

More Love! *Luke 2: 1-20*

Fearless Living

We are going through the season of Advent and as we all know, Advent is known as the season of “waiting”; waiting for the Christ child to be born anew in our hearts; waiting for God to “create a new heaven and a new earth”; and waiting for Christ to come again and the reign of God to come to this world. We are waiting for something wonderful to happen.

But this “waiting” theme of Advent can have its problems too. In her book, *“Fearless Living,”* Rhonda Britten describes, “when we passively wait, we are living in fear.” If we passively wait for situations to change in order to feel hope, peace, joy or love, we rob ourselves of the chance to have those things right now. We can choose hope in the midst of despair. We can nurture peace even in the midst of enmity. We can choose joy even in the midst of adversity. Cultivating hope, peace and joy means we accept our agency to make our lives our own and choose to be the agent of hope, peace, joy and love, no matter the circumstances of our lives around us. When we do that, we do not live in fear. Rather we have the power to make a difference and can actually make a difference just like Mary and Joseph did.

Of course, we don’t do this work alone. God always leads and empowers us through God’s angels above us and among us. Throughout Advent, we’ve read the story of angels delivering God’s message to Zacharias, Mary, and Joseph. Today, we hear another story of angels announcing good news to shepherds that brings more love to the world.

Mary and Joseph

This story begins with Mary, and Joseph traveling from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah because Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the empire. Nowadays, we can complete a census by mail or online, but in the ancient world, everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to register. [ppt] As you can see on this map, the distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem was about 90 miles and it was constant uphill walking. Can you guess how long it takes to walk 90 miles? It takes about 45 hours. We can assume Mary and Joseph had to walk for about 4 to 5 days. Would they enjoy their travel? I guess not because traveling during a full-term pregnancy is not easy. But the Roman empire didn’t care for the well-being of a pregnant woman, Mary. It considered people as “a cog in the wheel.” There was no love. Of course, our society has improved the welfare system compared to Ancient Roman society, however, we are unlikely to find love in large institutions or systems, whatever they are.

When my mother visited me this summer, she had to go to the emergency room for acute abdomen pain. We arrived there at midnight and spent all night in the waiting room. My mother was in agony so I went to the front desk several times but no one really came to see her. I am not blaming them because I understand how the system works, but, it’s also true that I could not find love there, where love was most needed. Sadly, we accept it as normal. We need more love.

When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, they looked for a place to stay but they found no place to stay. I often wonder why they could not find a place to stay since it was Joseph’s hometown, which means there must have been relatives living in Bethlehem. Why couldn’t Joseph and Mary stay at one of his relatives’ houses? Or why didn’t they welcome them? Maybe they had heard rumors about Mary and the child. They might have felt that Joseph disgraced his family by taking Mary as his wife. A family should be a place of love, but we also know that sometimes, there is no love even in a family. We need more love.

Joseph and Mary must have been physically and emotionally exhausted by their long journey and unwelcoming family members. They might have desperately looked for a proper place for Mary who was about to give birth to a child. However, they could not find one because there was no room in the hostel and no one wanted to yield their room to them. As we all know, it’s difficult to give up our own rights for strangers. There was no love. We need more love.

Mary felt ‘the baby drop’ and they didn’t have a choice but to stay in any available shelter, which was a barn. I don’t think Mary was able to get help from family members. Was there any love available for this couple? Yes. There was still love for them. But this love came from strangers and the marginalized. Yes. There

were angels around Mary and Joseph. As we all know, labor is a long and dangerous endeavor, particularly in the first century. Many women died. Joseph could not help Mary alone so he would have called for a midwife. According to the gospel of James, which was one of the apocryphal gospels, there were two midwives who came to help Mary. They came to help despite the fact that the couple were strangers in Bethlehem and possibly couldn't pay. But they came to help! Their compassion for Mary and the warmth of their hands were likely an unexpected blessing for Mary and Joseph. Yes. There was still love for Mary and Joseph. Two midwives were angels for them. I believe we can do the same thing. You never know what your small help and kindness to strangers may mean to them and you may become angels for them in that moment. Yes. we can share more love!

Shepherds

Of course, God didn't let Mary and Joseph celebrate the birth of Jesus alone. How would you feel if your child had just been born and no one was there to celebrate with you? Kind of sad. According to the gospel of Luke, God's angel appeared among shepherds camping in the neighborhood. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." This was wonderful news, but it was still their choice whether they would believe it or not. And we all know what they did. "As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherds talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger." Shepherds were there to witness and celebrate the birth of Jesus with Mary and Joseph. Joseph and Mary were strangers to them as they were strangers to Joseph and Mary. But when they came to Jesus and congratulated and celebrated his birth, the barn was no longer a place of rejection. It became a place of love in which the divine love of God most vividly manifested. Humanity and human relationships were redefined not by social status but by love. There was love for Mary and Joseph. There was love for the shepherds. There was love for all humanity, which is still in us. Yes. there is love in us and we can share more love.

Sharing love does not mean doing extraordinary work. Just being with others can be a way of sharing our love. Last Saturday, Asbury UMC had a winter celebration. I learned that the American way of celebrating winter is much sweeter than the Korean way of winter celebration. I drank two cups of hot chocolate with marshmallows. I never thought about using candy canes as a hot chocolate stirrer and Diane Pratte taught me how. I was also reminded that God didn't give me an artistic talent. Samantha and Andrea had put candy canes together in a star or flower shape, but because I didn't realize it, I grasped one of the candy canes for eating. Anyways, it was fun. I was especially pleased Ben and Eva were there and enjoyed their time. What did we do there? We share our small light of love with each other. We hoped more neighbors and kids would come and enjoy our winter celebration, but that's ok. Size doesn't matter. The most important fact was that at least Ben and Eva will remember the feeling of warmth, joy and of course, the sweet taste of hot chocolate, and remember they are loved by their Asbury family.

There is love in us and we can share more love with others. Sow love wherever you can. Share love as much as you can. Don't think sharing love is difficult. Be more compassionate. Be more kind. Be with others. "Yes, I believe there are angels among us. We can be messengers of love, flying in the face of fear, for we are the Body of Christ. Amen.