

Advent 4
Order of Worship
Luke 2:8-14

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

The shepherds in this familiar Christmas story are so interesting to me. Because they didn't sign up to be a part of this. They aren't religious professionals. They are just people, doing their job, on a hillside. I love the way Marci Glass tells the story – she says they are just minding their own business on that hillside and then, this happens.

***Halleluah Chorus!**

An angel of the Lord stands before them and the glory of the Lord shines around them. And they are told not to be afraid. Isn't it cute the way the angels always think they can just show up to talk to mortals as if we wouldn't be afraid?

Anyhow, the shepherds receive this good news of great joy for ALL the people.

“to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And then the angels sing some more

***Hallelujah Chorus**

and then they go back to heaven, leaving the shepherds, we imagine, gaping up at the clouds.

Luke tells us that after the angels left, the shepherds said to each other, *“let's go see this”*. But like really? Surely that wasn't their most immediate conversation. Surely there was one shepherd who said, *“whoa there, cowboy. Let's slow down and consider this for a minute. We're just shepherds. We can't just go traipsing in to some family's private moment with this crazy angel story.”* And then another shepherd who says, *“good point. That angel thing was pretty incredible. I always*

thought angels were just in stories. Didn't know it could happen to me. Plus, Who would believe us? I wouldn't believe us. Why would the angels come to us? Nobody listens to shepherds." And then the first shepherd says "exactly. We make a pact. We say NOTHING. What happens on the hillside stays on the hillside." But then I am sure there was THAT one, who said, "I'm not making that pact. People might not believe me, but we just saw the glory of the Lord! They came to US to bring this amazing story. We have to tell it! You can stay here if you want, but I'm going to see what the Lord has made known to us. "

We know how the story goes, we know they went and found the baby and in finding the baby they found love. But in telling the story so matter of factly Luke has lost the humanity of the shepherds who I am sure are a lot like you and me. I am sure they wondered if or how any of what the heavenly hosts were telling them could be true. I'm sure they pondered if they had been slipped something at dinner. They had to be astonished by what they just had seen and heard and perhaps were a little fearful about what it all could mean for them and for the world. We can't really blame the skeptical shepherds. Shepherds were despised—seen to be dishonest people who let their sheep eat the grass on other people's land. They had no social standing or power. Surely they hadn't been chosen to be the bearers of this important message from God! I am sure they were worried about the ridicule they would receive. "Oh those shepherds, they must have had too much wine out in the fields." The angel's message is completely out of their frame of reference, unlike anything they have known before.

And yet, here they were. How did the shepherds find the courage to leave the fields and head into town to see something so unusual?

In choosing the shepherds with no power or social status to bear witness to what God was doing in the world God was declaring that *all of us* have a role in sharing the story and bearing witness to God's love that is all around us.

What I find most interesting about this story – is that the "Do not be afraid" is two-fold in this story. Do not be afraid – of course of the great light and the fact that literal angels are singing and speaking to you – but also too – do not be afraid to go and see this sign – do not be afraid that God has chosen you to bear witness to what God is doing – do not be afraid of this new thing God is doing." And friends, that's the message that is actually for us too. We don't need the message about not being afraid of the singing angels all aglow – but we do need the message – "do not be afraid of bearing witness to the movement of God's love in

the world” and the message- “do not be afraid of the things God is calling you to do.”

We are more like the skeptical shepherds than we would probably like to admit. We want to tell people the story of how we have seen God, of where the divine busted in to the middle of our boring lives, of how we have experienced love. We want to tell the story of how love has transformed our lives and turned everything upside down.

We do.

We want to tell the story. And not only that we have those stories to tell.

That is the crux of today’s story about the shepherds. As a result of having heard and seen these things, the shepherds themselves become messengers as they return “praising God”—mirroring the songs of the angel multitude.

And just like the angels we are sent as messengers of God’s love. We are called to be witnesses to the inbreaking of divine love in the world. We have stories to tell. But we question like the shepherds, who will believe us? Or we don’t trust our own voices, and we assume there is someone better to reveal the love of God to the world. In fact, Kelley Becker is doing such a bang up job— so let’s just let her. Except, you and I?, we have our own unique stories to tell. Stories that need to be told by us. Stories about love, and grace, and hope, and peace, and joy. Life changing stories. Stories about how love transformed our lives, about how love changed the way we live and the way we saw the world. And it is time we start sharing those stories.

A lot of people are out there speaking for God these days. And a lot of them are saying really horrible things – some of them are blaming victims of violence for not being faithful enough, or claiming that God abandons humans based on their failures, or claiming that some people created by God are not wholly loved by God just as they are. And friends, that is not love. We know a different truth. We don’t know of a hillside that shines brightly with a angelic choir but we know of a God who is love.

You know all of this reminds me of the Velveteen Rabbit. I am sure you know the story. In case it’s been a while the Velveteen Rabbit is a little boy’s Christmas present and this stuffed bunny longs to be made real. And in the world of toys the only way to be made real is through love. The velveteen rabbit ends up becoming real because the boy loves him so much, but before that happens, there is this conversation in the play room with the skin horse. “What is REAL?”

asked the Rabbit one day. "Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?" "Real isn't how you are made," said the Skin Horse. "It's a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real." "Does it hurt?" asked the Rabbit. "Sometimes," said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. "When you are Real you don't mind being hurt." "Does it happen all at once, like being wound up," he asked, "or bit by bit?" "It doesn't happen all at once," said the Skin Horse. "You become. It takes a long time. That's why it doesn't often happen to people who break easily, or have sharp edges, or who have to be carefully kept. Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand."

When I look around this room I see people who know what being made changed by love is like. And I imagine there are people in our lives who need to hear our stories of how love has transformed us. There are all sorts of stories in this room and within our larger community of God's love. Experiences in which what we thought was impossible was made possible by love.

This was the moment in the sermon I had hoped to steal baby Margaret from her dads and remind us again that in BIG ways God is still revealing God's self through love. Or perhaps we could point out how the Bennett's opened their home out of their love for God's people and because of such love we are able to enjoy beautiful music this morning. But God reveals love in small and ordinary ways too— much like the velveteen rabbit's transformation, some of our own has been gradual. From the ways we help our neighbors to the gifts we share with one another at this time of year. We have experienced love in the care we have given to and received from each other. We have experienced love in the moments when we have volunteered in the community, seeking to make the world better for all of God's children. We know of a God who chose to reveal God's self through a baby born to a family displaced by political events of the world, calling us to engage the political structures to speak up for the people who have no voice. We know of a God who revealed the good news first to shepherds who had no social standing or privilege, but trusted that they would be the perfect people to share the good news.

You see, this news of God's love revealed? - we can't just decide to keep on the hillside what happened on the hillside. There is love to be shared. We can't hoard

our stories of when we have experienced God's love and we can't stop continuing to share that love with the world.

Way back at the beginning of this series, we heard from Kelley that the opposite of fear is love. So let us not be afraid. For when God shows up as a baby we, like the shepherds, are able to recognize that love is what saves us. And we know this because the shepherds overcame their fear, their hesitation, their distrust of their own voices, and came off the hillside to share the good news. It is our turn and our time. We too must find our voices and trust that our stories of love are important. We live in a hurting and broken world in need of stories of love.

Julian of Norwich says, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well, for there is a force of love moving through the universe that holds us fast and will never let us go."

Let us share our stories of the love that doesn't let us go. Let us, like the shepherds, reveal God's love that has been made known to us...Amen.