

About this time Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the nation. (This census was taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) Everyone was required to return to their ancestral home for this registration. And because Joseph was a member of the royal line, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, King David's ancient home - journeying there from the Galilean village of Nazareth. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was obviously pregnant by this time. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born; and she gave birth to her first child, a son.

She wrapped Him in a blanket and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the village inn. That night some shepherds were in the fields outside the village, guarding their flocks of sheep. Suddenly an angel appeared among them, and the landscape shone bright with the glory of the Lord. They were badly frightened, but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" the angel said. "I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior - yes, the Messiah, the Lord - has been born tonight in Bethlehem! How will you recognize Him? You will find a baby wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger!" Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others - the congregation of heaven - praising God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven," they sang, "and peace on earth for all those pleasing God."

When this great host of angels had returned again to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Come on! Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this wonderful thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." They ran to the village and found their way to Mary and Joseph. And there was the Baby, lying in the manger. The shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. All who heard the shepherds' story expressed astonishment, but Mary quietly treasured these things in her heart and often thought about them. Luke 2:1-19

This is the first Sunday of Advent; a season of preparing for the coming of Jesus to the manger of Bethlehem, and into the world, and into our hearts. Christians have celebrated Advent since the 5th century as a season of waiting, and longing, and hope. There are four Sundays in Advent and each Sunday has a theme. Today's is hope. The scripture we've heard is usually heard on Christmas Eve, at the end of Advent.

Every year we hear this ancient story and every year I pray that we'll hear it again... with wonder and awe... as if it were the first time. I've walked into the former Fellowship Hall and the former church library half a dozen times in the past week, and each time it's almost taken my breath away. The Bethlehem Experience has

transformed that space I thought I knew. That's how I pray we'll experience this season of Advent.

In August the Worship Team, and the Welcome, Evangelism and Reconciling Ministries Team, had an Advent planning retreat at San Damiano. At the planning retreat it was decided that on this first Sunday of Advent we would focus on the mystery and the wonder of the shepherds and the angels in this story. Here's some backstory about them, about shepherds and angels. Shepherds were considered as scum: dirty, smelly, offensive, and from a religious perspective, unclean (that is, unholy, and unacceptable to the religious community). Picture someone now who lives on the street, an addict who sleeps underneath an overpass in a cardboard box, and has no place to bathe. Shepherds were the ancient culture's outcasts. The only place for a shepherd was outside: outside the gates of a town, outside the community; and unwelcome everywhere except outside... in the fields. It's important to know as this story unfolds.

Angels always show up in bible stories and say, "Don't be afraid!" Psychologists say that parents shouldn't tell a child going to a medical or dental appointment, "Don't be afraid" because it tips off a child that there is something to be afraid of. Angels are often portrayed as fat cherubs, painted with golden wings and harps, but encounters with angels in the bible tend to be fierce meetings, and angels deliver frightening and unwelcome news. Later in Advent we'll hear about the angel who appeared to Mary and to Joseph, and who told them that even though they'd never had sex, they were going to be parents to God's own Son... frightening and unwelcome news. But today - this first day of Advent - we're hearing about the angels, and the shepherds, and about the hope we have because of them.

One of my friends told me about a lunch date she had with someone who talked about global warming and who said to her, "There is no hope". I reacted strongly to hearing about this, and said to my friend, "There's always hope!" And yet the world does look bleak. I can't list all the atrocities in the world. I can't even read about all of them. But you have to be asleep all of the time to not be aware of the hopeless situations in the world right now. And of our inability to repair the brokenness; to feed the starving, to heal the nations ravaged by war, to reclaim civility among political parties, or even to mend our own relationships. World news is grim and some of it looks hopeless. At this time of year it's a bizarre experience to read the news and then go into a store that's selling the Merry-Christmas-Experience.

