

MYSTERY

1st Presbyterian Church

Pittsford, New York

December 14, 2014

3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Psalms 126 or Luke 1:47-55

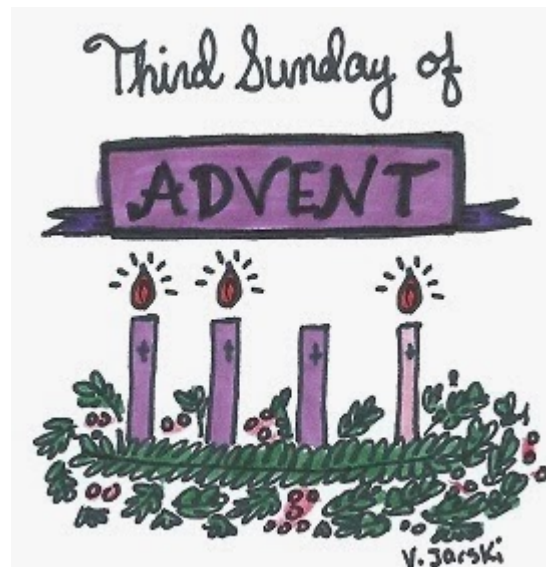
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Shepherds and Sheep

Green

Peace



Text:

Luke 1:28 (NRSV) *and he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

(1 Tim 3:16 NRSV) *Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.*

On the plane ride home from Kenya this summer, I tried to do a little reading . . . after all you are confined to a relatively small space for a very long time. It was there that I came upon a verse that I hadn't noticed in 1 Timothy. I made a note about it to myself and stuck it in the pocket of my travel vest only to be rediscovered this fall before the vest was hung up for the winter, as it is only light cotton. The verse was 1 Timothy 3:16 - *Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.* At the time, I thought, I need to pull this verse out during Advent. It is not read during the Advent Season in the life of the church, but could it be that this is one of the best summaries in all of the Bible to describe Advent and Christmastide – the mystery of our religion is great. He was revealed in flesh.

Well, yes today we were able to read again the prophecy of Isaiah, the Thessalonians passage about rejoicing for yes this is the Sunday of the pink candle for rejoicing. Paul's letter also contains that instruction about rejoicing always and praying without ceasing and giving thanks in all circumstances. We could do some theological ruminating on the 1st chapter of the gospel of John from this morning's readings where Jesus is identified as the true light which enlightens everyone and connects this light to creation and the fulfilment of prophecy.

I also thought that we could even look at the alternative suggested text for today from Luke 1 where Mary has just heard the announcement from the angel Gabriel and hurries off to visit her cousin, Elizabeth who is herself pregnant. Some churches celebrate this event back in the spring of the year on a holiday known as the visitation of Mary . . . well, it sort of makes sense if you reckon that the pregnancy had to start some nine

months prior to the celebration of the resulting birth if that celebration is in December.

Bruce Manning Metzger, a professor that Rod Frohman and I shared was not only our professor of Greek studies, but the chairman of the editorial board for the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that is in these pews. One day he read to us about how Mary, having been visited by the angel, left town to visit her cousin. In Dr. Metzger's approved version the passage reads, "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb." Actually it suggests that the baby in Elizabeth's womb kicked.

But Dr. Metzger read from the Rudolphus Dickinson translation of the same passage. In the preface of his translation Mr. Dickinson entitles it, "A new and corrected version of the New Testament" and in this 1833 edition published in Boston his opening notes state, "This author condemns the quaint monotony and affected solemnity of the King James Version with its frequently rude and barbarous attire and he declares his purpose to adorn the scriptures with a splendid and sweetly flowing diction suited to the use of accomplished and refined persons. So this verse in Dickinson's translation reads, "When Elizabeth heard the salutation of Mary, the embryo was joyfully agitated." Actually I think that his translation sounds obstetrically obtuse.

I've wondered a bit about the early announcement to Mary or to Joseph by an angel. How might I have reacted?

Rev. Brian Bauknight received a phone call very late one evening. The voice of a woman on the other end of the line said, "May I speak to Martha, please?"

"There is no one here by that name," Bauknight replied. Click! The phone went dead.

A few seconds later the phone rang again. It was the same lady. "May I speak to Martha, please?" Again the Brian said, "There is no one here by

that name." Click! The phone went dead a second time.

Only a few seconds later, the phone rang a third time. "May I speak to Martha, please?" Rev. Bauknight responded, using all the restraint he could muster, "Ma'am there is no one here by that name. Maybe you are dialing the wrong number."

"Listen, sonny," she said, "I am not dialing the wrong number. You are answering the wrong phone!"

