

THE BIRTH OF HOPE

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirin'i-us was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

(Luke 2:1-20)

HEADLINES: An army invades a neighboring country. The poor get poorer and neither the religious community nor the government is doing enough to help. A brutal dictator seeks revenge on those of a different ethnic origin and religious perspective. A baby is born to temporarily homeless parents. Are these headlines from the year 2003 or from 2,000 years ago? The answer: both.

For it was a night as dark as any night, in a time as dark as any time when God sent the Light of the world to be born in a Bethlehem stable. Despite all the peaceful scenes we see depicted on our Christmas cards, life was hard on the night that Christ was born. The Israelites were living under the military occupation and domination of the Roman Empire. Most people lived in poverty, with barely enough to eat. Medical science as we know it did not exist. Labor was long, and luxuries were few. They were dark and difficult days.

Things were especially bad for one couple that had traveled all day, and were now searching desperately for a place to sleep. Far from a pleasure trip, they had made the

journey in order to pay their taxes. And to top it all off, the wife was in her final days of pregnancy. Her baby's birth was imminent. The couple of course, was Mary and Joseph, two ordinary people who found themselves carrying out God's extraordinary plan.

Only a year ago, Mary's engagement to Joseph was the most exciting thing going on in her life. But all that changed the day the angel Gabriel showed up. He told Mary that God favored her, that she would soon be a mother, and that her child would be none other than the very Son of God. Nine months passed and her pregnancy progressed. That's when she and Joseph found themselves traveling to Bethlehem, following the mandates of the latest Roman tax laws.

Exhausted from their travel, Mary and Joseph finally got a break from an innkeeper who was willing to let them bed down for the night in his stable. He apologized that he couldn't do more, seeing as Mary was pregnant and all, but a bed of soft straw was better than nothing. The couple agreed, and barely had time to get settled in before the baby was born. They quickly wrapped him in cloths to protect him from the cold night air, and set about soothing his tiny cries. How they marveled at his angelic face and sparkling eyes, his sweet mouth and tiny fingers. It was a dark night in a dingy stable, but their hearts sang as they snuggled their newborn and repeated his holy name, "Jesus."

Not far from this stable, shepherds were tending their sheep. In an agrarian society, shepherds were everywhere. They were common; they were smelly; and they bordered on being outcasts. And yet on this dark night in this dark time, they came first. The angels chose them above everyone else to first hear the news of Christ's birth. Imagine the shock on the faces of this rag tag bunch of boys and men, when the angel Gabriel appeared. They may have been used to fighting off wild animals or thieves, but this was another story. The gospel of Luke tells us that the shepherds were filled with fear.

Gabriel said, "Be not afraid. I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people." At this point, the shepherds' thoughts must have been racing. What was this good news? Had a greener pasture been discovered? Were some of their lost sheep finally found? Had the Romans packed their bags and gone home? I'm guessing that the news they eventually heard must have seemed puzzling at best. A baby? An angel shows up to tell them that a baby has been born? What's the big deal? Babies are born every day. And then comes the startling message that this baby is no ordinary infant, that he is the Savior, the long-awaited Messiah.

Before they even had a chance to ask how they would know which baby was *the* baby, the angel said, "And this will be a sign unto you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." As if this news of the newborn savior in a feeding trough wasn't shocking enough, the deep, dark sky suddenly shown with the light of day as it filled with an angelic choir who sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom God is pleased."

And then silence. They could feel their hearts pounding in their chests as they stared at the dark sky where only moments before a heavenly chorus had sung. What should they do—pinch themselves to see if they were dreaming, run for safety, or heed the angelic call? We know from the story that they decided to go to Bethlehem to see what in the world was going on. And what was going on in the world was this: a baby boy wrapped in swaddling cloths was lying in a manger, just as Gabriel had said.

After seeing baby Jesus and his family, the shepherds returned to their fields. And as they returned the Bible says they were "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." On their hurried approach to the stable, they most likely felt a mixture of fear and confusion. But upon leaving, their hearts overflowed with gladness and thanksgiving to God. For on a dark night, in a dark time, they had found the birth of hope.

Two thousand years later, we find ourselves in difficult times as well. Soldiers are being picked off like sitting ducks in Iraq and the terror alert has been raised to orange. Some of us are missing loved ones this season. And despite the improving economy, many of us have family members or friends who are unemployed or underemployed. For those of us feeling burdened tonight, whose celebrations are tinged by sorrow, the arrival of the Christ child can bring us hope, comfort, and joy.

As surely as Gabriel spoke to the shepherds, God speaks to us tonight, saying, "Be not afraid." For the angel brings us "good news of great joy which will come to all people; for unto us is born...in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord."

When the baby Jesus was born in the darkness 2,000 years ago, hope itself was born anew. For this child grew up to gather children in his arms and turn water into wine, to heal the sick and dine with the outcast, to love us and teach us how to love one another. And in the end, to die and rise again that death itself might die.

Our faith lies in a God who specializes in the unexpected, the miraculous. The God who sent us a savior born in a barn—a messiah first visited by everyday shepherds. On this blessed Christmas Eve, may we all become like the shepherds. May we too seek the Christ child. May our fears turn to thanksgiving and joy. May we too gaze in wonder at the miracle of his birth. And may the hope born in a stable be born in our own hearts, now and forevermore. AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only
Edited by Colleen Brown Only
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

PASTORAL PRAYER

We come before you in awe, O God, freshly aware of your glory and your love embodied in the midst of this world. Here amid dirt and straw, amid the noise of cattle and the labor of birth, we perceive your work. We dare to believe that it is you, God, coming to be among us in the person of Jesus, and so we praise you with songs of joy. Glory be to you, O God, forever and ever.

We pray for all people who find the holidays sad and difficult to bear. For people in the military and humanitarian relief workers, regardless of their country of origin, who are separated from their families during this season, we pray. For those who have lost family and friends either recently or long ago, we ask your assurance that their loved ones rest secure in your everlasting arms.

As we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we pray for our world's leaders that peace and justice might spread throughout our world.

And now, O God, we offer you the gratitude of our hearts for your arrival on that starry night so long ago. May the hope that was born in Bethlehem be born in us tonight, through Jesus Christ the newborn king we pray. AMEN.