



# “What the Angels Sang”

Text: Luke 2:1-20

*a sermon by Kevin Fleming*

**Christmas Eve  
Sunday, December 24, 2017**

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH - EVANSVILLE, INDIANA

On the hillsides near Bethl’hem, when darkness was deep,  
There were shepherds abiding and keeping their sheep.  
It’s the story we’ve heard so often before,  
We scarce hear the story at all anymore.  
We know it too well – we know it by heart,  
But, perhaps, it’s a story we know only in part.

“There were shepherds,” we’re told. And that’s most odd, indeed,  
For shepherds were always quite unpedigreed.  
Unlearned, untutored, inexpert, untaught –  
Ill-mannered, unseemly, all-in-all, not so hot.  
You don’t want your daughter to take one for a spouse,  
You don’t want one taking up space in your house.  
You want them on hillsides, away from the town.  
With their wineskins and rude jokes and that sheep-smell profound.  
On society’s ladder, at the bottom-most rung,  
Were loud, drunken, shepherds that smelled of sheep dung.

In the depths of the darkness, outside Bethlehem,  
In the very late p.m., or the early a.m.,  
The darkness was shattered, there was light all around,  
Which knocked those poor shepherds right down to the ground.  
And then, we are told, before them there stood,  
An angel of God, the charge to make good,  
Of bringing the message from heaven to earth,  
A message of joy, of hope, and of mirth.  
But flying winged messengers, who appear in the night,  
Are not often seen with great joy, but with fright.

So the first thing the angel proclaimed to their ears,  
Was to put away terror, and panic, and fears.  
The news that the angel was sent down to share,  
Was not news to frighten, but meant to repair,  
The old broken bonds between heaven and earth,  
To reclaim all God's people, and give them new worth.  
Good news of great joy, the angels proclaimed,  
But the shepherds still doubted the words all the same.

"A Savior is born," the angel then said,  
"A Savior born there in *the* House of Bread.  
In Bethlehem town, in a manger quite rude,  
Wrapped in cloth and placed where the cows once did chew,  
You'll find him - the proof of God's offer complete,  
You'll find him - an infant so tender and sweet."

And then, in a twinkling, they saw in the sky,  
In the place of one angel, in the heaven's so high,  
A gaggle, a herd, a congress, at most  
A company of the heavenly host!  
They sang with one voice a song in the night,  
A song meant to put every dark fear to flight,  
"Glory to God!" the angels intoned,  
"And peace on the earth, where God's favor is shown!"

The shepherds just stood there. Everyone was slack-jawed.  
They were filled with deep wonder at the actions of God,  
Who shared this good news with the poor of the earth,  
With those oft-considered of quite little worth.  
The angels came not to the powerful folk,  
But to those who were strapped to life's heaviest yoke.  
To the poor, to the outcast, to the humble of earth,  
Came first the good news of great joy and great mirth.

Then they ran - they just ran - leaving sheep on the hill,  
They ran - they just ran - filled with joy and the thrill  
Of searching for one fast asleep on the hay,  
The Savior new-born in Bethl'hem that day.  
At the end of their search, their eyes did behold,  
The One often spoken by prophets of old,  
A child to us born, a son to us given,  
A baby in whom earth is joined with God's heaven.  
And when they had seen it, they returned to their sheep,  
And with peace they entered a winter's night sleep.

That's the story passed down to us through the years,  
The story that still brings good news to our ears.

But do we believe it? Do we still think it true?  
Do we let it affect what we think, feel, and do?  
Or do we unpack it each year with the tree,  
And the ornaments, star, and the season's esprit?

Is the good news still good? Do we hear the poor's plight,  
And the voices that cry for some light in the night?

Is the good news still good? For the hungry and cold,  
And for those overlooked like the shepherds of old?

Is the good news still good for a woman and child,  
Who through violence and cruelty by men are defiled?

Is the good news still good? Does it still bring deep mirth,  
To the poor, and the helpless, and the battered of earth?

Is the good news still good? Do the sick hear the song,  
Are the broken still treated and the weakened made strong?

Is the good news still good? Is the stranger embraced?  
Do those dispossessed from their homes find a place  
Where they receive welcome, compassion, and care,  
And treatment that's just, and impartial, and fair?

Is the good news still good for all colors of skin?  
Do we see in each other our own kith and kin?

If that old angel song is still true and still strong,  
It calls us to take on every insult and wrong.  
It calls us to speak for those with no voice.  
It calls us to act for those without choice.  
It challenges you and it challenges me  
To be what our God has called us to be:  
A light in the darkness, the salt of the earth,  
God calls us to be a strong force for rebirth.

For "peace" in the ancient, is rendered *shalom*,  
It means healing and wholeness – just let that hit home.  
The angels that flew in old Bethlehem's skies,  
Were sharing a message so strong and so wise –  
That God came among us to right every wrong,  
To carry the broken, the weak to make strong.  
This is the good news the angels did sing,  
And the song still goes on and a challenge it brings,  
To those who would call themselves by God's name,  
And Jesus as Savior by their words they would claim.

The challenge is this: have a heart for the poor,  
And the broken, and battered, and forgotten, and more –  
Wherever a life is less blessing, more curse,  
You and I are called on to sing out a verse,  
Of peace on the earth, and wholeness and love  
Be among us, the gift of God from above.  
And when lesser voices bid us practice old hate,  
The song of the angels their calls will abate.  
True people of God, with the angels will sing,  
Of peace among people, and the blessing it brings,  
Of wholeness, contentment, of justice, and life,  
The end to all hatred, and bias, and strife.

So, on your way home, on this sweet Christmas Eve,  
The angels still sing, and then – please believe –  
That the gift that was given so long, long ago,  
Is a gift that each person on earth can still know –  
It's the gift of deep peace – of wholeness – of love,  
It's the gift of true healing – indicative of  
The God who brings life and hope to the fore,  
The God who is now and for evermore.



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