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Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve

A RESPONSE TO GOOD NEWS

There were the shepherds. Those who did that type of work in that time and place were generally not considered the upper crust of society – not anywhere near it. It was a dirty job, as they worked out in the fields with livestock generally owned by someone else. No one would have been thrilled to have their daughter marry a lowly shepherd. However, these shepherds were working the same fields that the most famous shepherd in Israel's history had worked. Before David had been anointed and then became Israel's greatest king, while growing up in Bethlehem, he took care of the family flock. These shepherds knew a prophet like Samuel was not going to show up and anoint one of them to be the next person to sit on the throne over Israel. But they did feel that they labored in a special place. They imagined that the large rock on which they sat to eat their lunch while keeping an eye on the flock was probably the same rock on which Israel's greatest king had at some point sat. And then, there were the events of that night. Yes, David had been anointed by a prophet, but even he had not been visited by angels. Even he had not been told of the grand news of the birth of the Messiah. The shepherds not only got to hear the news; they got invited to see the young descendant of David who was coming as the Savior of the world.

There also were the angels involved in the story. They were the ones who shared the good news with the shepherds about the birth of a child. They had observed many times when humans shared good news about the arrival of a baby. But now they got to be in on the good tidings of great joy. And this was not just another baby. This was the Lord in human flesh. God was doing something radically new. There were plenty of events that would positively affect only those who were rich and powerful. But this was a holy strategic move that would impact even those who just eked by, the un-influential, the hoi polloi. Instead of telling the town mayor or religious officials or even Roman authorities, the angels told a group of simple shepherds who were tending their flock by night. It was the most joyous news the messengers from heaven had ever gotten to share and they relished the moment. Joyful praise flowed forth – “Glory to God in the highest” that has reached all the way down to the lowest!

There was also, of course, the young mother, Mary. There is every indication that she was just a young teenager and yet such responsibility had been given to her to bring such a special child into the world! She had to be frightened. It wasn't the smoothest of starts with the need to be a long way from her home in Nazareth when the child came. And with the crowds that descended upon Bethlehem because of the requirements of the Roman registration, she and Joseph couldn't even find a decent place to find shelter for the delivery. They had to make do, like finding an unused manger to serve as a makeshift crib. Mary was greatly relieved and quite thankful that the baby seemed to be alright. Yet she was beginning to figure out that the angel who had told her of God's plan about her being the mother of the very Son of God nine months earlier was not going to show up to rock the baby to sleep or to help feed, burp, or clean the child. She thought it odd that several shepherds were in the know about her baby's birth. They said angels had told them of the special event. The good news came in spite of her fear. Even though her life was totally different from what she had anticipated, it was still good news that was redefining her life.

And then there was Joseph, the father figure who wasn't really the father. All of this had

been quite awkward with Mary's unexpected pregnancy. He had felt betrayed by his betrothed. The story she told him about her pregnancy – well he was not that naïve. And yet, could a bit of redemption come through this child that might overcome the perceived infidelity that had hurt him? One thing was clear for Joseph: the protection and care of the child was of primary importance now. That little one had nothing to do with the rough relationships and conditions into which he had been born. Would he be able to serve as a father for the child? The visit from the shepherds confused him. It was as if Mary had conspired with them to continue this strange story about the specialness of the child. And yet, what if it was all true? Even his doubts had not been able to chase off what may indeed have been good news.

Of course, central to it all is the child. The story leads us to the audacious and mysterious belief that God took on eyes and ears and hands and feet, tears and laughter, hunger and other human vulnerabilities. God took on joy and pain, growth and loss, and even our curiously redemptive human need for each other. Amazingly, God came in human form, utterly dependent upon others to be fed, clothed, sheltered, taught, and loved. The arrival of any newborn offers an opportunity to rethink one's priorities. To revamp one's focus to provide for the needs of those most vulnerable, whether they are little ones or not, is a step toward God's good intent for humanity. And that step starts even as God comes as a human who initially couldn't even hold up his own head. Yes, God's love embodied has to be utterly vulnerable. It couldn't be any other way. It shows the length to which God goes in order to be embraced by beloved creatures. Here is the personification of good news.

Let's go back over this. The shepherds got to hear and to see the good news. Angels got to share the good news. The good news directly involved and came through Mary in spite of her fears. Joseph perhaps wasn't so sure about the good news, but it was still for him. Jesus was the embodiment of good news. Is that everyone in Luke's nativity account? No, it isn't. For the angelic message proclaimed that the birth was good news of great joy for all the people. I don't think that was limited to just the people there in and around Bethlehem. It doesn't sound like it was even limited to people who were alive at that time. Even though this news isn't new, its goodness of great joy extends to you and to me. We too are part of the story because the story goes beyond Bethlehem to all over the world. It starts in the first century but reaches to eternity. As Isaiah wrote, "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." It is still news and it is still very good because it opens the way toward true joy for all people. It redefines who we are. It is not undermined by fears or doubts. How do we respond to it? Perhaps an initial response is simply to echo the angels in singing, "Glory to God in the highest!"

Say that with me: "Glory to God in the highest! Glory to God in the highest! Alleluia! Amen.