

“Just The Truth”

*A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Stephen R. Silver at
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Luke 2:8-16

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 Saviour, 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 favours!’*

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.

What’s a preacher supposed to do with a narrative that everybody knows? What can I say that is new about this story? I know you’re probably not interested in the latest historical-critical insights, nor in the perspectives offered by some niche theologians. I doubt, too, that you want to hear about a theological faceoff between mainliners and evangelicals, or Protestants and Catholics, concerning the reliability of the infancy narratives.

No, you want something else I suspect, something worthy of Christmas Eve, something new. Well, I could always take the easy route, and just make something up. As we sadly know all too well, that course seems to have helped far too many people seeking power, celebrity, or wealth to get ahead in life.

I could tell you that there were aliens in Bethlehem; that dinosaurs – peaceable ones that wouldn’t eat the other livestock – lived in the manger; that ninjas lurked in the shadows. Somehow I might find a way to include

the Avengers or Baby Yoda in the story, or for people with a different reference point, Buck Rogers or John Wayne.

Something, anything, to get your attention. But why? Why do this, any of this? Why would this be necessary? Because the Lukan account is too familiar, too hum drum, to boring? Really? *Really?*

Think about what happens here: real, live angels appear in the sky to share a divine announcement with a band of shepherds. Does that need special effects to astound you, a CGI rendering to make it more “real”?

Focus, not on the visuals, but on the meaning of this incredible event: a word from God, was delivered directly to a bunch of rough, dirty men who work with sheep and were thus unclean, and that word came by way of heavenly messengers, who were not the adorable, baby-cheeked *putti* or cherubim that figure in Renaissance art or adorn Hallmark greeting cards, but awful, magnificent, beings who had to introduce themselves by saying “Be not afraid!” lest their audience flee in terror.

These angels had come to the humblest of men – heaven met earth, the high and the low mingled – for the sharing of amazing, life-changing news: the messiah, the savior is born.

Oh, sure, Augustus Caesar made such claims for himself. Master of the world, ‘son of god’. I’ll admit, Octavian had done well for himself and for Rome. He’d ended the Civil War that for so long had torn apart the Republic and plunged the Mediterranean world into chaos. It was said that he found a city of brick and, when he had died, left one of marble.

But we know that he was only ‘son of god’ because he’d conveniently declared his adoptive father, Julius Caesar, a deity. We know that one of his successors saw a large portion of the putative Eternal City consumed in a terrible conflagration. And while Caesar may have brought political stability, his peace was that of the *Pax Romana*, enforced by the legions at the point of a sword.

The world needed something different, and still does. It was at that moment that God entered into our reality, offering a rejoinder in the form of a baby

boy. The imperial palace on the Palatine Hill was countered by the lowly trough in the manger; Rome, supposed 'caput mundi', head of the world, was answered by the frontier town of Bethlehem, the city of David. These distinctions are key. They highlight the contrasts that came into focus on that long ago night. Augustus was technically a patrician, yes, but he was essentially a self-made man who claimed to be royalty. Jesus was descended not only from a king who had ruled in Israel centuries before – but was the very son of the King of the Universe.

Jesus' kingship matters not because of his royal lineage but because of the kind of king he was – and is. The nature of his rule can be found in that announcement to the shepherds. The angels came not to the Senate in Rome, nor the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, nor to military leaders at the heads of armies; not to the so-called important people or A-Listers, but to the lowliest of the low, to those who needed Jesus and not only needed but deserved to be told that God loved them, that God had chosen them. Think about that: God himself so loved the shepherds that he reached out to them. God came to them. He loved the world so much that he came us. That was and is big news! No wonder those men left the fields to spread the announcement, to share their excitement!

And what of the peace that God promised? Did not the Romans bring peace? Or was it merely pacification, the imposition of calm through the force of arms. That is not true peace, that is not the kind of peace of which the prophet Isaiah wrote in those famous words of Scripture are boldly inscribed on a wall in the Ralph Bunche Peace Park across from the entrance to the United Nations in New York:

He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isaiah 2:4).

It is one of history's great ironies that a sculpture depicting this scene was given to the UN in 1957 by the Soviet Union, a state that maintained its power through might and fear. Today, of course the USSR is gone, but the artwork remains. More important, what that sculpture symbolizes – true peace - remains.

Later in our service we will sing of ‘peace on earth’ but one that is not of this world yet is necessary for it. A peace of God that we long for, that we yearn for, the peace that will not be brought by military power or surrender to those wielding brute force, but a peace that will enable each and all of us to live our lives as Children of God without fears of deprivation or abuse or oppression, or as the prophet Micah put it so eloquently 2,800 years ago,

... they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of hosts has spoken (Micah 4:4).

It’s a lovely image, it’s a vision of what God wants for us, indeed intends for us. It’s the realization of a promise that was fulfilled when the infant Jesus was born in Bethlehem on that long-ago night.

Is this wild enough, fantastic enough for you? When you take a few moments to really sit with this story, to imagine the characters, to hear the echoes of commitments made and fulfilled, is this story enough for you, for me?

No, there are no aliens to be added to this story. No dinosaurs or ninjas, either. But there is something more incredible: the truth, God’s truth. His truth overcomes the lies of this world. The truth is that Jesus was born two millennia ago. God did come into the world. We are saved. And best of all, the story did not end with our Lord’s birth, but began – and still continues.

Merry Christmas!