

Parable of the Day the Christmas Tree Crashed

Scriptures: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 2:8-20

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Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

The Shepherds and the Angels

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And 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!'

¹⁵When 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Proclamation of the Word

After pulling out the pre-lit artificial (or as my friend, Tammy says, "eternal") Christmas Tree and realizing that it was only ¼ pre-lit and the rest dark and unlit, Chuck and I had a dilemma, what to do this year. We had an artificial tree because of my allergies. We decided we had three options.

1. Just wrap the current tree with strings of lights and return her to her glory days
2. purchase a replacement tree, pre-Christmas and full-priced
3. or what about trying a real tree again...start a new tradition, with a new house, a new place, a start of something new...

After all our children do not even remember having a live Christmas tree, so why not? I had to convince Chuck a bit, but it was Christmas, why not? So we strapped a NC Frasier fir to the top of the mini van, taking it home to surprise the kids who were staying with the Grandparents for the day. Hallie and I, in particular, relish decorating the tree. Avery did his part, too. Chuck always has to help with the heavy lifting and setting it snugly in the tree stand. It took a couple of days, but the tree was eventually complete....

...until Tuesday of last week, when we came home from work and school to find the tree face down, like a fallen soldier. Glass ornaments were shattered. Water soaked the 7 presents lovingly hand-made at Gift Day by Hallie. Along with the hand-made presents, the first gift under the tree was a box of bones for our dog, Baxter. The wrapping paper a loss, but the rawhide treats were safe.

Chuck, on his way home from a long day at work, called to check in. "The tree has crashed." I said with urgency. "Oh" he said. Then I described a couple of fallen ornaments, casualties in the crash, giving him the blow by blow on the cordless phone as I am discovering the damage.

"There's a snow man made out of baked dough, now in 2 pieces that say 'Chuck, age 5.' And remember the handmade- glass angel I gave my mom. I bought it in college with my own money at the Montreat gift shop. After she died I made sure to take that one to our house. And Oh my goodness, there is a decapitated wise man and a shepherd who lost his sheep, his head, and both his feet in the incident. You remember your Aunt Betty gave those to each of the kids, one per Christmas until they both had a complete nativity in Christmas ornaments. Oh no, Avery's glass snowman from 2004- he was 6 years old."

"Yeah, well I should be home in 20 minutes," said a tired Chuck.

"Oh. Okay," I said thinking, I am probably over-reacting. They are just ornaments. Spilled water can be cleaned up. Fir needles can be swept up. Presents will dry out.

When Chuck gets home and dinner is in the oven, we begin to clean up the crashed Christmas tree mess. I feel again the initial sadness I had when I discovered the tree on the living room floor. I realize that I am attached to those things, little trinkets because they are signs of my relationships with those I love most. Like the fact that my mother is no longer here to celebrate Christmas, I can treasure a few things from her tree and the ornaments she gave me- one each year marked with the year and my name...a tradition we have continued with our children, so that when they grow up they will have a set of ornaments and memories for their own Christmas trees. What made me sad was that I cannot keep even those little trinkets from breaking. I have known for a long time that people we love get chipped and break...sometimes a little at a time. Other times people shatter in one quick crash.

The angel was fine, but her harp will be hard to repair. The shepherd is okay, but I need to reunite him with his beloved sheep. He will definitely need his two feet and head glued back on. But Avery's glass snowman is a goner...just like he will never be a chubby cheeked 6-year old again. All gone.

It makes me realize how very fragile life is and what a sentimental sap I am. I come by it honestly. It was given to me one ornament at a time, a Christmas

tradition from my mother. And life taught me early that we lose people sometimes a little at a time, sometimes in one big crash.

But God also has taught me that into our lives, steps people, shepherds of sorts, who bring us joy and grace to keep going, a sustaining hand to hold us together when things fall apart. Those objects that are signs of love for us point us to a larger sign that was born in Bethlehem.

But God sends signs of peace and hope among us even now. A messenger of grace and an angel of good news stepped into my life somewhere along the way. His name is Chuck. After the frantic phone call and his flat response, he said later, "Sorry I wasn't very responsive to your being upset, I had just had a long meeting, again, with a very troubled student who appears vacant, his single mother who struggles with her own demons, and his team of teachers and administrators. At the end of a long day of teaching, I am exhausted."

"I knew you were. It's fine. Life is like that...fragile."

Chuck teaches kids every day who are chipped, broken, and some so shattered, I pray God will grant one more miracle and send an angel their way. There is the boy who sleeps all day on Monday recovering from his weekend Meth addiction. There is the girl who does not feel safe at home. The boy who says, "I knew my father was not faithful to my mom, but how would you feel, Mr. Conrad, if you just found out you have a sister you never knew about?" Or there are the kids who cannot learn because they do not have the basic needs of food, shelter, or security. I pray God will send them a sign. I pray Chuck and others can be a shepherd to them- even a small messenger of love, a sign of redemption.

The Christmas tree is standing and tethered now to the wall. We remembered that we have had this problem before, and learned to anchor a Christmas tree because we can never seem to get a live tree straight in the stand. It is missing a few ornaments now. And some of them are glued back together. Other ornaments have a new chip like the little red jeep tree ornament my mother bought Chuck one Christmas as a joke because he always said he wanted a jeep. A smile of recognition crosses my face as I remember that...and God's grace sustains me once again. A quiet and simple joy replaces the sadness.

