

“The Thrill of Hope”

Luke 2

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There is something about this night. Throughout the centuries people have tried to capture what that “something” is through the carols and stories that have become part of our Christmas celebrations. Stories that illuminate for us the difference that that first Christmas night has made for all humanity. Stories of people forgetting the meaning of Christmas...like Scrooge...and the Grinch...and stories of people caught in the world’s troubles and losing the hope of Christmas, like George in “It’s A Wonderful Life.” To Charlie Brown’s exasperated cry, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about,” to which Linus replies confidently, by quoting the angel’s visitation to the Shepherds from the Gospel of Luke that we just read. Each year in our own ways we try to remember, we try to receive anew the true gifts of this night...which is one reason we come here in spite of questionable weather including in our own celebrations, worship of the newborn king!

Tonight we’ve come from different places and not just geographically. Some of us have had a good year; many of us have had a hard year. Because of the economy, some of our Christmas celebrations will be altered and through choices and sacrifice some may look much the same. Some of us are regular church goers ~ some are not. Some of us are living with a crisis in our families, others of us are not. Some of us are surrounded by family; some of us are alone this night. Some of us have visions of peace and justice for all dancing with possibilities in our heads; others of us are struggling to get from point A to point B. Whatever our differences, we’ve come to this same place, drawn by the warmth and wonder of this night, by its mystery and majesty just like those on that first Christmas eve.

On that first Christmas night, drawn to the stable was Joseph. As a man he was a person of power in the first century. Joseph had the option to destroy his pregnant fiancé but obeying divine intervention he did not. Mary, a faithful young woman, by culture was property of her husband, pondering the miracle of her pregnancy and the promises of the angel’s proclamation about her newborn Son. The overwhelmed shepherds whom we hail as poor...but by virtue of having flocks were not the poorest of the poor. They were not the hired hands, nor were they homeless people in the market place. And as it is reasonable to assume, they weren’t the only shepherds in fields that night...but for whatever reasons...the angel appeared to them with the good news of great joy for all people and sent them to find the babe in manger. The sheep assumedly came along for the walk...to peer in the stable door. The curious innkeeper who may have peeked out from his house repeatedly wondering “what’s going on in my stable?” And wise ones, astrologers, educated people, foreigners, compiling the information they had, left their homes and began a year or more journey...following a star...that led to the Child, who changed the world!

All came just like we’ve come, drawn, faithful, overwhelmed, curious or some cases just going about our business like we do every Christmas eve...to peer in again through the Scripture door at the babe in manger. A young woman, fourteen years old, in our confirmation class “got this” she said, “I think we all have different reasons for finding the truth and we all find it in different

ways but whether know it or not, I think we all want to find it.” We all want to find it and when we do, from our different places, we bring different gifts. Last Monday at our faith journaling class here at Covenant, we wrote on what gifts we bring to Jesus this year. One woman wrote; “Dear Jesus, I’ve been out shopping for a few things you’ll need. I’m the practical type so I hope you will appreciate the utility of these gifts. A LED headlamp, usually it would be a flashlight but the headlamp will let the shepherds and your parents see better in that dark manger. Even that amazing star in the sky will go behind clouds. LEDs are in this year as they are green friendly and will help preserve God’s creation. Also, the latest version of iPod nano filled with a whole variety of music. You’ll be impressed with how people express themselves through music and how we are learning from other cultures. A snuggie. It’s quite cold in the mountains outside of Bethlehem. Mary will need to stay warm so she can nurse you. You can use the snuggie later to give others warmth. A toothbrush with anti-plague toothpaste. I know you don’t have teeth yet and dentists aren’t exactly at every corner but you have a responsibility to keep yourself healthy and presentable as you minister to the people. You’ll need a good cell phone plan—one with the family share plan. I’m sure you can talk Verizon into considering the disciples part of God’s family. I’ve turned on unlimited texting for you as it may be more convenient when you’re in noisy market places. A digital camera will help you keep everyone up to date as you travel. Quick uploading to Yahoo will let your kingdom see how others live. You’ll also need the uplifting spirit of a child smiling or a community celebrating. People can follow you on Facebook—you’ll need to pay attention to that new family designation, yours’ might get pretty large. A GPS unit with turn by turn instructions...you’re going to cover lots of territory and your presence will be in hot demand. The quicker you can travel the more people will hear your word. And a journal. You will be experiencing some heady stuff. You will feel alone and betrayed. You will feel joy that you need to capture. You will experience great sorrow that rips at your heart. A journal is a safe place for you to be vulnerable and yet helpful. And you can dialog with God anytime you want...” Are these gifts of our age any less valuable to Jesus than the wise ones gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh? These gifts reflect our time and place...which is where Jesus, the babe born in Bethlehem, Emmanuel, God with us...meets us.

So from our different places, with our different gifts, we come. What gifts are you bringing tonight...tangible gifts like gold, frankincense and myrrh, LED headlamps, a GPS, and a cell phone may not be practical but what about obedience like Joseph, faithfulness like Mary, sacred curiosity like the innkeeper, singing glory like the angels or wonder like the shepherds. Or perhaps it’s doubt or discouragement, fear or frustration, or a relationship that needs healing, a problem that needs solving, or prayers for peace on earth good will toward all. Each and every gift we bring honors the newborn king whom God sent into the world, out of love, for the world.

And having brought our gifts we all can receive one on this Holy Night...the carol the choir sang before the sermon captured it for us...it’s the thrill of hope! Hope for healing. Hope for wholeness. Hope for peace. Hope for justice! Hope for love! Hope for joy! This thrills us and fills us...even if we can receive them for only for one night...the possibilities and the promises of the Babe born in Bethlehem ~ born in us anew...born for the world anew... So we come ...because we know there is “something” about this night. We may not know what Christmas is all about...but what we do know draws us to worship, singing with the angel’s “glory, glory to the new born king!”