

Angels and Shepherds

Luke 2: 8-20

Matthew 25:31-40

Jan 1, 2023

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Luke 2: 8-20

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.

Matthew 25:31-40

‘When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, and he will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. Then the king will say to those at his right hand, “Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.” Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?” And the king will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.” Then he will say to those at his left hand, “You that are accursed, depart from me into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.” Then they also will answer, “Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.” And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.’

The gifts have all been opened, the Legos are in various stages of being built, the torn wrapping paper and empty box towers have been cleaned up, the bells have been jingled, the poinsettias are beginning to droop, the tree will soon be taken down—if not already done, the last of the cookie crumbs are out of the carpet and the Christmas dinner leftovers are out of the refrigerator. In all that the Christmas season is—its joys and surprises—its challenges and complications- it's possible as we flip the calendar to a new year, perhaps with a collective sigh, to say that Christmas is over.

But it's not. The secular parts of Christmas are indeed behind us once again, but the true work of Christmas is not over.

Today is the 8th day of the 12 days of Christmas as we move towards Epiphany, towards the arrival of the Magi and their 3 royal gifts, towards the baptism of Jesus by his cousin John the Baptist. Yet even when Epiphany has come and gone the work of Christmas will not be over, and in many ways it will be just beginning.

The work of Christmas is what happens when the angels have stopped their joyful singing, when the bright Bethlehem star no longer shines, when the leaders are back home to govern, when the flocks and herds need tending, when Jesus is no longer lying in a manger, when we are led and inspired by God's image within, by our calling and purpose, by our faith expressed in words and the actions of our minds, hearts, hands and feet to bring about the world as God sees it, to bring about the world that Jesus showed us how to work for and towards in our welcoming, our advocacy, our care and our compassion.

Christmas comes again and again, Christ is born anew again and again, to remind us, to re-center us, to recall us, to the work we are to do as we live out our baptism promises throughout our lives. Christ, Christmas, has already come as we live in the 'not yet' of the gospel work of Christmas yet to be done. The work of Christmas begins by caring about the things Jesus cared about, and then acting on them in our own Spirit-led way bit by bit.

This is what pastor, author, civil rights leader, activist and mystic Howard Thurman described in his poem "The Work of Christmas."ⁱ

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and the princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers,
To make music in the heart.

Howard Thurman, the grandson of slaves, became a voice for peace, love, nonviolence, and justice, and a mentor to the Civil Right Movement. His passion was in part tied to the goodwill that happens during Christmastime, as the light that breaks forth now into the darkness of the world, is a world that needs God's peace and justice every single day of the year.

Bruce Epperly, in his book, *The Work of Christmas: The 12 Days of Christmas with Howard Thurman*ⁱⁱ, wrote that “Thurman knew that Christmas always begins in darkness – the darkness of the womb, the darkness of human violence and oppression, the darkness of hopelessness. In Christmas, Thurman reminds us, a light shines even in the darkness, and this light will never be defeated. God’s light streams into the most unexpected places – a stable, among foreign magi from another religious tradition, and in the varieties of human culture and ethnicity. Just a little light can transform the darkness and help us anxious pilgrims find our way.”

Us anxious pilgrims are not unlike the shepherds as we too hear the angels’ songs of Christmas that the good news is for all of us, no matter who we are. If we feel unsure, overwhelmed- terrified even—we are certainly in good company. We are encouraged to not be afraid, intimidated, of what we have been created and called to do, as we do not do it alone, nor do we need to do it all. The shepherds heard the angelic good news of great joy and they shared it. The shepherds heard the angelic messengers good news of Jesus, and they immediately went in search of him, showing us how to respond and react.

“Just a little light can transform the darkness and help us anxious pilgrims find our way.”

‘This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine,’ is a gospel song many of us know from childhood, and that is what our work of Christmas is—what we can do with our little light as it shines on and on.

When you invite someone to come to church with you, when you give guidance to someone in need, when you take the time to sit with someone confused by the grasp of dementia, you help to find the lost.

When you donate blood, when you offer comfort to someone who is grieving, when you volunteer with Family Promise to ease the burdens of homelessness, you help to heal the broken.

When you bring food donations on Communion Sunday, support the food pantry or End 68 Hours of Hunger, you help to feed the hungry.

When you advocate for the wrongly incarcerated, or for those trapped in abusive relationships, or for those held captive by addiction, you release the prisoner.

When you learn about another person’s culture in order to have a better relationship with them, when you support organizations that seek to meet the extraordinary needs of 3rd world countries, you are helping to rebuild the nations.

When you offer a listening ear and a gentle spirit to those in conflict, you are bringing peace among brothers and sisters.

When you offer prayers for others, when you take time to truly be with someone, when you show care and compassion, you make music in the heart.

Listen for the angels, respond as the eager shepherds, and let your light shine through the work of Christmas. Amen.

ⁱ Thurman, Howard, *The Moods of Christmas*, 1973

ⁱⁱ Epperly, Bruce, *The Work of Christmas: the 12 Days of Christmas with Howard Thurman*, 2017