

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
December 20 & 21, 2014
John Crosby
Come and See: Savior, Messiah, Lord
Luke 2:11**

A long time ago, Heather Hood [Minister of Worship & Music] taught me a quote that says, “The person who sings, prays twice.” I suppose if you sing like Rich Larson [Primary Contemporary Worship Leader] or Heather, that’s true. I’m not sure that my prayers would be heard if I was singing, but certainly the sound of the music gives balm to our souls. It gives, at least for a second, peace to hearts that again this week have been ripped apart by violence—whether that’s death to the family or death that comes across the world. As I heard about the children slaughtered in Pakistan, I thought of a mentor of mine in seminary who for 40 years had tried to start churches in Pakistan and Afghanistan. He learned the language, loved the people, got into the culture. He was actually the third generation of missionaries. His work resulted in these tiny, tiny, little churches—10, 15, never more than 20 or 25—people gathered together to talk about King Jesus. Then when the Ayatollah came over in Iran, he was forced out of Afghanistan, but I kept thinking of the power of those little communities and how they will make a difference for generations in ways we cannot know because they serve the Prince of Peace.

This Christmas it is good for us to be reminded about new little communities that spring up. We supported one at the beginning of the autumn, Genesis, up in St. Louis Park. This is their first Christmas. They have never done Christmas before in their little auditorium. It would be great for them to have newcomers share the joy with them. We pray for them the same way we pray for Upper Room, five years into it. They are at a place where they are going to have to move because their building is being sold. Let’s pray for their Christmas as we do for ours.

Lord Jesus, I do thank You that You come to be the Prince of Peace on the western side of Minneapolis and in the streets of our cities around the world. We ask especially that You will bless our sisters and brothers at Upper Room and these pioneers at Genesis, and that they will open their doors wide so that the love they start to feel and the peace they start to experience might be shared with people around them. Bless them. Help us bless them in Your Name. Amen.

We wanted the kids to stay for part of today because they have things to teach us. For instance, the kids would know that the tradition in liturgical churches is that when we come to the reading of the stories about Jesus, that’s called the Gospel, and when we read the Gospel, we stand. So why don’t we stand for the Gospel? We’ll hear this story in full on Wednesday evening. Luke says,

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby,

nearby Bethlehem

keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." **13** Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." **15** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." **16** So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned,

to their fields

glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Now in liturgical churches, when the person finishes their reading they say, "The Word of the Lord" and people respond by saying, "Thanks be to God" and then they sit down. Again, I think the kids can show us different parts of Christmas because they are hardwired in. I would love it if you are between kindergarten and fourth or fifth grade, when you see the image up on the screen, you tell me what it is, okay?

First image of Christmas, who's that?

[Kids:] Santa Claus!

Santa is to remind us that we give gifts to people we love. Here is another image. What are those?

[Kids:] Presents!

No explanation required. Let's keep going. What's the next image?

[Kids:] The tree!

The tree was a sign to all the people that there was light in the darkness and they could gather around it. What's the next image?

[Kids:] The Grinch!

Let me give you another example. Here's another one. Who's that?

[Kids:] Scrooge!

Scrooge and the Grinch! They are there to show that there are people around us who do not understand the joy and love of Christmas and need to be taught. They need their hearts to be warmed. Let's see if there is another one.

[Kids:] Angels!

This is called a manger scene, right? This is to show where the Baby Jesus was born, with angels and shepherds and Wise Men and cows and all kinds of stuff.

Christmas is a spectacle. I say that as opposed to saying Christmas is spectacular. Christmas is spectacular when it just resonates in the heart, but a spectacle is a show. Too often we turn Christmas into a spectacle and it's all about how spectacular we can make it look, how big we can make Christmas seem. But God seems to start Christmas with the unspectacular, the unexpected, things that nobody else noticed. Jesus does not come to the front lawn of the White House, but instead tucked away in a tiny, little city in a far off part of the world. This year as I listened to the story, I was struck by that last image we viewed, the image of the shepherds. The shepherds are foot soldiers. They are nobodies. Frankly, you never hear from the shepherds again. The Wise Men and the shepherds hear and they disappear. You never hear about the shepherds' great army for Jesus, but they were the first ones in the story.

