

Message Delivered at Christ Church
Christmas Eve, 2009
TEXT: Luke 2:1-20
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

The congregation remained seated for the reading of the Gospel.

We've heard this story countless times before. Every year at Christmas worship we read it; and then some of us read it at the dinner table or around the tree on Christmas Day; and there's a distinct possibility that for some of us, our first memory of this story is from Linus, reminding Charlie Brown what Christmas is all about. We've heard it...we've read it...more times than we remember. But even so, we read it again...just to be reminded of what it reminds us of.

It's Christmas Eve, everybody...Merry Christmas. And the word "Christmas" comes from a conflation of two words: "Christ's mass." If your background is Roman Catholic you know that the mass is the worship of the Church, but if your background is not Episcopalian you should know that some in the Anglican tradition also call what we do when we worship "the mass." It's something we have in common with our Roman Catholic sisters and brothers. But go a little deeper, and the word "mass" comes from the Latin word "missio," which can loosely be translated as "sending." It's the same Latin word from which we get "mission." So if this is the feast of Christmas--Christ's mass--then that means this is the feast of Christ's sending.

It's a busy story, when you look at it closely. There's lots of movement. It begins with a pregnant Mary and Joseph making the trek from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's a two or three day journey, so we really do hope that Mary rides a donkey as all the Christmas cards have it. They don't go to Bethlehem, of course, because they want to. They go because they're told to; they go because they must. They must because Caesar has told them they must. But that's the proximate cause. The ultimate cause is that they must because the only place the Savior can be born is Bethlehem. It's David's City, and it's where the Messiah will come from. They travel not because it is easy or convenient, but because it's the role they must play for the Word of God to be fulfilled; it's what Jesus asks of them. Sometimes, for Christ's sake, you gotta do what you gotta do; and you gotta go where you gotta go.

And then, the angels move. An angel—who gets joined by other angels—comes down from heaven and trumpets the arrival of the Savior, the Messiah, and the Lord...not to the Pharisee hunched over the scriptures; and not to the priest in the Temple getting ready to make the sacrifice; and not to Caesar, in his silk sheets...but to a ratty bunch of shepherds. But go, of course, is what angels do. They're messengers—that's what the word "angel" means--and messengers go where they're told to go.

When you think "shepherd," don't think pretty. Remember that shepherds smell like sheep. You know that television show "Dirty Jobs?" If that show were on 2000 years ago, they'd do a segment on shepherding. Being a shepherd is a 24/7 kind of responsibility...no matter what the important people say, you don't take the Sabbath off when you're a shepherd; you eat what you can, even if it's unclean; you do whatever you need to do to keep the sheep safe, and have no patience for any niceties that would cause any of your charges to become lost. Shepherds live on the periphery, do work no one else wants to, and are mostly invisible to folks who reside in the center. Should we ever become self-satisfied in our piety, or overly righteous

in our religiosity, or complacent in our comfort, may our hearts grow in mercy. For the angels did not come to the pious, the righteous, or the comfortable.

Now...can we do a little Christmas Eve Bible?

There are code words in this story that we've heard so often that we don't even realize they're code words. Here's what I mean...

...there's a code in what the angel says to the shepherds. When the angel declares that he is bringing "good news," he's using a technical term with a specific meaning. A "Good News," in Greek a "euangelion," was a kind of pronouncement reserved for the Emperor. It was a governmental press release, carrying all the authority of the Emperor. When the Emperor won a battle, or got married, a "Good News" would be proclaimed. So it's a political word that the angel appropriates to speak of Jesus' coming. It's the angel's way of saying "you've always known this power over here...Caesar's power of force, and injustice, and oppression. Well, fear not, there's a new king, and he rules the world with truth and grace.

And all the talk about the manger is a code, also. We don't know whether it was a cave or a stable. The story doesn't say. But three times, the manger gets mentioned. That's because 700 years before Jesus, the prophet Isaiah bemoaned that though a donkey recognizes its own manger, Israel seems unable to recognize their God. So it's more than an engaging little detail that the baby rests in a manger and that the shepherds show up to adore him. Sometimes, getting up and showing up really does matter.

So that's what they do. The movement begins again, and the shepherds get up and go. And they don't meander; they don't sache; they don't stroll...they race, the way you got to race when you can't get somewhere fast enough.

