

Tom Coop
Luke 2:1-20
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Don't You Feel Like Dancin'?

I don't know about you, but to me, the Christmas story never gets old. Kind of like Christmas pageants.

Everybody has their own favorite Christmas pageant story – one of mine is the one about this one young boy, about twelve, named Dennis.

Dennis was looking forward to his church's annual Christmas pageant, because he was finally becoming the right age to play Joseph.

He had been playing a donkey or a sheep or some other animal for years, and he thought it was about time he got a speaking part.

Well, the time for rehearsals came around, and sure enough, Dennis got a speaking part, but as the Innkeeper, not as Joseph.

Gotta tell ya, Dennis was very disappointed because he really had his heart set on playing Joseph. Soooo, he came up with a plan to get even.

Pageant night arrives. Everything goes as rehearsed until Mary and Joseph make their entrance into Bethlehem, looking for lodging.

They encounter the innkeeper, played by Dennis, and Joseph asks if there is room for them at his inn.

Dennis, who has not forgotten his disappointment at not being picked to play Joseph, replies:

“Sure, there’s room for you. Come on in!”

Ah, but the little girl playing Mary, remembering full well how the story is supposed to go, pronounces:

“Let’s keep looking, Joseph. This place is a dump!”

Don’t you just love it? ☺

And we come here tonight to hear the Christmas story told one more time.

We come, because Christmas wouldn’t be complete without the singing of Christmas carols, seeing old friends, hearing me preach...

(Okay, maybe that’s not exactly why you all came tonight).

And, then ending our time together by gathering in the courtyard, lighting our candles in memory of the Christ child, and singing *Silent Night* – rain or no rain!

As you listened to the Christmas story told through the words of Luke, did you notice that the story is very ordinary ... until ... until the angels arrive?

But, when the angels enter, everything changes. The shepherds are terrified. All that light, all that glory. And the presence of something incredible.

The first thing out of the angel’s mouth is, “Do not be afraid.”

He doesn't launch into any learned theological discourse, no recitation of the Ten Commandments, no complicated statements of doctrine.

No, there is nothing "churchy" about it.

What he tells the shepherds (and I'm paraphrasing here):

"Hey, guys, don't be afraid. I have some really good news for you ... I mean REALLY good news!

"You can be filled with joy, everyone can. See, there is a newborn baby. And this baby is the Savior...the Anointed one of God. The Messiah!

"And, you can find that baby. You can touch, see, and hold that baby."

Then the Angel Choir can't hold back any more, and they start to sing. Boy, did they ever sing! I think it might have been an early rendition of Handel's the Hallelujah Chorus!!!

Well, when the angels are through singing, the shepherds go and check it out. And it is exactly the way the angel said it would be.

Can you just imagine being a shepherd and seeing and hearing what they saw and heard?

It had to be incredible – especially for a shepherd.

To be a shepherd 20 centuries ago, you see, was a not a joyful vocation.

Shepherds were outcasts, wanderers in desolate places, disconnected from society, with lives often filled with misery and hopelessness.

God, however was present, surrounding them with a wonderful presence, inviting them to be among the first witnesses to the birth of God's son.

And in that moment, they were affirmed as worthy persons, loved by God. They were not forgotten.

Although I don't think any of you are shepherds, or even sheep (well...), I believe there are still many who feel a real disconnect from the presence of God.

Hardships, financial strain, health problems, aloneness or fragile relationships can keep us in darkness.

"Where is God in my life?" "Why is it I don't feel God's presence?"

I think, we can learn a lesson from the shepherds.

Being at the bottom rung of the social ladder and having little to call their own ...they could have believed that the whole thing was a hoax ... or too much wine.

Better to tend to the sheep then run up to Bethlehem and check out the news.

But, they didn't, did they? They had faith – at least enough to go down the hill.

The truth is, a life of faith requires a response.

At any moment God can appear, speak or fill our minds and make His presence known in our lives.

When we choose to accept that a guiding light, a joyous sound, or a heart-warming sensation is of God, we are responding in faith to the presence of God.

But, when we brush off such an event as coincidence, or deny the impact on our lives, we just might miss the fact that God is in our midst.

The text says: "The shepherds went with haste to see what had taken place in Bethlehem."

They didn't procrastinate or rationalize what was happening. They went and after witnessing the event they shared the good news, "glorifying and praising God."

In other words, they responded to God's presence. And that's what God asks of us tonight.

The Christmas story still means now exactly what it meant when it happened. You see, something special has happened.

A baby has been born. A Savior. Christ the Lord. And there is room for YOU around his cradle.

In the same way that in our Christmas pageants, there is always room in the Angel Choir for one more child (even if that child acts up in the rehearsal)...

... There is always room for one more soul in God's love, even if that soul messes up royally in the rehearsal for heaven, called life.

I think it is fitting that the shepherds were the first to hear the good news.

God's love is not limited to the rich and famous. God's love is inclusive. Anyone can be the bearer of God's love.

I love the story of a little orphan boy named Misha.

It was nearing the holiday season somewhere, I believe, in Russia.

100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program, were living in a rundown orphanage.

It just so happened that two Americans were visiting and were given the opportunity to tell these orphans, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas.

The boys and girls were told about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem, finding no room in the inn, then how the couple goes to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened.

Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

Afterwards the children were given three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger.

Each child was also given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins.

The children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw.

Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt.

The orphans were busy assembling their mangers and Mark, one of the American visitors, walked among them to see if anyone needed any help.

All went well until he got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about six-years-old and had just finished his project.

As Mark looked at the little boy's manger, he was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

He asked Misha why there were two babies in the manger.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings pretty accurately - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

Then Misha started to go a little off point. He made up his own ending to the story.

He said, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay.

"I told him I got no mama and I got no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him.

"But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him, like everybody else did.

"But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift.

"I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.

"So, I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?'

"Then Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.'

"So, I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him - for always."

As Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears.

He had found someone who would never abandon him and be with him always.

God's love is amazing.

The love of God can come to us, even in the remote places of our lives.

There is no place, no circumstance, or person that God's love can't reach.

The story of Jesus' birth reminds us that no one is excluded from the amazing love of God - everyone is loved.

The shepherds were a despised people, and yet they were the first to hear the good news.

God includes outsiders in His inner circle of love. And God includes Misha ... and you ... and even me.

That's what I call Good News!

So, how does that make you feel?

In a Peanuts comic strip, Snoopy is feeling great. He comes dancing into the first frame saying:

"Sometimes I love life so much I can't express it!"

He keeps dancing and says: *"I feel that I want to take the first person I meet into my arms and dance merrily through the streets."*

Then, into the scene comes grumpy old Lucy. Snoopy freezes, sits and tries to be as inconspicuous as possible.

And then in the last frame he's dancing again and saying:

*"I feel that I want to take the **SECOND** person I meet into my arms and dance merrily through the streets."*

Folks, if there was ever a time for dancing, it is at Christmas.

The Lord of all the heavens and the earth came into our world as a tiny baby. And the world has never been the same.

I think that's cause for celebration, don't you?

And we can celebrate very simply by holding the Christ child in our heart and letting his love be the seasoning of our lives, that re-creates in you and in me His image.

Don't you feel like dancing?

Amen!