

January 2, 2022
“When Christmas Passed”
Luke 2:22-40

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, our Lord and Redeemer.

In a children’s book about the visitation of the Angel Gabriel to Mary, the following dialogue takes place....

Mary: Stay where you are or I’ll scream!
Gabriel: My name is Gabriel
Mary: Are you an angel?
Gabriel: I have a message for you
Mary: You shouldn’t go around surprising people
Gabriel: Oh, angels are for surprises!

I like that! “Angels are for surprises!” Ever since that time when Gabriel appeared to a young girl and told her that she was to become the mother of the Lord, the Messiah, the Savior of the World, Christmas has always held an event of surprise. I think we are surprised every year again just how beautiful it all appears in Word and Song.

I think we are surprised, too, each year by the emotions which surface, as if we have forgotten since the last time the glorious WORD and wonderful SONG. And I think we are surprised – although maybe the word might be disappointed – how little some people seem to understand what it all means.

We read about angel visitations to Mary and the Shepherds, about the Manger and the Wise Men, and the Inn that had no room. It seems too well crafted a story and so well known that many people relegate it to the subconscious recesses of the mind, that repository where we store those stories of fairy tales we have heard.

The whole point I am trying to make is that we should look now past the Manger in Bethlehem, and past the imagined starlit night. We need to look a few weeks past Christmas. You see, the real story does not leap immediately from manger to

ministry, from cradle to cross. There is time for several other angel visitations and angelic surprises.

For instance, there is the record of another angel visitation. This one to a man named Simeon who had spent the greater part of every day at the Temple in Jerusalem. The Bible tells us that he was "...looking of the consolation of Israel". This means that Simeon was looking for some sign that God would intervene in history and rescue the Jewish people. The Angel had promised him that he would not die until he had seen this confirmation of consolation. When Mary comes to the Temple for her prescribed "ritual of purification", and brings the baby Jesus, Simeon senses that his wait is over.

Mary and Joseph are following the ancient law which states that a mother must present herself at the Temple for the Ritual of Purification, within forty days following the birth of a male child. Part of the ritual was the offering up of a sacrifice --- customarily, an unblemished lamb. In the case of the parent's poverty, an offering of a pigeon or two turtledoves would be acceptable. The cost of the sacrifice was little more than a penny! Mary and Joseph made sacrifice of a turtledove. And it was here that Simeon saw the Lord/Child.

From the standpoint of the old man Simeon, there is assurance that the promises of God are kept! The angel had promised, and Simeon's deepest desire had been realized. God has made a lot of promises to the people with whom He has entered into Covenant, not the least of which is that He shall be always with them, and that He shall not fail those who have placed their trust in Him. Simeon – and all of us who read this ancient story – can trust that what **God promises, God delivers!**

Next, we discover that Jesus was born into extreme poverty, and not into great wealth, as we might have expected had we been awaiting the consolation of Israel. The wealth of our Lord was not something which could be carried around or counted, like gold coins, but something that rested quietly within – the grace of God. Sometimes we complain that our own means are so meager, so limited, as if we were caught in poverty and its attending curses. How simple we must seem before the rest of the world, especially those to whom a crust of bread would be a treasure and pure water a miracle.

As you and I rushed into Christmas – putting up the tree, wrapping and mailing sundry gifts, and running from counter to encounter – it might be well for us to see Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus in the real world. The traditional figurines of the manger scene have been left back in Bethlehem: the kneeling Shepherds, the gift-bearing Wise Men, the brightly shining Star, all packed away and all but forgotten. Now, the Holy Family is in Jerusalem, reminded that they are too poor to offer what many would have considered “a proper sacrifice”, reminded too that a nine-month pregnant girl was compelled to climb upon a donkey for the long ride to the census office. And here in Jerusalem, they had been brought face to face with the scary decree of a half-insane Roman king, who would order death to all male children under the age of two years because he had heard from foreign astrologers that a “king of the Jews” had been born in his precincts. The Holy Family lived in a world where men might be spread eagled upon a cross for the most minor of misdemeanors if those crimes had been committed against Imperial Rome. It was such a world that welcomed Jesus, the One who had been born, Simeon knew, to be the “consolation of Israel”, the one we know to be Savior of the World.

You and I do not live in some quiet village where Shepherds tend their flocks by night, where angels sing, and a star shines more brightly than the sun. We do not live in the Bethlehem of Christmas cards and Christmas carols. We live closer to the noise and confusion and danger found in Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish world. But, like the ancient people of Bethlehem and Jerusalem, we too know the need for “consolation”.

We grieve for starving children in a quarter of the world’s population and for people who are spread-eagled upon their own punishing crosses, for people who are the least, the last and the lost.

It is when we sit next to the old man Simeon and feel the intensity of his faith in the promises of God that we understand just how powerful is this Christmas story. **Powerful.** That’s the word that we need to carry into Christmas, for this is the literal translation of the angel Gabriel’s name. Power! Like the power and suddenness of a lightning bolt, Gabriel brought God’s message to the young girl, Mary. And like the stored up power of the sun’s energy, God’s love was loosed upon the world. His strength was visited upon us that we might face down and rise up above whatever it is that the world might assemble against us.

Oh yes, it is a wonderful story --- this Christmas Story --- but it is so much more. It is the revelation of God coming into the midst of us, of God being forever within earshot of our cries, of God being within touch of our needs. No wonder our heart sings chorus with the host of angels who proclaimed hallelujah.

As we enter into a new year, the tradition in this church is that we find a star with a special word on it. There is nothing magical about this word – not miraculous – not magical that has some special power associated with it. It is merely a word written in ink on a piece of paper. This word may be a description of an aspect that you never thought of in connection with your life. It may be a bit of good news that you need to hear. You don't have to add another thing to your plate of activities, but you may want to sit and quietly ponder why this is the word you selected and what is God trying to tell you with this word.

SLIDE

Here's how it'll work: We're going to play about a minute of music. You decide in your worship pod – who picks first – second third – etc. Oldest to youngest / youngest to oldest / where do you usually sit in the pew / then simply pick a number between 1-12. When the music ends have a number in mind – because then we're going to call out the numbers by the Epiphany Star to find out what your word is.

Pastor Dave, since this is your last Star Words Sunday with us, I am going to ask you to select 12 cards – one at a time –and read the word out loud. IF this is the number you picked, then this is your word.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10
- 11
- 12

Consider how this word might be a gift from God. Consider this word to be a chance to stop long enough to receive something from God. Consider how this word speaks to you right now as 2022 begins... consider how this word speaks to you in a few months...consider how this word speaks to you after having traversed half-way and then $\frac{3}{4}$ of the way through the year. Is it something you need to receive? To offer? To ponder? Does the word mean the same at the end of the year as it did in the beginning of the year? What's the Word...wait and see. Amen.