Advent is a welcome place to catch your breath, in between the hopelessness in the world and the bait used by advertisers to lure us into thinking we can buy a Merry Christmas. Advent is a place of sanity, a place of waiting and longing... a place to prepare our hearts... for coming of Christ. There's a line in the movie, "Fiddler on the Roof" when the villagers of Anatevka learn that the Russian Tsar is evicting all the Jews. One of the men says to the Rabbi, "All our lives we've been waiting for the Messiah. Wouldn't now be a good time for Him to appear?" The Rabbi says in response, "We will have to wait for Him someplace else". Advent is that place to wait for the Messiah. It's not a place to shut our eyes or plug our ears to the cries around us of desperation and pain, and it's not a place for us to give into the hopelessness of those voices. It's a place for us to prepare, with hope, for the coming of Jesus to redeem the world. Advent is the place to practice Buddhist mindfulness, awareness, and peace. We're not Buddhist, probably most of us are not, but our Buddhist friends practice inner

silence and peace that's needed in this season of waiting for the Messiah to come. I think the Christian heart is actually manger-shaped, and our work as disciples of Christ is to make our heart-mangers a place of hospitality and love, with the same kind of tenderness and longing that new parents feel in preparing a nursery.

When Jesus is born in us, and lives in us, He changes us... and when we are changed the world around us is changed. Many Christians don't hold out hope that Jesus is living in them, and changing them, and as a result many Christians live with resigned hopelessness. I think that because we don't imagine that our hearts are mangers, and because most of us are self-aware enough to know that our heart-mangers are stored for eleven months of the year in the attic with the other Christmas decorations, and they're full of spiderwebs and dust and perhaps a rat's nest... we don't imagine that Jesus wants to be born... not just in Bethlehem, and not just in the saddest places in the world, but in us. And so we don't imagine that He's already taken up residence there in order to change us with His love, and that He's using us to transform the world around us with His love.

Ah! but during Advent our defenses are down, and the candlelight and the beauty and the music touch our hearts, and it seems that more often than usual heaven touches earth, and we are filled with hope... that Jesus really is coming. We tend to be more hopeful during Advent that the story of Christmas and the story of Jesus is our story, and that the Baby born so long ago is coming again to heal and save the world... and to live in our hearts and to heal and save us.

The coming of Jesus was first told to shepherds, who were outsiders: dirty, unworthy, untrustworthy. Their reaction to the appearance of angels, Luke's gospel tells

us, was terror. We are probably not much different than those shepherds: pretty confident that we're not worthy or reliable or faithful enough to be visited by angels, singing to us of God's amazing news of a Savior born to heal and save us. But we are meant to find ourselves in this story, and it tells us, on this first Sunday of Advent, and this Sunday of hope, that the Messiah has come for us, and to us, not because of our worthiness or our goodness or even because of our love for God, but because God can't be kept away from you. Nothing can keep God's love away from us. This story of God's passionate love for you, and for me, and for all the world, was first sung to shepherds. So that tells us that we don't have to be perfect or worthy. We just have to be available, like the shepherds were. So during Advent make yourself available to the wonder and mystery of God's story. Listen for angels singing. Look out for outcasts. Watch for places where heaven touches earth.

In the story of the first Christmas, angels from the highest heaven touched the lowliest people on earth, shepherds. Angels filled the night sky and sang to the shepherds the good news that the Savior of the world had come as a Child. Jesus, from the highest heaven, took on the form of the most vulnerable human being, a newborn baby, and heaven touched earth. During Advent we're preparing our hearts for Jesus... so that heaven and earth touch will each other, in us.

The angels who sang to the shepherds burst into the night sky, singing and praising God. The angels are still singing to you (and to me and all the world) that the Messiah is coming. They sing, "I bring you the most joyful news ever announced, and it is for everyone! The Savior - yes, the Messiah, the Lord - has been born in Bethlehem.

You will find a baby, wrapped in a blanket, lying in a manger” (and I would add to their song... look for the baby lying in the manger in your heart.)

I hope for my friend’s lunch date - the person who said about global warming, “There is no hope” - that that person hears angels singing this Advent. Advent is a season of hope when we listen for angels singing the good news that Jesus is coming. Jesus is coming to love us and live in us, and to transform the world around us with His love.

Each Sunday of Advent there’s a theme. Today’s is hope. Luke’s gospel story tells us that “Mary quietly treasured these things [that were said about her newborn baby] in her heart, and often thought about them”. Advent is a time to treasure this story in your heart, and to think about heaven touching earth as Jesus is born again in you. Amen.