

Go and See

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Christmas Eve (C)
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Text: Luke 2:1-20

A few years ago we had the bright idea to travel to be with family on Christmas Eve. I decided that I wanted to be there when I woke up on Christmas morning, and the only way to make that work as a pastor is to leave *after* the Christmas Eve services are done. I learned a couple of things—one, that no one, *no one* is on the roads on Christmas Eve, except Santa Claus and crazy people, and two, I deserved to be in the latter category, because after a busy day, no week, of preparing, I was exhausted already when we hit the road, and by three in the morning there were a couple of times I think I should have been pulled over by the police. So as nice as it was to wake up (if you can call it that) at our destination on Christmas morning, we don't do this anymore!

Have you traveled already this Christmas? Are you planning to go somewhere? What did you do to prepare for a Christmas trip? What do you expect the journey to be like, and what do you hope to find at the other end of it? How do you decide where to go, and whether to go at all?

So many Christmas stories are travel stories, including the first Christmas—more about that in a minute. But first we have to get clear on what a travel story is. A travel story begins with a hero or heroes who have *a wish or a hope*. This wish or hope leads to a *decision* to make a *journey*. The journey could be short or long. It could carry the heroes across thousands of miles, or through the past and future, or just simply across town. But this journey *changes* the heroes, and when they return, they are *not the same*.

Think about some of the stories we tell at Christmas. Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol" is a travel story, with Ebenezer Scrooge following three ghosts across his past and into his future to awaken a desire to take care of his neighbors, especially those who are poor. The movie "It's a Wonderful Life" shows the hero George Bailey wishing that he had never been born, and the angel Clarence sends him on a journey to see how much worse off the world would be without him. He returns to his own life understanding that no one who has friends can be a failure, as the entire town rallies to help him. O. Henry's short story, "The Gift of the Magi," a husband and wife each want to give the other something special for Christmas. They each make a decision to sacrifice something precious to get the other a gift. The wife sells her hair to buy her husband a platinum watch chain, and her husband sells his watch to buy her a set of combs for her hair. As I kid, I hated this story, because it all seemed like a waste, but I've come to see how this journey opened the eyes of this couple to the depth of their love for one another.

I could go on and on... "Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street" ... Even "Home Alone"! These are travel stories. They begin with a wish or desire. They move through a decision to go on a journey that transforms, and they bring the protagonists back home changed in some great way.

"Let us go," the shepherds said to one another, before hurrying down to Bethlehem. Their story was a travel story. Of course, the first Christmas involved a lot

of traveling. Mary and Joseph, as we heard, had traveled. But they didn't really have a choice, and I imagine they would have been just as happy to stay home.

The shepherds, though, did have a choice, and it's their journey I want to talk about. Because like them, we're the ones who hear the good news of great joy tonight, and it's up to us to decide what to do about it.

First, the wish or hope—the birth of the Messiah, the savior. The angels spoke to the longing built on the promises of the prophets of Israel for a deliverer. The shepherds and their people wanted to feel God's powerful presence, as their ancestors had. What longings, what hopes do you bring tonight? I want God to deliver us from this terrible disease that has been with us nearly two years now. I want a new sense of community for our country that I think we've lost. And I want wholeness and peace for friends who are struggling with grief and with mental health challenges. What are your hopes, what are your longings tonight? What would it mean to hear that a savior has been born? Not that our struggles are over, but that help is here, that God is walking beside us? That's what the shepherds hoped for.

And then the decision—"Let us go and see." The angels made a promise and invited them to test it. Look for a child lying in a manger, an improvised crib. What would they have said today—look for a child in a cast off cardboard Amazon box? Look where no one else would think to look, with a poor family who had no place to stay. God shows up in the places we wouldn't think to look. Sometimes it's a church service, but sometimes it's a lunch with an old or new friend. Sometimes it's a soup line. Sometimes it's a song sung with more feeling than skill. The angels invited the shepherds to look for God in an unlikely place, and then shepherds said yes. What would you say, what will you say, to the invitations to find God that come to you every day?

Next comes the journey that transforms. The Babylonian Talmud, written not many years after Jesus' life on earth, says that the testimony of shepherds is unreliable, and cannot be considered valid in Jewish religious courts. It may or may not have been a written rule in Jesus' time, but the suspicion can't have come from nowhere. Yet when the shepherds came down from the hills and found everything just as the angel had said, when they told their story to anyone who would listen, the people didn't scoff. They listened with amazement. God had transformed these shepherds from mistrusted outsiders into the first evangelists, the first ones to bring the good news to others. And the only way those others could hear that news was to trust their testimony. Let's not forget that, when we hear the stories of those our world is inclined to mistrust. So the shepherds returned to the fields, but they weren't the same. They couldn't be the same. God had showed them how valuable, how important they were, on this never-to-be-forgotten journey.

Christmas is a travel story. We see ourselves reflected in the journey of the shepherds, but let's not forget that Jesus himself traveled the farthest of all to be there in the manger on Christmas night. God wished to be, not God-over-and-above-us, not God-apart-from-us, but God wished to be Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. And so God made a decision—not to descend a heavenly escalator ringed in light, but to be born into a poor family far from home, a family soon to become refugees fleeing to safety in Egypt. And this birth began a journey for Jesus that meant that now God could touch and be touched in the flesh. Jesus healed, fed, embraced, warned, forgave. He allowed himself to be touched—held by his mother, but years later beaten, whipped, and crucified. Rising from the dead, he showed us that God's love finds us and raises us up, even from the grave. Ascended to heaven, Jesus carries all our human hurts, hopes, fears, and joys up into God's presence. The journey that begins at Christmas changes

everything. I don't know that I can say this journey changes... God. They'd probably put me on trial for heresy. But it definitely changes our story with God.

God is with us still. God is here, in this gathered community, not just those in this sanctuary, but those of you who are praying with us and hoping with us from home. The angels told the shepherds that the Messiah was to be found where no one expected—in a manger. God is here in gatherings like this, in the relationships between people who pray with and for each other. God is there when we reach out to feed and shelter our neighbors. And God is with the poor, with the refugees, with the LGBTQ kids kicked out of their homes, with those in prison, with those taking their last breaths or their first.

Christmas is nothing less than this—the God of heaven has come to stay with us, now and always. Go and see—see for yourself, and let God show you how loved, how valued, how precious you are. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace to all! Amen.