Mary knew the voice of the one who addressed her. She knew God was speaking but it was still pretty mysterious even though Mary is the biblical image of absolute trust in God.¹

Clarence is my favorite angel. He seems to appear on TV every year about this time helping George Bailey discover that he has a purpose for his life. Actually, a week from Monday Clarence will be here in this chancel. Yes, you can read about it in the bulletin and you will have the opportunity to encounter him. In the movie we see Clarence and George warming themselves after being pulled from the chilling waters of the river, Clarence takes George on a tour of Pottersville. *It's a Wonderful Life* hits each of us with a reminder of how we are valued and most would like to have a humble, bumbling, wingless angel like Clarence.

I never did have answers for the theological questions that people asked regarding the Touched by an Angel programs. Sometimes people used to call the church office and quote whole portions of the show verbatim. Each week the angels were assigned a new "case" and determined how best to make an opening for God's will and grace in human affairs.

If you venture out into cyberspace on the Internet, you will find Web pages and links

¹ Brian Bauknight, "Mary: The blessing of complete trust," December 5, 2004, *Christ United Methodist Church Web Site*, christumc.net.

dedicated to angels. There are electronic collections of stories of people's lives who have been influenced some way by angels. It is fascinating that in a world of such exponentially growing technology, we are still moved by the transcendent and people are eager to express openly their need of divine touch and inspiration. Rev. William Tully, rector of St. Bartholomew's Church in New York says "People are starving for the spiritual. They want to believe they are not alone."

We can only imagine how Mary felt when an angel addressed her or what flashed through Joseph's mind when an angel spoke to him. We can picture the shepherds abiding in the field, the parking lot attendants of the ancient world. They were working the night shift. An angel appeared and spoke. It would be more understandable if the text had told us that one of the shepherds turned to the others and said, "Hey, Abe, I think we've been passing that wine skin around the circle just one time too many. What-do-you-say? Were those white things really a few clean sheep? Somebody wash the sheep? What do you suppose that singing was about? Am I the only one who heard the singing?" We wonder if it was the appearance of the angel that was so frightening, or the possibility that they weren't paying attention to the sheep as closely as they should have that they were filled with fear.

What would your reaction be if you were an unmarried woman, poor, living in a forgotten, depressed, and oppressed part of the world, and you were greeted one day by a man dressed in white who told you that you were going to have a baby? The man was not a gynecologist. He was Gabriel, an angel. Luke says that Mary was "much perplexed," which is polite Bible talk to say that she was scared out of her wits. The angel is saying to her, "Guess who is going to help God?"

Perhaps as miraculous and mysterious as the appearance of this angel was Mary's response to be used. One of the great delusions that goes with wealth, power and status is to think we are in control of our lives. The most difficult lesson

for most people to realize is that God values the heart, not what we possess. Everything we have is on loan to us. We are only stewards of God's possessions. God is really not interested in appearance, performance or status.

Barclay well said, "God does not choose a person for ease and comfort and selfish joy but for a task that will take all that head and heart and hand can bring to it. God chooses a man in order to use him." Someone said, "Jesus Christ came not to make life easy but to make people great."²

Theologian Trudy Bush believes that the special popularity of angels at this time of year suggests that they function "as a kind of Santa Claus for grownups."³ Perhaps celebrating Christmas without its religious significance has left secular folk feeling empty. Angels fill that void, becoming a sentimental substitute for real, deep, abiding faith in the Christ. We like angels because, unlike the babe at Bethlehem, we can make them mean fairly anything we want.

Though Mary was called "favored one" by the angel she didn't feel favored, at least not at first. Maybe she knew enough about the real, living God of Israel that she knew that a message from God might be something over which to be perplexed. The angel didn't come to tell Mary that she was going to be protected while crossing the street; the angel came to tell her that she had been selected by God to change the whole world through the advent of the Messiah. The holy God doesn't indulge in trivialities.⁴ Angels in scripture usually trigger a signal that something big, strange, and wonderful is about to happen.

Notice how Mary's encounter with the angel ends. Mary doesn't say, "Now I know that I am going to be protected and comforted for the rest of my life by my personal guardian angel." No,

² Will Pounds, *Gabriel Came by Today*

³ Trudy Bush, "On the Tide of the Angels," *The Christian Century*, 1994.

⁴ William Willimon, "Messengers of God," *Pulpit Resource*, Vol. 24, No. 4, 1996, p. 48.

what Mary says is, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." In other words, she is saying, "I'm not sure what all of this means, but I am here, ready to be of service in the work of God." Maybe this is why it has been the tradition of the church to say that Mary was the very first of all the disciples, the first person in the gospel to be called by God and to say yes to that call.

Angel messages in the Bible usually involve risky service rather than merely comfort. Our God comes to us, not wearing a blank face upon which we can paint any expression that suits us. Our God comes to us bearing a name, wearing a face that is not only compassion, but vocation. "Follow me," he says to us.

