

Sermon – “They Went With Haste”  
Christmas Eve 2017  
Scripture Readings: Luke 1:26-38, Luke 2:1-20  
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A reading from the Gospel according to Luke, chapter 1, verses 26-38:

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

*<sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*

*<sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” <sup>34</sup>*

*Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”*

*<sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

*<sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.*

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A further reading from Luke. Hear God's word of hope in Luke chapter 2, verses 1-20.

*<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.*

*<sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

*<sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom [God] favors!”*

*<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

*<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*

*<sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

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Nativity scenes vary in many ways, but there are always a few particular characters we remember and include. One interesting thing about these characters is that none of them just happened to be there. All showed up having heard somehow first from God. We recall Mary, of course, visited by an angel who announced her path to this moment. Joseph received a dream sending him down this road. The wise men, whose sign was a star in the sky. And the shepherds? Why did they come?

If someone were to ask you, “What was the sign from God which the shepherds saw that night?” you would likely describe much of what we just heard about: an army of angels appearing in the sky, singing praises. You might mention bright shining glory appearing around them, and an angel announcing the birth of the Christ child to these surprised keepers of sheep, as they stand astonished at seeing things far beyond their comprehension or expectation.

But you would not entirely be right.

Those things did indeed happen. But what was the *sign* they saw? There is only one thing in the story which is described as a sign. “This will be a sign for you:” says the angel of the Lord, “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”<sup>1</sup>

It is kind of a funny thing. An experience from outside the world altogether, the glory of God breaking in with the appearance of an angel, terrifying them, followed by the heavens filling with a multitude of God’s army, praising God and announcing peace on earth, then disappearing into the sky, the overwhelming experience to beat all overwhelming experiences, supernatural beings and a proclamation from heaven...and it is not this, but a regular-looking baby in supremely unimpressive circumstances which is described as a sign.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 2:12 (New Revised Standard Version).

Indeed, the birth of Jesus is not, itself, described by Luke as particularly extraordinary. It is just a single, plain sentence from the Gospel writer. No special characteristics are attributed to the event; no glory is described around it, just, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn.”<sup>2</sup> That’s it. It happens in the least glorious way imaginable; his first bed is a feeding trough for animals.

And yet, when the shepherds arrive to this unremarkable scene they are not deterred from their enthusiasm at all. They saw this great heavenly scene, announcing the presence of this child as a sign, and yet apparently the baby’s inconspicuous surroundings and reality do not diminish their amazement in the least, for they immediately go on to tell anyone who will listen all the fantastic things they have heard from the angels, spreading the messianic gospel already from the most unbelievable of places: a barn where some poor unmarried woman and her boyfriend are huddled with a baby for whom they can’t even find a bed. This is not yet the Jesus who has fed five thousand people from a few loaves and fish, or the Jesus who has brought Lazarus back from the dead. This is just a baby, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. This is the sign the angel said they would find.

This, some everyday thing found in uninspiring circumstances, is not what we typically think of when we hope for God to “give us a sign.” We look for the grand, or maybe we do sometimes listen for the small, hidden thing, but we hope for it to be unambiguous and direct, like a multitude of heavenly host, or a burning bush from which comes the voice of God. So how is what they find here a sign, then?

In one sense, the child simply serves straightforwardly as a sign that what they said was true—as fulfillment of a prophetic word, as verification of the angelic message. The angel says a lot of extraordinary things—a Savior is born, the Messiah, the Lord—and why should these things be believed? Here is one thing they can check out for themselves. There’s a baby over in Bethlehem right now lying in a manger.

It also serves as something else, though, another kind of sign. For the angel could simply have said, “Believe this news! The Messiah is born! The sign for you that this is true is what you see before you: that I am here in terrifying glory, and that you shall witness a multitude of the heavenly host appearing and giving glory to God.”

But the angel did not say that. The angel sent them somewhere, to a much more earthy kind of sign. “You will find a child,” the angel said. “You will find” does not allow passivity, mere *reception* of a sign; it is a foretelling that implies action, a search, a journey, on the part of the shepherds. They are pointed not at a miraculous signal flashing among the stars, but at a concrete guidepost on the ground which, should they set forth on this search, will tell them when they have arrived.

It is a wonderful thing that the news of the Messiah comes in the form of a pointer to something right here on earth, to someone, someone who can be found, approached, and met. It is truly “good news of great joy for all the people,”<sup>3</sup> for the question, “Where is God?” is answered not by pointing up to the sky, but by pointing down here.

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<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:7 (NRSV).

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:10 (NRSV).

Pointing to where God is on the move among us, bringing the power and favor of God to us.

Pointing to a sign within the ordinary...not outside of but *within* lives where nothing special was visible to outward appearances.

Pointing them at a sign not of God's glorious existence "out there" somewhere in the universe, or beyond it, but of God's real presence here, in everyday life, in this everyday world, the kingdom of heaven come to overturn the chaos, reconcile, and make aright the world. Not "a Savior is come," but "to *you* is born...a Savior."<sup>4</sup> They are given not knowledge of something abstract or distant, but of something they could go see, right that moment.

And they went, with haste.

A real-world savior. Here, in our own dirty, dark streets, shineth the everlasting light. The hopes and fears of all the years are met in this, tonight.<sup>5</sup>

Glory be to God; amen.

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<sup>4</sup> From Luke 2:10-11 (NRSV).

<sup>5</sup> To paraphrase words from the beloved carol, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, by Phillips Brooks.