It is into this same fallen and broken world that God is born again in Jesus. God does not enter into a world that was picture perfect, as our Christmas tree had been before the crash. God sends a sign of peace and a sign of God's deep love for all of creation. God enters the world in the most human way to a couple living under oppression just doing their duty. They were doing what was required of them- going to Bethlehem to be counted for the census. Grace comes to us in ordinary ways among ordinary people.

As we remember this Advent, God sends an angel to Zechariah and Elizabeth faithfully and patiently waiting for a child and hoping for a savior, a messiah, all of their lives.

The angel Gabriel speaks to a teenage girl and says that she will be a vessel of change for her world. She will be a conduit of grace. This child will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace. All authority on heaven and on earth will be his. And Mary amazingly, says, "Let it be according to your word, AMEN." Let it be so.

And shepherds (who are probably not missing their feet, head, or their sheep) are watching over all the sheep in their care. Doing their very best not to lose any one of them, but also realizing that they can only do so much. Some sheep like to wander away from their masters. Others are bent on choosing to graze among the dangerous plants and weeds, not able to stick to the nourishing plants. Some are so afraid that they will follow the other sheep down paths that are harmful. But shepherds watch over their sheep, by day and by night, even to the point of exhaustion. They cannot keep all of them from harm, but they try their best. They do their best even with limited resources like too few classrooms, limited medical care, no jobs. Without enough social workers to protect children or enough mental health care treatment, shepherds keep watch over their sheep by day and by night. They work in the intensive care units of the hospitals and the deserts of dangerous places like Pakistan or Afghanistan, or in a refugee camp the occupied territory of modern Bethlehem in Palestine. They serve in shelters and soup kitchens. They serve here among us as teachers, officers, and givers of Christmas boxes. Shepherds watch over their sheep.

By God's grace, an angel announces to some random shepherds, "Do not be afraid, I bring you news of great joy which is for all people...not just some people...but all people. Today in the town of David a savior has been born to you; he is the messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you; you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." He will not be exactly what you expected. Oh yes, he is of the Davidic line born in Bethlehem. And he will be a Savior, but he is humble and vulnerable for he has taken on human form. He will eat as we do, wet his diapers as we do, grow and learn skills as we do-becoming a carpenter like his earthly father, Joseph. He will be a Shepherd King like David the shepherd boy who grows up, an unlikely candidate for the role of king of Israel.

But he will also suffer as we do knowing the pain of the human heart and the torment of the body. He will hurt and ache for us.

When people are violent or mean,
too negligent or too indulgent,
too greedy or underfed,
he will hurt, too.

He is steadfast love and mercy. He will not rule with might and force, but with justice and love, changing the world from the inside out and turning things upside down. The last shall be first, the hungry shall be filled with good things, and poor riff raff shepherds will be the first people to get to hear the good news that love has been born into the world. And they will be the first to see with their own eyes.

Isn't it interesting that the angels drop this news and then high tail it back to heaven. The shepherds are left there in the fields the first to hear the news. Luckily, they decide to go and see the baby Savior for themselves or we may not know about these things that have come to pass. God sends shepherds to greet the Shepherd King from the line of David who is savior and messiah, Christ the Lord. It is the job of the shepherds then to tell the good news of redemption.

As a youth I helped deliver our angel presents and food for families in my town much like the Christmas boxes we prepared yesterday. I remember as a youth walking into a home with a smoldering fire in an open fire place, 5 kids my age and younger, no adults, and a baby lying on the couch- no soft hay or blanket- only a smelly sofa for a bed. It was so cold. I looked down and saw the ground between the floorboards of the house. Then I realized that I went to school with one of the girls. It is into places like these that God's messengers go first. As a youth, this was my favorite way to serve each year at Christmas, because it was where I found Christmas most real.

It is into the poor countryside that that the God's angels reveal the good news first. And they did not go to the mayor, the local pastors, or the leaders of the community, the angels told the shepherds working third shift watching over the smelly sheep. The angels appeared to the lowly shepherds.

Maybe they were the only ones awake, or the only ones God thought would trust and follow, go and see.

Who knows why the angels speak to shepherds. Maybe because they knew about lambing season, and understood the process of birth. Or maybe God knew they were the ones who needed most to hear, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

At any rate, they hear the message first. And they go and see the baby- God's sign. Then they become the messengers, themselves, praising God. They went to see for themselves, and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Then they spread the word. People were amazed, the Bible says, at what the shepherds said to them.

BUT

What if the angels had not gone to shepherds?

What if the shepherds had not gone to see?
What if they had not spread the word?

No one would be amazed. No one would be praising God. No one would hear the good news of God's love.

But through "Gifts that Give" for instance here at Fort Hill church we participate in telling the story of salvation. We are trading over-consumption for compassion and teaching our children the story of God's love made flesh. Gifts of compassion:

feed bodies through Clemson Community Care and Heiffer,
bring healing through the free medical clinic,
bring Joy by caring for families in crisis and people of color who
have the opportunity for education.

Through the Gifts that give, you and I are literally saving lives and telling the story of salvation.

Don't you and I need to be shepherds watching over the sheep and spreading the word telling anyone who will listen, "God's love is born again into the dark corners, fragile places, and simple stables of our lives where broken things and broken people may find the light and love of Jesus the Christ child- love made flesh- God with us!"?

There is no excuse. You have heard the message of the angel now, too.

So shepherds grab your staffs, let's go to Bethlehem. We have sheep to tend and good news to share.