Unfortunately when God's gift came to Israel, it was rejected. Not many people were willing to take a chance on a humble Galilean. Why should they? How could he be the Messiah? God had kept his secret but when he began to reveal it and unwrap it, there was disappointment because it wasn't the gift which was expected.

He wasn't born like a Messiah should be born. Whoever hear such nonsense as a stable and a manger and shepherds? You and I are thrilled to hear the story told each year, but to the people of Jesus' time it was not the kind of advent they anticipated.

Not only was he not born like a Messiah, he didn't act like one either. He washed people's feet. He exhibited the virtue of propriety and modesty, exalted the position of women and forgave sinners. He never wore royal robes or carried a scepter.

He was not born like Messiah. He didn't act like a Messiah, and he didn't die like a Messiah.

On Christmas Eve in 1642, a humble farmer's wife in England went into labor and an hour or two after midnight, Christmas morning, she gave birth to a boy who possessed the greatest mind in modern science. Isaac Newton, the son of a yeoman father who could neither read nor write,

became the preeminent thinker who produced epoch-making discoveries in mathematics, physics, optics, and astronomy.

At 23 he had already established the elements of differential calculus. Soon after, he created the reflecting telescope and described the properties of light. At 45 Newton secured his phenomenal reputation by publishing the *Principles of Mathematics*, a treatise on universal gravitation that would alter forever humanity's vision of the cosmos. You probably have a vague recollection from your school textbooks of a drawing of the young Newton in knee breeches seated under an old apple tree, his eyes uplifted in mock ecstasy, ripened fruit scattered at his feet - a fanciful theory that Newton discovered the law of gravity by an apple falling on his head.

Gravity, and the other monumental discoveries of Sir Isaac Newton, have always been in the universe, or course. It took the brilliance of this British thinker to reveal the secret of them, to make them known in a somewhat understandable way.

On another Christmas Eve nearly 2000 years ago, a similarly unpretentious woman went into labor and gave birth. Her name was Mary and her child was destined to make a greater impact upon the world than that of Newton or anyone else. Jesus, too, presented to the world epoch-making discoveries, new ways of looking at things, revelations of riddles

- Not in mathematics but in morals
- Not in physics but in metaphysics
- Not in things of science but in things of the spirit,
- Not in the law of gravity but in the law of God.

Jesus disclosed it;

He unlocked it - the gospel message of hope and salvation through faith in God and adherence to divine law. This is the significance of Christmas. We pause to recognize the birth of a life spiritually brilliant enough - as Isaac Newton was scientifically brilliant enough - to reveal to

the world new ways of looking at realities and mysteries which have always been in the world but which lay hidden in riddle and paradox until a sufficiently attuned heart could unlock them, disclose them, and bring them to light.

We tend to make complicated the things of life that are simple. Rather draw a line from the manger to the star - from earth to heaven - we draw a daisy or a Christmas tree or some other substitute. God, in a baby, who taught love, forgiveness, peace, goodwill, freedom - there in plain sight. But all is hidden from those who will not believe.

"A feller can't no more explain what he don't know than he can come back from where he ain't been." (Mountain Philosophy)

Alan Abramsky and his family in Roanoke, Texas were hosts to a rabbi from Russia at Christmas time. They decided to introduce him to a culinary treat that was probably not available in his country. They took him to their favorite Chinese restaurant. Throughout the meal, the rabbi spoke excitedly about the wonders of North America in comparison to the bleak conditions in his homeland. When they had finished eating, the waiter brought the check and presented each of them with a small brass Christmas-tree ornament as a seasonal gift.

They all laughed when Abramsky's father pointed out that the ornaments were stamped "Made in India." But the laughter subsided when they saw the rabbi quietly sobbing. Concerned, Abramsky's father asked the rabbi if he was offended because he'd been given a gift for a Christian holiday. He smiled, shook his head and said, "Nyet. I was shedding tears of joy to have an experience in which a Buddhist gives a Jew a Christmas gift made by a Hindu!"

From time to time we hear someone say, "Wouldn't it be great if it could be Christmas all year long? That was God's intent. That is why God invaded our planet and gave us his gift. That is the message he tried to impart through

the angels. It was a message that God loves us, a message that most of us need to hear.

