

“Shepherds, Singing”

Luke 2: 8-20

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The House of Hope Presbyterian Church

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Christmas Eve

Phenomenologists – a certain wing of philosophers and theologians – talk about the layers of meaning found in religious rituals and symbols. It’s like the stratification in layers of the earth. So the question is, what layers of meaning come to you as we gather on Christmas Eve? What memories of Christmas time and Christmas Eve worship continue to nurture your soul? Think about that. Maybe share a memory with someone later tonight.

I’d like to share a few memories that come to me as we gather tonight. My memory goes back to Christmas Eve with the Rev. Dr. Carl Ericson. I was in 8th grade. He was our new pastor. He made a theological statement through Christmas decorations. He refused to allow anything fake to be used. No plastic greens, no plastic Holly. Nowhere in the church.

Even in Dr. Ericson’s own home. They had a real tree, but no glass beads or no tinsel. He railed against the vice of tinsel. In traditional Swedish style, they strung together cranberries for ornaments. And they had no fake electric lights.

For lights on their real Christmas tree, they used real candles. The Ericson’s lit the candles on their Christmas tree only once a year, for a few minutes, on Christmas Eve. Did I mention they lived in the Church manse? The Building and Grounds committee thought the new minister was insane! But I have never forgotten Dr. Ericson’s theological point: When you celebrate Jesus, it has to be real.

So when you hear the words, Prince of Peace, and Peace on earth: is it real? Who are the real friends you reach out to across the globe at Christmas time? We made friends with a church behind the Iron Curtain near Dresden, Germany. We’ve kept up the relationship for years. We have fun translating for each other. Jens is in the legislature, and is a rather strict translator. When he translated the 23rd Psalm, we all expected, “The Lord is my shepherd.” Jens said: “You Americans, you don’t have shepherds. To be authentic, you should be translating it, “The Lord is my cowboy.” You stop and think about it, there is something real to that.

I think of these friends on Christmas Eve, and I let my mind wander and make connections with thoughts of long ago. What comes to mind is a movie that came out about 10 years ago. The movie, “Australia.”

“Australia” is a cowboy movie whose story takes place in the outback. Hugh Jackman as the cattle drover, Nicole Kidman as the Governess. But at the center of the story there is this 11 year old boy, Nullah. Nullah was born to an aboriginal mother and a white father. Through tragic events, Nullah

becomes an orphan. Nullah has a grandfather. But according to the corrupt government, the grandfather is an outlaw, an outlaw who is also said to be a Shaman, a Magic Man. He has not been seen in years.

The governess takes the orphan, Nullah, under her wing. She raises him. Protects him. Teaches him. Then all of a sudden, one day the grandfather shows up and says it is time for the boy to go on walkabout. Walkabout in the Outback, the ritual of young aboriginal men. When they learn the stories of their people. Learn the songs of their people. But the governess refuses to let Nullah go. In silent anger, the grandfather leaves.

Later on in the movie, the scene has shifted. The cowboy, the governess and Nullah are on a great cattle drive through the outback desert, with 2,000 head of cattle. They unexpectedly had to change course and now they have been days without water. The nearest water is 3 days away. The cattle are about to die of thirst. All hope is lost.

Suddenly, the boy's aboriginal grandfather appears. He reveals just what kind of Medicine Man he is as he starts... singing. He sings the songs handed down from his ancestors. He starts singing, and the hopeless starts listening. And they discover, in the midst of the songs of the ancestors are images that will guide them through the desert. The songs provide a musical map that leads them to water. Which is to say, the songs lead them to life.

So it was on that first Christmas Eve, the cowboy-shepherds are sitting in the darkness. Working the night shift, in that time of year when the flocks give birth, and the shepherds have to be in the fields at night, to protect the vulnerable ones from predators.

The darkness is a metaphor for life in a brutal time, a time of oppression, a time of hopelessness. There they are, trembling in the dark. When all of a sudden, these strangers come and start telling them this outrageous story. As they tell it, the strangers become overwhelmed with joy, to the point where they break out singing.

Imagine. Out in the fields these strangers singing to you about a baby born in a barn. You're not quite sure why, but these strangers are so overwhelmingly happy, it is infectious. You decide to go see for yourselves. The songs guide the shepherds to this barn carved in the rock. Inside, the barn is dark and dank and musty. It is the humblest place on earth, but this baby is there, and amazingly, it feels like home.

Imagine a place where the shepherds, and the cowboys and travelers and truckers and homeless are welcomed to hold a newborn baby, to share a story, sing a song and feel as if there is something transcendent going on. The transcendence encounters and envelops them.

Imagine holding the baby, and looking down and feeling the warmth of the light in the child's eyes. You hand the baby back to the parents, then you go back outside into the cold, but the warmth stays with you. The warmth of the light in the child's eyes stays with you.

Only now it seems as if God is whispering to you in the vault of heaven, and that there are angels in the architecture of the cosmos. Imagine wanting passionately for the warmth of that light to be nurtured and shared, morning and night, seven days a week. Not just to your friends, but everyone. You see this transcendent love is meant to be shared. To bring people together.

Imagine recognizing, let's be candid, that there have been times when you were not so welcoming. But you just received a new beginning. You see that you have a second chance to live life with more love, with more courage to love.

Imagine this warmth stays with you every day. And you decide to make this love stretch, spread, expand, and grow, multiply. Imagine this love lived tangibly, spreading broadly, imagine that there is no limit to the people it can touch. Imagine a world where this love moves ordinary people to do extraordinary things.

And if God can come to the baby of a homeless couple, in a barn in a backwoods county in a backward part of the world then no place in the world is beyond God's love. So nowhere in the world is beyond our love too. God's love has become real!

Imagine the light of the child's eyes, reflected in the eyes of the shepherds is reflected in your eyes tonight.

Your eyes from now on become more... aware.
Aware of the gift we have been given.
Aware of the people around us.
Aware of the world around us.
Aware of how much our courage to love matters.
Aware that we are not alone,
and no one else should be either.

Imagine seeing that Jesus can come to us again anywhere, so why not here? Why not this place? This night? We say that Christ is born, and that he has been born into our world. The truth is: we have been born into his world.

Because Christ is born, we are born anew into a world of the most profound hope. Christmas is about us, again, learning to tell the story, learning to sing the songs of the angels and the shepherds that will guide us through every dark place and every desert.

So sing the songs with that will guide you! Sing!

Son of God, love's pure light,
Radiant beams from thy holy face,

Sing!

In the dark street shineth, the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years,
are met in thee, tonight.

Sing!

Joy to the World, the Lord is come,
Let Heaven and Nature ring!

You see, in the light of Jesus Christ, is God's love is made real.

Amen.