

**The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
East Liberty Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2011 (Christmas Eve, 11:00 pm service)
Luke 2:8-20
“The Distinctive Voice of Christmas”**

Listen. (Silence) We begin with silence, which is itself a gift from God. Sanity, peace, even life itself are all dependent on silence. (Pause) Into the silence, words will now be spoken. Different words from that which has set your eardrums vibrating most of this Christmas season. You will now hear words of scripture and their distinctive voice for Christmas. It's a gift for you. Listen.

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

What makes these words distinctive? Part of it comes from their subject matter: shepherds in fields, angels in the sky, a child, a manger, a young mother pondering it all in her heart. Compare that subject matter to some of the things Patrice, Heather and I just read aloud (click Readings bookmark on left or scroll down) from macys.com and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. For the record, the Christmas holiday television specials this year began on October 22 with the airing of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. And since that date, you could watch shows featuring Rudolph, Santa Claus, and Frosty, or choose to celebrate the season by watching on HGTV *Celebrity Holiday Homes*; on TLC, *Invasion of the Christmas Lights*; on Bravo, *The Real Housewives of New Jersey: Twas the Fight Before Christmas*.

Kim Kardashian, Kris Kringle or the Christ Child: the gospel's subject matter is one thing that makes it distinctive. Also, its pacing sets it apart. Turn on the local news station and you'll get pounded by buzz words like "live and late-breaking." Soon they'll count down all the year's Top Stories: from Kate and William's Royal Wedding, to Occupy Wall Street; Casey Anthony, Colonel Qadhafi, Japan's tsunami, Joplin's storm; Gabrielle Giffords, Newt Gingrich, Osama, Obama, and on and on, in a relentless rap of all the latest news.

By contrast, Luke's Christmas story starts slowly. It describes fields where shepherds watched their flock by night. And even though an angel appeared to them, the first words spoken were "Be not afraid." After a divine pronouncement was made, quiet and darkness descended again on the land. There was an occasional sheep bleat or rustle in the grass as the shepherds collected their thoughts. Then they made their way into the town of Bethlehem, where they found the place in which Mary and Joseph were staying. There the shepherds paused again, to worship, to see the child, to tell in whispered voices what the angels had said to them, and to let it all sink in.

The subject matter, the pacing, and the simplicity of the gospel story make it so distinctive. Liz Taylor died earlier this year. Some of her jewels were recently auctioned off for over \$132 million dollars. Richard Burton gave her rings as a reward for beating him in a ping pong game, and gave an \$11 million pearl necklace once owned by Spanish kings and queens, as a mere bauble for Liz's 37 birthday. By contrast, Luke tells us about a child wrapped in bands of cloth, plain, rough, simple clothes; a child lying in the straw of an animal's feed trough. And yet I am fairly sure that, generations from now, we'll still be hearing about Luke's glad tidings while the tales of Liz's gaudy diamonds fade from memory.

There is something in the Christmas story that is heavier, weightier than the normal news that fills our ears and clutters our minds. It is no accident that the merchants of the Internet describe their products as residing in the "cloud," that nebulous space above our heads where data is stored and invisible waves carry news and nonsense to our computers, phones and cable TV sets. To walk with our head in the clouds now means that we spend our days distracted by the latest gossip, news, and trivialities. To come to earth suddenly means we move away from the cloud(s) and discover what has real substance, real meaning for our lives.

That's the secret and the distinctive power of Christmas. Sure, there are angel songs in the night-sky over Bethlehem and voices singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven." But mostly Christmas is about coming down to earth, in every sense of that phrase's meaning. Think about the gospel words and how they sink into us, pull us down, and ground us on something that is timeless and weighty and rock-solid. The story has simple, earthy witnesses: Shepherds in a field; a husband choosing to trust and stick by his young wife; a young girl, who told an angel, "Let it be according to your word." There is a wonderful child born, whose

birth fills us with wonder and leads us to ponder him in our hearts. And there's a time of glory and praise for something more real than all other reality that has come into our midst.

Listen. Hold on to the words of this Christmas story: a birth, shepherds and wise men bowing down on bended knees. A child called Emmanuel, God with us. A rabbi called the Light of the World. A Redeemer who offers us the Bread of Life. A Lamb sacrificed on a cross. A Savior who emerged from a borrowed tomb. A Risen Lord who goes ahead of us so that where He is we too shall be. Listen. This is the Word, the distinctive Words, of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

AMEN

Readings from Revs. Randy Bush, Patrice Fowler-Searcy, and Heather Schoenewolf

Christmas Eve 2011: Shared Readings

Randy: For a season defined by “Silent Night”, there is certainly a lot of noise during the Christmas holidays. Radio stations and piped-in store music playing Christmas carols; newspaper advertisements and TV commercials insisting that now is the time to buy, buy, buy; and yet somehow, through all this white noise and consumer static we are supposed to hear the story of the birth of Christ. To hear the good news of our faith at Christmastime requires us to literally train our ears and listen differently. If you listen with your heart and your soul, you can hear the depth and wonder found in the words of scripture. Concentrate now as we share some contrasting examples of this art of spiritual listening.

Heather: The Last One Day Sale Before Christmas – Shop 7AM to Midnight! Wow! \$10 off your purchase of \$25 or more.

Randy: Excludes: Everyday values, specials, superbuys, furniture, mattresses, floor coverings, rugs, electrics/electronics, cosmetics/fragrances, gift cards, jewelry trunk shows, previous purchases, special orders, selected licensed depts., special purchases, and services. Cannot be combined with any savings pass/coupon, extra discount or credit offer. Purchase must be \$25 or more, exclusive of tax and delivery fees. Limit one per customer. (macys.com)

Patrice: Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her

penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. [For the Lord] will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep. (Isaiah 40:1-2,11)

Heather: Christmas cards do two things for people: they convey a merry message appropriate for the season *and* they add a creative decorative element to any home. Christmas cards not only convey the attitude and style of the sender but also personalizes the season for the receiver.

Patrice: That is why professionally printed Christmas cards are the preferred choice and represent a better value in today's marketplace. Through an online interface that allows for creative control over the design and message of a card, the buyer can completely proof the card before placing an order at Holiday Card Website.com (Christmas Newswire)

Randy: But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace. (Micah 5:2,4-5)

Patrice: All those Who girls and boys will awake bright and early; and they'll shriek squeaks and squeals, racing round on their wheels. They'll dance with jing-tinglers tied onto their heels. They'll blow their flew-floobers and bang their ta-tinkers; they'll blow their who-whoobers and bang their gar-ginkers.

Randy: And they'll play noisy games like zoo-zither-car-zay, a roller-skate type of lacrosse and croquet. And then they'll make ear-splitting noises de-luxe on their great big electro-who-cardio-snux. Then the Whos young and old will sit down to a feast, and they'll feast, feast, feast on Who pudding and rare Who roast beast. (The Grinch Who Stole Christmas)

Heather: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said,

Patrice: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Heather: All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

Randy: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took Mary as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son, and he named him Jesus. (Matthew 1:18-25)
Those who have ears to hear, let them hear. Amen.