During Advent we run about like bats that have lost their radar, the revelation of God's secret can be lost. But, the secret is out...God's secret which has been hidden in silence for ages from before the creation of the universe is unwrapped. Yes, it's OK. It can be opened before Christmas. Let me give you a hint: so there are three things that abide but the greatest of these is

In the beginning was the *mysterium tremendum*, unfathomable, uncontrollable, indescribable, the source of light and darkness, warmth and cold, delight and dejection, life and death, not yet divided out into nature, humanity and God. People learned to live with this mystery and in time to project it, interpreting the unknown by symbols equally incapable of rational explanation. But there came a new mystery, one that we haven't yet completely solved. Why should we? Perhaps this verse from 1 Timothy looking like an island in a sea of advice from the apostle Paul to his young protégé, is one that seems to sum up the life of Jesus. It is a verse that begins, "Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great." Well we could say, "Amen" to that. All this talk about God in human flesh leads us to that conclusion. The verse in its entirety is a thumbnail of the life of Jesus and it seems so odd to be stuck here in the New Testament. It reads:

(1 Tim 3:16 NRSV) *Without any doubt, the mystery of our religion is great: He was revealed in flesh, vindicated in spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory.*

As a teenager Steve had to get up at four every morning to help his father milk and do chores. Life was hard for his family. They struggled to meet the challenges of the farm.

On one occasion this Steve overheard his parents talking. They were trying to figure a way to

allow him to sleep longer. But because of the demands of the farm it was necessary to start with the milking and feeding each day at 4:00 a.m. There were no options. From the conversation and the tone of their voices it occurred to this young man how special he was to his parents and how much his father loved him. This inspired him to spring out of bed at his father's first call each day at that ungodly hour.

One Christmas eve this young man turned in with a heavy heart. He had been unable to afford some wonderful gift for his Dad. He wanted so badly to show his love for his Dad. Suddenly he had an idea. He would get up extra early and do the milking and feeding as a grand gift--a gesture of the love he felt. At four on that Christmas morning his father called him, then headed out to the barn. The boy lay under the covers, his heart beating joyfully at what his father would find when he reached in to get the milk can. His father would know who was responsible.

In a few minutes he heard his dad come back into the house and into his room. The man was so overcome with emotion he could scarcely speak. He just took his son in his arms and said over and over, "This is the finest Christmas I ever had, the very finest."⁵

"We are all meant to be mothers of God," wrote Meister Eckhart, a medieval mystic and theologian. "What good is it to me," he said, "if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace and if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then is the fullness of time: When the Son of God is begotten in us."⁶

With little doubt we can say, *the mystery of our religion is great*. But, perhaps the hardest thing for us will be to reply in faith when God uses some divine messenger to say,

Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid. For nothing will be impossible with God.

⁵ *Monday Fodder* <dgaufaaa@iohk.com>

⁶ *Meditations with Meister Eckhart*, Matthew Fox, ed. and trans. (Santa Fe, NM: Bear & Company, Inc., 1983), pp. 74, 81.

ADDENDUM

Advent contains the promise that if we go to the manger we will find the one who will stay with us always. But there is much that threatens to separate us from Immanuel, and prevent us from testifying to his power.

Back in 1994, two Americans were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in their prisons, at their businesses, fire and police departments and even at a large orphanage. They were also told they could teach from the perspective of their faith.

So they went - as witnesses to the light, like John the Baptist "to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him" (John 1:7). They believed that Jesus, the true light that enlightens everyone, was coming into the world (v. 8).

The experience of these two in the Russian orphanage proved to be particularly illuminating. According to one of them, "Will Fish" - the name of a real person, perhaps, or a pseudonym for an anonymous Christian who is willing to "fish for people" (Matthew 4:19) - there were about 100 boys and girls in the orphanage, children who had been abandoned, abused and left in the care of a government-run program. Fish tells the following story of what happened when the holiday season approached and it was time for the orphans to hear - for the first time - the traditional story of Christmas.

"We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem," says Fish. "Finding no room in the inn, the couple went 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.

"Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

"The orphans were busy assembling their mangers as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat - he looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

"Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad 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 heard the Christmas story only once, he related the happenings accurately - until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger.

"Then Misha started to ad lib. He made up his own ending to the story as 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 have no mamma and I have 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?" And 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 little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him - for always."

We call Jesus by the name Immanuel, which means "God is with us." In this Advent season, we discover, like the orphan Misha that the God who came in Jesus Christ will never abandon or abuse us, but will stay with us - for always.

Jesus promises to be with us:

- When the cancer biopsy comes back positive, instead of negative.
- When the final exam is marked with an "F," rather than an "A."
- When the spouse of 15 years stomps out the door, and doesn't return.
- When the dream of success in business is once again downsized and diminished.
- When the late-night long-distance call communicates a death, not a birth.
- When the longing for family harmony is shattered by a shouting match.
- When the desire for companionship is drained by another lonely holiday season.

In all these depressing, discouraging, and disillusioning situations, our Lord is with us as Immanuel, God with us. We're never completely without companionship or support, as long as there are two babies in the manger.