And isn't it just like God to come to shepherds and let them be first? God, who came in the flesh as Emmanuel? God who came to walk and live among us?

I read about a monarch who would go incognito sometimes, walking throughout his kingdom, talking to the people, the poor – all his subjects.

When asked why he did such a thing that was beneath him and risked security and safety, he replied "how can I rule the people if I don't know how they live?"

Isn't it just like our God of love and grace to show up as the poorest of poor, the most vulnerable of all – a baby, dependent on others for his every need?

Isn't just like God in Jesus, to walk among the poor, to share a meal, to stand up for justice, to show mercy and grace, to heal and have compassion for the people who were looked down on, who were despised, who were made to feel they were not important?

Going back to that word “tide” ... I like the way Fred was thinking ... how the tide comes in. It swells and it rushes up onto the shore, making a big splash sometimes. And then it recedes ... goes out and we have low tide again ... calm and quiet.

Fred and I lived right on the beach in North Carolina for 6 months. We were there from August until the first of February while I did some chaplain work at the hospital in Wilmington. We were fortunate to be able to rent a condo there ... with the ocean as our back yard.

I loved living there. There is something about the tide coming in and out that to me is exciting and calming, but also stirs up fear at times. We were there for 3 hurricanes in 2 months. To stand on the beach and see those waves come crashing in, the roar of the ocean loudly proclaiming its presence and power is amazing. Of course, we had to evacuate the island each time so we did not actually see the activity of those waves when the hurricanes were in full force. And we did not want to either.

But the point is that the message of Christmas – the Christmas Tide – which is Tidings of Great Joy has come in with a swell, with a roar, with an awesome power that is exciting and even sometimes a bit frightening. But other times, it recedes like the low tide and is calm and gentle and so quiet you almost forget about it.

But whether the tide is high or low, this is a message that stays with us always. It is a message that is relevant for our lives all year long. It was a message of great joy to those shepherds who must have suddenly felt that they were worthwhile and cared for, after all.

It is a message still today for us – people who live and breath and worry and work; people who are anxious about taxes still today, about falling off fiscal cliffs, wondering how we will make it and none of us too happy with the government who sometimes doesn't seem to care about the little guy.

We are people who are trying to care for our children and our aging parents; who celebrate life and who grieve the loss of loved ones; who worry about paying bills and keeping or finding a job; who struggle with illness and long for good health.

We are people who wonder where the peace is when we watch the dreadful news of violence, war, oppression, pain and hunger throughout the world.

And the Christmas message is this: Yes, here on earth we are still fending off the darkness that tries to overcome the light. Here on earth, we still face the things that get us down. We continue to struggle.

But the tidings of great joy – the Christmas good news is that unto us a child was born, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And his name shall be called Jesus, which means one who

saves. And his name is also Emmanuel – which means God with us. And his name is Prince of Peace!

Because this baby did not stay a baby, we have really good news! The good news is God loved us so much – shepherds, laborers, servants, women, children, men, people of all walks and classes – even tax collectors, even politicians, even sinners – that he gave us a Savior – who would not only heal the sick, cause the blind to see, the lame to walk, who would not only care for the poor and stand up for the oppressed – he would go to the cross and give his life for the forgiveness and the salvation of the world.

Peace rules. It may not be that clear. It may not be quite here. But peace comes in knowing God has it under control. God ultimately wins the day over all those other anxious moments in our lives.

God loves you. God is with you. God will never leave you. That is the Tidings of Great Joy – no matter what the season, no matter where you.

Thanks be to God forever and ever! Amen

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