I think God sends the angels to the shepherds first to let us know that the Baby Jesus was for everybody—for blue-collar people and poor people and people who feel far from God and ordinary folks, and not just for people who can afford the best Christmas presents. I think that Jesus sends the angels to the shepherds first because the shepherds were the only ones who were awake. Everybody else was exhausted. It's the middle of the night and the shepherds are the only ones awake, keeping watch, and so they are the ones who get surprised because everybody else is asleep. Sometimes it's the folks who cannot sleep at night, either through grief or anxiety or the fear of the future, the ones who toss and turn, who need that story the most, and they are the ones who hear something different in the wind.

It says in the story that the shepherds start out in fear. They were terrified. But it says at the end, that they returned to their fields, giving glory to God and rejoicing. Really, nothing had changed. They didn't get new flocks. They didn't get new customers. They didn't get honor. They didn't get the gold. Nothing was different for them, but everything was different! When I think about the shepherds, they teach me that I am supposed to celebrate *before* the end of the story.

It's easy to celebrate at the end of the game when the outcome is determined, but the shepherds teach me that I am supposed to celebrate at the beginning of the story. I am supposed to look forward and not just look around me. If you were telling this as a story, you'd say, "No, no, no, this isn't the end. We're just getting to the good part." Christmas is not the good part. We're just getting *to* the good part. Christmas, if you're telling the story of World War II, is not the victory. Christmas is D-Day. It's where the invasion begins. It's where we get hope that the tide of the battle has turned, but there are still lots of tough days ahead. The shepherds, it says, returned to their fields giving glory to God because what they had seen convinced them that everything they would see from then on was different. Something had happened. The difference is what the shepherds focus on, because once you've seen glimpses of God in a manger, everything looks different. Once you've heard the wisps of what the music of heaven must sound like, whether it's here or out in the fields, once you've heard that, you hum it for the rest of your life.

There's a great quote by Frederick Langbridge that says "Two men look out through the same bars; one sees the mud and one the stars." The shepherds were in the same place looking out through the bars, but they came home seeing the stars. Maybe they were singing Psalms. That's what the Psalms are. They're songs. Maybe they were singing Psalm 59. Psalm 59 is an odd song because it's written in a time of trouble and war and despair. The people are looking out through the bars and one sees the mud and one sees the stars. The psalmist says,

16 But I will sing of your power; yea, I will sing aloud of your mercy in the morning: for you have been my defense and refuge in the day of my trouble.

And they sang that song all day. Josh Dubois is a young man who is the descendant of slaves that became followers of Jesus and they sang that hymn, Psalm 59. They would sing that song, "I will sing of your mercy all through the day in the time of my trouble." His slave ancestors called the song "David" and when the shepherds sang, they called it "praising in the middle of the storm." I like that. Praising in the middle of the storm. God delights when we trust Him enough to sing praises even *before* it's all okay. The shepherds came and sang *before* it was all okay. Then it says, "The shepherds returned to their fields, rejoicing and giving glory to God." They teach me not only to celebrate out in the fields, but in the office, in the home, in the school, at the store. Praising God in the middle of the storm should shape the way we work and live the next day and the day after that and the day after that. We should rejoice in the fields.

C. S. Lewis said once, "I believe in Christianity [Christ] as I believe that the sun has risen: not only because I see it, but because by it I see everything else." So, after the shepherds have seen the baby in the manger and the glory of God, after singing, they see their work tending these stupid sheep differently. They see their fellow shepherds differently. They see their children differently, because not only do they see the sun, but by it they see everything else differently. So how about you? Are you a shepherd today? I am. I'm not one of the all-stars in the story. I'm just a shepherd. Do you lead a pretty ordinary life? Do you sometimes lie awake when everybody else is asleep? Do you do your best thinking about God in here and wish you did it out there in the fields? Is your life filled with minutes of anxiety and fear? Well, then you need to hear the story of the shepherds—that Christmas is finding God when you're out in the fields or, more accurately really, having God find you when you're out in the fields. You never see anything quite the same after you've seen what you've seen and heard the song of the angels. It goes on forever, you see, and people who have lived with it in the background hear it full on when they die, and they sing it in heaven from Christmas on.

Lord Jesus, I thank You that the little parts of the story, the parts that we overlook in Your coming, can give hope and life and light. When we are shepherds, just ordinary people filled with fear, I thank You that You come and bring us again to the manger and show us that when the Son comes, all will be different forever. In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, we give thanks. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.