



“When Necessary, Use Words”
Scripture – Luke 2:8-14; 15-20
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 29, 2019

When they saw [the child lying in the manger], they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Have you noticed that every person in the Gospel who comes into the presence of the holy child has the exact same response? Right away – as soon as they’ve encountered this blessed baby boy – each of Luke’s characters goes with haste to share this good news of great joy. Every single one of them – from the unwed teenager who is overwhelmed to learn she will give birth to the Savior of the world, to the eighty-four-year-old widow who has been watching for the redemption of Israel.

Even before Jesus is born, these women can’t keep the news to themselves. As soon as the angel Gabriel departs from Mary, she rushes to her cousin’s house to share her joy with Elizabeth. Never mind the fact that she has to trek some 80 miles from Nazareth to the Judean hill country ... Mary is bursting to tell someone that she will bear the Son of the Most High. And who better than her elderly, pregnant cousin who knows first-hand that nothing is impossible with God? Mary has barely crossed the threshold before the words pour out of her: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior ...” (Luke 1:46-47).

And later – eight days after Jesus’s birth, when Mary and Joseph take their newborn son to the temple in Jerusalem – those who behold the babe cannot contain their joy. There is Simeon, the righteous man whom the Spirit had reassured he would *not* see death before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. As soon as Mary and Joseph bring Jesus into the temple, Simeon scoops up the child and proclaims for all to hear, “My eyes have seen [God’s] salvation!” (Luke 2:30). And Anna – the prophet who spends her days worshiping and fasting – she is there too. And when she lays eyes on Jesus, she begins speaking about the holy infant to all who are looking for Israel’s salvation (Luke 2:38).

Yes — every single person blessed by this good news of great joy wastes no time in sharing the Gospel with others.

But it’s the shepherds’ response that most surprises and delights me. As the story goes: *[The shepherds] went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. So overwhelmed by wonder are these lowly laborers that they tell everyone gathered there the news they’ve heard about the child cradled in the hay.*

Admittedly, we do not know who all is packed into that humble shelter. There could be midwives there — women whom Joseph summoned at the first sign of labor who now linger to ensure the exhausted, new mom and her baby boy are resting comfortably. There could be other travelers to this over-crowded town who — like Mary and Joseph — have resorted to sleeping among the animals because there was no place for them in the inn. Perhaps, in their exuberant rush to the manger, the shepherds have caused quite a scene. And now cranky town folk, drawn away from their dreams, have assembled to see what all the fuss is about. I suppose there could be quite a crowd gathered under the star in Bethlehem. But the only people named are Mary and Joseph, and they know full well what has taken place. Even so, even so the shepherds feel compelled to speak — to proclaim to these adoring new parents what the angels have proclaimed to them: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

This is the kind of news that needs to be proclaimed. It’s a Gospel message that must be shared — both to people at the center of this story and to people on the margins who are watching and waiting for glimpses of God’s salvation. It’s no wonder that every single person who beholds the babe of Bethlehem goes with haste to tell others what they have heard and seen ... It’s a story that needs to be told.

This still holds true, because the good news of Jesus’ birth is as radical today as it was two-thousand years ago. It still boggles my mind: The very One who ordered the cosmos loves creation so much that God chose to enter into our world and share life with us. The Lord of Heaven and Earth yearns so deeply for relationship with us that God chose not to watch from afar, but to be born among us. As the Gospel of John puts it: “the Word-became-flesh and dwelled among us” ... or, to borrow words from Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase of the Bible: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood.”¹

This is the good news we celebrate during the season of Christmas: God has moved into the neighborhood that we might see the divine face with our own eyes, that we might hear the divine voice with our own ears, that we might receive the good news in a way that speaks not only to our minds, but to our hearts and our souls.

Like Mary, like Simeon and Anna, like the shepherds, we should be going with haste to tell others what we know to be true: To us is born in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord! Our joy should compel us to make known what has been told us about this child; our joy should compel us to become bearers of the good news.

And, yet, I have a hunch that most of us went home from worship on Christmas Eve and did not tell a soul what we have heard and seen. You know why? Because we’re Presbyterian. Sharing the good news just does not come naturally to most of us.

Thankfully, though, there are many ways to proclaim the good news. The Spirit has given us many ways to do so. That’s part of this incarnational story: If God has become flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood, then the church also takes up residence in the neighborhood. And this mission requires the language not only of lofty sacred spaces, but of loud city streets. The language not only of pulpit and classroom, but of prisons and public markets, of soup kitchens and society gatherings.

I am reminded of the quote that is commonly attributed to Saint Francis: “Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.” Preach the Gospel at all times. When necessary, use words.

