

Series: Come, Let Us Adore Him
Sermon: Wonders of His Love
Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

First Sunday after Christmas
December 29, 2024
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8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before 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; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 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." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Christmas always seems more joyful when seen through the eyes of a child, don't you think? I remember when my niece and nephews were young, I asked the oldest two, Houston and Molly, what they wanted for Christmas and they each had a long list of things as child generally do. Then I asked them what Hunter would want, he was just a baby at the time. Molly spoke up quickly and said, "Oh, he doesn't want anything. He doesn't watch TV." I was astounded that at such a young age, she could still understand the power of television to shape our desires and expectations. She somehow understood that she didn't know, on her own, what she wanted. She needed someone to tell her. Hunter, she decided, since he was too young to watch TV, could not understand the joy and wonder of Christmas as fully as she and Houston could. It bears the question; can we understand the joy and wonder of Christmas if we don't fully understand the power of the gift?

I think about the shepherds in the field, keeping watch over their sheep. Their task is simple, but their lives are not. In the social hierarchy of first-century Judea, shepherds were at the bottom—often overlooked or mistrusted. Yet, the angel declares to them: *"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people."* (Luke 2:10), all people. The shepherds were not seeking God; they were tending sheep. Yet God met them where they were, reminding us that no one is beyond the reach of divine love.

This moment, when the angels appear, is God's grace breaking into a weary and divided world—a grace that extends to everyone, especially the lowly and marginalized. This is a profound statement about the nature of God's grace. In our Wesleyan tradition, we understand grace in a number of ways. One facet of grace founder John Wesley spoke of is prevenient grace—God reaching out to us before we even recognize our need for Him. As United Methodists, we believe this grace is available to all people, calling us to respond in faith and love. This is an inclusive grace that brings transformation and calls us to respond with joyful witness.

The Angels helped the shepherds to understand that not only is God doing something wondrous and amazing for the world...he is inviting them into the story...even if they don't yet understand what it means. Not only did the shepherds not understand, they were terrified when the angel first appeared. But the angel said, *"Do not be afraid."*

Fear is often our first reaction when God breaks into our lives. We fear change, we fear the unknown, and we fear the demands that faith might place on us. Throughout Advent, "fear not" has been a

common refrain, heard by Mary, by Joseph, and now by the shepherds. And we need to embrace those comforting words, as well.

The message of Christ is one of joy, not fear. This is what Wesley calls justifying grace—the grace that reconciles us to God through Jesus Christ. It transforms our fear into joy, our despair into hope, and our alienation into belonging.

The angelic host sang, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*” This peace is not just the absence of conflict; it is the peace that comes from being in a right relationship with God and with our neighbor. We might consider: What fears are holding us back from fully embracing the joy of Christ’s birth? How can the assurance of God’s grace bring peace to our hearts and minds?

After the angelic message, the shepherds didn’t just stay in the fields. They said, “*Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.*” (Luke 2:15) They responded to the good news with action, and after witnessing the Christ child, they returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God.

This is what Wesley calls sanctifying grace—the grace that empowers us to live out our faith in love and service. Wesley taught that faith is not merely belief; it is an active response to God’s work in our lives. But can we fully respond when we don’t fully understand?

A few years ago, my brother, knowing my love for puzzles, gave me a 3D puzzle for Christmas. It was intricate and complicated, a set of wooden puzzle pieces from which you could create a mechanical holder for pens and pencils on your desk. I took a look and even before opening it, I discovered that the instructions were in Russian. Now Latin, I could have done something with, but Russian doesn’t even use the same alphabet. I had a choice. I could push through, get creative, figure it out. Or I could leave it in the wrapper and hope to someday find a way to translate the instructions. Experiencing sanctifying grace means that we are invited to participate in God’s plans...without fully knowing what those plans are. Like building a puzzle with directions in a foreign language.

You probably guessed that I left my brother’s gift in the wrapper, where it remains today. But we simply cannot do that with the gift of Jesus Christ. The story of the shepherds is more than a quaint part of the Christmas narrative. It reminds us that we are called to live out our faith in God’s grace with joyful service and bold witness, and through acts of mercy and justice.

It is a reminder that God’s grace is for all people, especially the overlooked and the lowly. It is a call to let go of fear and embrace the joy and peace of Christ. And it is an invitation to respond by glorifying God and sharing His love with the world, even if we don’t understand all the instructions along the way.

As we continue to celebrate Christmas, let us remember that the good news of great joy is not just for shepherds in a distant field—it is for all of us. May we, like the shepherds, go and see, and may we leave glorifying and praising God, sharing His love with everyone we meet.

Let us pray:

Gracious God, we thank You for the good news of Jesus Christ, a gift of grace for all people. Help us to receive this news with joy, to let it transform our hearts, and to respond with lives of faith, love, and service. May we, like the shepherds, glorify and praise You in all that we do. In the name of the Christ child we pray, Amen.