When they get there, like the innocents they are, they don't know enough to keep quiet. Did you notice they're the only human beings to speak in this story? And they just can't stop. First, they say "Let's go," and then they just start jabbering to anybody who will listen. Because when something happens that transforms your life, you just can't keep quiet. When the one you've been waiting for finally arrives, when our existence is finally given meaning, and the puzzle pieces of the universe begin to fall into place...I'm not sure you can keep all that to a whisper. The mother of Jesus—she's quiet, and ponders; that's the privilege of mothers—but everybody else...the angels, and the shepherds, and the crowd that apparently is giving this new family no rest...they just got to go and tell about it...

So while it is we wrap this story in a peaceful pastorella, really there's a lot of huffing and puffing going on. Everybody's moving all over the place.

So it kind of makes you wonder...if Christmas is the feast of Christ's sending, is it Christ who is being sent? Or is it Christ who's doing the sending?

Yes...

I want to tell you something this evening...Unto us a child is born; unto us a Savior is given. What separates us from God is overcome, not through our own doing, but through God's doing. It all happens through the mercy of God. "What do I need to do to get to God?" people sometimes ask. Well, the beginning of the answer is to recognize that God has already come to us. The Savior has been sent.

That's the great miracle of this night...and "miracle" is too weak a word. The God of all that is; who started everything; the author of all creation...is with us—you and me—completely; became human; took on flesh; became one of us to the point of starting life the same way we do...dependent, defenseless, covered in blood, and gasping for that first breath...all because of the greatness of God's love.

All those things we carry so deep in our souls tonight...the regrets; and the missed opportunities; and the things in our past we can't let go of and those things in the future that make us afraid; the unsettledness that we hope more stuff, or more work, or more something will anesthetize us from; that feeling that what's just around the corner will make everything right, and the frustration that it never seems to come around the corner; the things that keep us in darkness, and keep us stuck, and make it hard to get up and go; the hopes and fears of all the years, as it says in the old hymn...because of all those things, and more--and just because--Emmanuel is sent and Jesus is born. And what he's doing is drawing us to that manger...

...and then sending us out...not according to our own devices, but according to his.

There's been something peculiar about this period before Christmas this year...and maybe, in your own way, you've had something similar happen to you. But I don't think I have ever—in almost twenty years of ordained ministry—gotten as many calls for financial assistance as I've gotten this past week. And it's kind of been the same for Hillary. I don't know any of these persons who've called; they aren't members of Christ Church; they don't live nearby; I don't know how they got our number, they just did; they pop into life for a moment, and then pop out. But sometimes, God is persistent, and keeps knocking, and keeps the phones ringing to reveal that the strangers who come our way and ask of us our best are really angels with a lesson to teach about the depth of the meaning of Christmas...that the fullness of this celebration is not simply Christ being sent to us, but us being sent by Christ to one another

For a while, the shepherds stay at the manger. And for a while, so do we. Lord knows we need all the hope, and joy, and peace, and love we find there. But then we get on with being Christs to one another because we want to join the party, and don't want to become the only ones in this story who stand still. Living the fullness of the feast means allowing Christ's being sent to us to be transformed into Christ sending us unto others. That's the full story of Christmas. Even, I would suggest, more literally that we might suspect, that's what "Christmas" means.

Ask any mom and dad with a newborn, and they'll tell you who the most powerful person in the household is...and it ain't the momma or the poppa. Babies are demanding, and I guess this one is no different. Linger at the manger for a bit. It's a good place to be. We all need to be there, more than once. But notice that no one in the story except Mary and Joseph get to stay there. The rest have to get on with what God has in store for them next.

The baby will grow up, and ask of us everything, though it won't be more than we're capable of. If we're already a follower of Christ we know that. If we're not—if for the first time ever we've dared to enter a service of worship--take heart...there are many meaningless things in life—many things that trivialize our personhood and occupy our time--but giving our lives to Jesus, no matter how many times we have to do it, isn't one of them.

So it's Christmas Eve...this luxurious night of light and singing and feasting. The place looks good, doesn't it... Just the way it's supposed to. May it be for each of us a blessed celebration of Christ's sending...filled with more joy, and peace, and hope, and love, and purpose, and excitement than we'd dare ever to hope for.

And if you're wondering...here's why I invited us to stay seated during the gospel reading: to gather our strength. This story is our story. And soon enough, Jesus will have us on the move again. For if it is true that the Savior has been sent—and it is—it is also true this Savior does some sending.