Today, we bid farewell to someone who is particularly gifted at preaching the Gospel without using any words at all. (Now, Paul, I realize that it is not all about you ... but today, especially, you must realize you are part of the

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*

draw.) Through organ solos and in concert with our choir and other talented musicians, Paul has proclaimed the good news of God's love for us with music that — I truly believe — lifts us closer to God. As his fingers and toes the great glad tidings tell, we have all felt the veil between heaven and earth grow thin — our hearts drawn just a bit closer to heaven. I realize that those of us on the chancel have the best seats in the house, but you cannot watch Paul Fleckenstein at the organ bench and suggest that he is doing anything less than preaching the Gospel. Paul, this congregation has been blessed by your ministry to and among us these twenty-seven years. And I trust that if the Lord of the Cosmos can make a home in a stable, then the Spirit can find ways for you to continue to bear the good news at a black jack table at Delaware Park casino.

Of course, we do not all need the musical talent of Paul Fleckenstein in order to bear the good news. We simply need a willing spirit and a readiness to preach the Gospel in our own, particular ways.

One of the people who embodied this for me was a man named Mr. Elbert Brown. Until his death this past fall, Mr. Elbert served as the Ambassador of Welcome for Broad Street Ministry. I've told you about Broad Street Ministry before — It's a Christian community in Center City Philadelphia that practices radical hospitality, most notably by providing meals and other services to those experiencing homelessness. It's a place I spent a fair amount of time when I was fresh out of seminary and serving alongside a congregation that was housed a few blocks away.

Now, as the Ambassador of Welcome, Mr. Elbert was the face of Broad Street Ministry. He camped out on a stool just inside the main entrance, so he was the first person you'd see when you walked through the doors. In many ways, Mr. Elbert's job was simple: He was a greeter. His responsibility was to welcome anyone and everyone who came through those doors. But, as the Ambassador of Welcome for a ministry that is all about radical hospitality, his job was much bigger than that ... His job was to communicate to *everyone* — from the woman pushing all her earthly possessions in a shopping cart to the CEO whose contribution sponsored thousands of meals — that, in this place, you belong. His job was to let everyone know there was a place for them at the table of grace. His job was to prepare guests for the possibility that, in this place where the sacred and secular intersect, you just might encounter the God who has become flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood. And, through his generous spirit, Mr. Elbert did this very important job day in and day out.

Now, Mr. Elbert did use words to preach the Gospel. But they were not the 'Alleluias' and 'Glory-to-Gods' of Scripture. They were the simple phrases of: 'hello,' 'how ya doing today?' 'Welcome to Broad Street Ministry.' And, with his warm smile and these everyday words, Mr. Elbert proclaimed what he had heard and seen: that the God of love dwells among us.

What "words" will you use to preach the Gospel? What gifts will you use to tell the story of the God who loves us enough to become flesh and blood and move into the neighborhood?

This is the kind of news that needs to be proclaimed. It's Gospel that must be shared — both to those of us who gather week in and week out, and to people in our neighborhoods who hunger and thirst for good news. Yes, this is a story that needs to be told. So go and tell all that we have heard and seen, until all the world knows the Gospel of God's love. If necessary, use words.

Prayers of the People – Gregory Knox Jones

Weaver of the world and Spinner of the Stars, we give you thanks for this special season when we celebrate the birth of the babe in Bethlehem. His nativity heralds a decisive moment in the history of the world, when a riveting day dawned and your essence was revealed as never before. Your Word became flesh to announce your everlasting presence *with* us and your everlasting love *for* us. Your light pierced the darkness to illumine the path

that leads to vitality and well-being, and now guides us to a way of living that spawns satisfaction in our soul, and assures us that our dreams of a better day are not in vain.

God of new beginnings, we pray that we may begin each day with hearts open to your Spirit so that we may be

filled with gratitude for life itself and loving bonds with family and friends...
filled with holy wisdom and truth to counter lies and deception...
filled with joy for laughter and a purpose that brings satisfaction...
filled with determination to resist maliciousness...
filled with humility so that people will be drawn to us...
filled with a generous spirit to combat selfishness...
filled with grace because so many people need someone to listen...
filled with a thirst for justice for those living under the cruel hammer of oppression...
filled with hope that comes from knowing that darkness will not ultimately triumph...

Eternal God, we give thanks that Christ's birth assures us that your love may be born in us, because it is only through acts of love that our beautiful, but turbulent, world can be healed and transformed.

Hear us now as we pray the prayer about the kingdom Jesus envisioned and called us to help bring into being, saying,

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, forever. Amen.