

St. Paul's Congregational Church
 December 24, 2017; Christmas Eve
 Luke 2: 1-20
 Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Aren't the words of Luke's nativity story beautiful – so familiar, so gentle – we have pictures in our minds dating from our childhoods of the scene – the baby lying in the manger, the shepherds being greeted by angels on that still, cold, starlit night – their fear changing to awe at the news they receive – and we go with them to see the baby. The baby surrounded by gentle animals in that stable. Mary and Joseph looking down lovingly at the child.

And the visit of the shepherds – those marginal people, eking out a living off the land. Not at the pinnacle of society for sure – maybe Mary was a little put off - they must have smelled of sheep: their nomadic life would have taken its toll in their appearance.

But it was these people who the angels chose to be the first witnesses of God being born into the world. We should begin to realize that things are not as they seem to be – when some of the least of society proclaim a mystery that is about to transform the lives of millions – when the lowliest among us glorify God, praise God, for all they had seen and heard -

Things are not as they seem. There was no end to the ways God was turning Mary and Joseph's lives upside down.

And so it is for us today – year after year we wonder anew at this story – the birth of Jesus, an event buried deep in history and tradition but at the same time, something new born into our hearts and relationships year after year. This is the mystery of the incarnation – God being born among us. And Luke's gospel reminds us that this birth doesn't happen when the house is in order, everyone has cleaned up, and the world is a tidy place. No, Jesus is born into a world every bit as complicated and difficult as ours. He is born into a community and family that suffer from many fears and anxieties, torn by its own conflicts and confusions. Jesus is born into a place where the first witnesses to who he is and who he is to become are not the experts or rich or the elite. Those witnesses - lowly folk living on the edges of society.

Christ's coming breaks into the center of our busy and messy lives just as it has for centuries. And our world is indeed messy these days, isn't it.

When God intrudes into our lives, everything, everything is disrupted. When God shows up, everything changes. Are we ready for that? The shepherds seemed ready, expectant. Are we?

Here's a what if – what if the shepherds had ignored the angels – what if they had chalked up the mysterious appearances, the mysterious night noises as their reaction to the cold, or by lack of sleep. What if they didn't respond. What if they didn't tell the story of what they'd seen, heard, experienced? I've been haunted by this question these past days – what if!

What if, indeed. Then I couldn't help but wonder how I would react if it were me there in the fields that dark night. Would I heed the voices of the angels by listening and

then going to see? Would I even recognize an angel in our midst? What kind of a sense of expectation did those shepherds have in their hearts to make them believe and then follow the words of the angels? Why the shepherds? That leads me to ask, what sense of expectation do I have in my heart? As yourself that question too.

God intrudes into our lives and everything changes. God always reaches down to us - what if we don't see, hear, feel, recognize the intrusion?

What difference does the incarnation – God coming to earth as a human baby – what difference does this make to us, right here, right now? My hope is that the meaning is burned into our hearts as we do our best to live lives of faithful discipleship. After all, how can words really describe the mystery of the incarnation – it's something we know in our hearts - and how in the world do we teach it to our children?

We teach it by sharing our experiences – just as those shepherds did.

You know, somehow I think we all expect, at least hope for, the Norman Rockwell version of Christmas and as we grow older, we find out it really doesn't exist in the same way as it did when we were children. And that's hard to take sometimes. There's a bittersweet quality to the Advent/Christmas season, isn't there.

Over the years I've shared much pain during the weeks before Christmas as I've walked with families through the grief of murder/suicide, fatal heart attacks, serious illness, death from many causes – many here tonight have had very difficult experiences this year – emotions are intense - the highs are higher – and our lows are so much lower.

I think every Christmas about a year when great tragedy came to one family in Glen Ridge, when I spent one of the hardest weeks of my entire ministry, but also when I gained a new understanding of what incarnation really means – when it was forever burned into my heart.

Jesus has come to us and shared our common lot. Jesus has come to us in the faces and voices of the people around us – and still does!

I remember that day like it was yesterday – there was a need to do a wellness check on a member of the church – a wonderfully kind man asked if I wanted him to go with me to the house - my immediate thought response was no, I don't want to take up your time. But instead my answer was a simple yes.

My friend's voice became the voice of Jesus walking with me through everything that happened when we arrived. Jesus was with me that entire day – through the faces and voices and presence of friends, neighbors, church members, police officers, family members – there was no place where Jesus was not.

Now, I truly believe this has been and always is – that we see the face of Jesus, the face of God in each other. But there was something about this experience that made it even more powerful – maybe because it was advent and my expectation level, my sense of the intrusion of God into our everyday lives was heightened – but whatever the reason, I feel blessed to have been touched more deeply by the mystery of the incarnation, the wondrous mystery of the story we have been told since childhood. There are no words to fully describe this experience.

I must tell you, I'd never felt more grounded in my faith, in the mystery of the incarnation, in the real joy of the Christmas season. Like the shepherds, we have to stop, get out of ourselves, and pay attention. We can't turn away – we have to let the angels speak to us and then listen to what they are saying. Christ will break into our messy lives – and when that intrusion comes, everything changes. And we in response can only offer

God glory and praise and thanksgiving— just as those shepherds did so many centuries ago. And then we have to go out and tell the story too – just as they did.

Back to the question – what if? What if we hear angels singing God’s praises, calling us to new life in a child about to be born in an unlikely place at an unlikely time. What if in our daily, messy, sometimes over complicated lives, we make room, take the time, to listen, to see, and then to respond. What if we let that intrusion come and trust that God will indeed transform us and change everything. Are we ready for that? If we are, we just might experience, with the shepherds, a singing of glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace and good will to all people. So may it be. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord Jesus, on this night, you were born among us, taking our flesh, our humanity upon yourself – our needs, our joys, our problems, our sufferings, and our pain. Lord Jesus, on this night, you took on our earthly form. On this night, you demonstrate to us the incredible lengths you would stoop in order to lift us up to God. You descended to earth that we might rise to heaven.

Be born in our hearts, Lord Jesus. Help us to see our lives caught up in your glory, enable us to see our lives transformed in your life. Help us to see our lives entwined with our brothers and sisters in You – that we become family gathered around your manger. We pray in your name, Amen.