**Shepherds Watch And Wait: Luke 2:1-20**

**Christmas Eve Reflection for Wollaston Congregational Church**

**December 24th, 2016**

I sometimes like to imagine the Christmas story, set like a movie, or maybe musical theater. So, here is my imagined presentation of the story we just heard, from the gospel of Luke. Think of it as a multi-media type presentation, in which we experience the sights and sounds, the smells and tastes and textures of each scene. Oh, and one more thing – we have a sixth sense, too, we know the thoughts and feelings of some of the characters …

Scene one begins with Herod’s wife, who is scurrying around the palace, checking on the latest alterations. The decorators are in, matching fabrics for the new draperies. Herod, himself, is busy overseeing the temple, one of many building projects he has on the go. The intent is to memorialize his name. Perhaps he will even get an in with one of the Roman gods. After all what has the God of Israel done for him lately? He’s also meeting with the tax collectors, insisting that they put a greater squeeze on the ordinary folk. These buildings don’t get built with nothing!

Added to this hectic activity, is the impending census called for by the Roman occupiers. Those who are descended from families of Jerusalem and the surrounding towns are flooding in. The lodgings are filling up rapidly. Too bad for those who didn’t book ahead! The marketplace is humming, inn keepers are buying up food and wine, to serve to their guests tonight. Evening is drawing in.

But, now there is a change of scene.

We cut to a group of humble shepherds, camping out in the distant hills surrounding the city. They are off the grid, there is no census for their type. The city lights are barely visible from their perch. They huddle under their cloaks for warmth, the sheep sporadically bleating around them. This is a place of stillness, and darkness. The stars are bright.

These migrant workers mumble few words, as they settle in for the night. Their meal this evening was meager, just a few crusts. The villagers didn’t take too kindly to their smelly, grimy presence when they ventured out earlier searching for food. At least the wine merchant was willing to take their few coins.

Shepherding is tough work, but it’s something. Never mind that the farmer who owns the sheep is tucked up warm in his house. The shepherds are willing to take what work they can find. And, truthfully, they don’t like being inside around people so much. Being indoors feels so hot, stuffy and claustrophobic when you’re outside all the time. And when you’re around people they want to talk and ask about where you’ve come from … it’s not always wise to share that information. Besides, sometimes you just don’t feel like talking.

The scene changes yet again.

We shift to a town on the outskirts of the city, less bustling, darker and quieter. A young couple are being shown into a room of a humble house. It is the area where the animals sleep, but it is quiet, in contrast to sounds coming from other rooms. The neighboring houses and rooms are full of others who have come for this census. They are exchanging stories of the road, the dangers and the near misses. But these young ones are simply exhausted, and she is visibly pregnant … about to pop. Her husband helps her to lower down to rest on the straw. There is a manger in one corner, full with fresh hay for the livestock. The couple’s few belongings lay beside them. She has brought swaddling clothes, in case the baby comes while they are traveling.

The scene returns to the hillside.

There is silence, except for the occasional bleating of the sheep, and rough coughs of the bedded down shepherds. But there is a light beginning to emerge, like a distant star coming close. At first the shepherds do not stir, but as it comes increasingly closer they are roused. They do not react yet. They have seen many heavenly events, out here on the fields: meteor showers, eclipses and the like. These are the things missed by the busy folk down in the town. Shepherds are not likely to be fazed by another star show.

But it grows brighter and brighter, all the more intense. They begin to shift uncomfortably and when the figure of an angel appears, at the center of this light, they cower together in fear. Is this the coming of the end times they have heard the religious people talk about?

But, no. The angelic apparition begins to speak … they look around, perhaps he’s addressing someone else more official. But they are the only ones for miles around.

"Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: *to you …* this day” … He said “to you” … to us??? They look around again. No one has ever said that there was something coming to them.

He goes on “in the city of David … a Savior, 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."

They are still staring, wide eyed, as the angel seems to multiply, in seconds there are thousands of them, singing in the sweetest voices ever heard. “Glory to God in the Highest and on peace among all people who please him…”

And as quickly as they came, they are gone. The hillside is dark and silent again.

The scene shifts again, the cry of an infant is quieted.

The lights come up to show the young couple who had bedded down. The young woman is cradling her baby. She did need the swaddling after all. The father is thanking the matron of the house for her assistance, she leaves them there to rest.

There is quiet for a few moments. And then the couple detect a scent coming before them: the odor of unwashed bodies and the wool of sheep, ruddy faces peer in the doorway.

“You won’t believe it” the spokesman for the group of shepherds says … “but we were sent by angels.” At this they all laugh out loud, from behind rough, untamed beards. The father of the baby laughs too … “there is something about this baby” he says.

But the mother looks lost in thought, unsurprised but pondering. After they have visited, they go out singing and dancing. They don’t even stop again at the merchant selling cheap wine at the corner. Their hearts and full of real spirit tonight.

And as they make their way back in to the hillsides, they keep saying

“he said *to you …* there was no one else there *…* he said *to you …* I am bringing good news of great joy.”

Could this really be good new *for us??*

The camera zooms back out from this scene, until the shepherds are a speck, and the doorway of the house where the baby was born is a dimly glowing rectangle.

And we focus in on the city again, it’s brightly lit, people are partying. Herod’s building projects loom against the night sky. And those who are bustling around are oblivious to what has just happened in the little town on the outskirts.

Nothing has changed … and yet everything has changed.

Amen