**“The Journey to Bethlehem”**

A sermon preached by The Rev. Rachel Wildman

Christmas Eve, 2016

*"Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people”*

*Please be seated.*

The story of Luke’s Gospel seems to hit especially close to home for me this year. Although the words of the story have not changed since I heard them last, the images they evoke are jarringly more present to me than in years past. I hear *“A decree went out that all should be registered,”* and I can’t help but see my friend Unab, a devout Muslim and gifted pediatrician, now far more fearful in going about her life than just two months ago… I hear “*because there was no room for them at the inn*,” and I see that painful image of the Syrian boy, my own daughter’s age, drowned on his way to the inn. If he had made it here to this country, he may very likely have been told there was no room. And, as I imagine the shepherds, gripped in terror, my own fear swells. What will all the “logical” folks I surround myself with think of me if I accept the invitation, as the shepherds did, to believe that God, incarnate, can actually be found somehwere in the middle of all of this fear and suffering?

In the Old Testament, shepherding was a revered vocation. One of many people’s favorite psalms—Psalm 23—begins by naming The Lord as our Shepherd. However, by Jesus’ time, shepherding had fallen way down the social ladder. Israelites were no longer nomadic and they now saw the nomadic shepherds as untrustworthy…shifty, as one commentator described them. Some rabbis banned sheep-herding, and as one historian of the time wrote, “To buy wool, milk or a kid from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property.”

It is to these seemingly shifty folks, around the community but not within it, that the angel comes. The angel comes to these—not to the rich, not to the learned, not to the religious leadership… to these shepherds, out wandering in the fields. The angel comes not only with the news of God’s birth into humanity, but with a sign so that they will know when they have found him—the implication? That these shepherds should believe this radically unlikely news so much so as to venture into town, the very locus of the community’s hatred and mistrust of them. The glory of the Lord was the first component of this interaction to frighten them, but I imagine that the call the Lord makes through it, was just as frightening.

And yet, the shepherds go.

“*Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you Good News of great joy for ALL people*.”

If the shepherds can overcome their fear, Good News of great joy will be at the end, not only for others, but FOR THEM…despised by their culture, and perhaps now, even by themselves. They will spread this Good News of great joy to the awe and wonder of all who hear it—this Good News of great joy will be their entry from alienation back into community….just as Jesus, the Good News, was for so many across his short ministry.

The journey to Bethlehem, as one commentator calls it, is to go into those risky parts of our lives where we are wandering... alone…alienated…maybe even those parts where we are despised, where we are untrustworthy…where we have let others…the world…ourselves, down, but where Christ *is* waiting to make himself known to us. We journey to Bethlehem so that we might come out full of such joy that we can do nothing else but proclaim its awe, restoring our connectedness…our belonging to all the world around us.

“*Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you Good News of great joy for ALL people*.”

To live our lives in love, rather than in fear, is not only to find the Christ child for ourselves, but to proclaim his radical saving love to all those we encounter.

At this moment in time, we, as a country, have a unique opportunity to take this transforming journey to Bethlehem. We have the opportunity to respond not in fear, not in ways that increase our alienation, but in that risky love which is the only path to the Christ child. We have the opportunity to draw a net of relationships that will catch not only ourselves and our families, but ALL people. How will we respond to those seeking asylum in our borders? To those calling for physical safety, equality, and the freedom to be fully themselves? To each animal and plant groaning in distress? Do we here in this sanctuary, Christ’s own disciples, have the courage to believe the promise of the angel that Good News of great joy for ALL people is possible when we approach these questions with love rather than fear?

Not only do we have this opportunity right now in our nation’s history, but each of us as individuals, has the opportunity at EVERY moment to accept the angel’s call and to journey to Bethlehem.

I’ve been listening to an audiobook these past weeks called “Furiosuly Happy,” by a woman named Jenny Lawson. Jenny is a writer, along the lines of Anne Lamott and others, who shares the truth of her own life to immense resonance with her readers. In this book, her second, she shares her experiences as a mentally ill person. Jenny suffers from both severe depression and anxiety, and with humor, yet such authenticity, she describes the alientation that those of us with anxiety, or depression, or a host of other mental illnesses may feel.

Despite the plethora of therapists and medications available, talking about mental illness, never mind claiming it publically as one’s own truth, remains taboo. Yet Jenny, who suffers from phobias that make it difficult for her to leave the house and experiences panic in crowded areas, has not only written about her exile in the fields of mental illness, but has ventured out to mobbed book signings to physically greet those who have met the Good News of great joy in her writing.

She has taken the journey to Bethlehem, setting aside the alienating fear that is so exacerbated by her anxiety and depression, to love…in her case, to love herself enough to publically proclaim her authentic truth and the pain that it invites. It is through even this self-love, that she has found the Christ child and the awe and wonder which surround him, and has been moved, just as the shepherds were, to proclaim it—inviting her and all those who have found themselves in her writing into a powerful, divine, even, sense of belonging.

One reader tells of her own journey to Bethlehem, prompted by her witnessing of Jenny’s. A severe agoraphobic—one who fears crowds—she went to Jenny’s book signing but had to find respite under a table…where Jenny found her, and signed her book. Jenny’s story and those of her readers is the story of joy and belonging promised each of us when we, too, journey to Bethlehem.

“*Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you Good News of great joy for ALL people*.”

For me, this year, this is the Christmas story—to respond not out of fear, but out of love, out of curiosity, out of awe.

We as communities and countries, and we as individuals, discover the Christ child, and are the window to his discovery for many, many others in *every single moment* that we successfully do this.

The call of the angel, and the gift of the incarnate God who awaits us, is to come out of the diminishing isolation of our fear and shame, and to come fully alive in the rich and sacred relationships which result.

“*Do not be afraid, for see, I am bringing you Good News of great joy for ALL people*.”

The angel has spoken again this very night--the Christ child *is* born anew. May we each have the courage to embrace the radical, irrational call he brings, to our own joyous belonging and to that of the whole world. AMEN.