

# “In the Fields, at Night”

*Valley Presbyterian Church – December 24, 2022*

Christmas Eve

Psalm 9:2-7

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Luke 2:1-14

Jesus is born, Luke says, and Mary wraps him up and sets him in a manger – a feeding trough for the animals – “because there was no room for them in the inn.” What could be more natural than a mother providing warmth and a place for her infant child to sleep? Here is a family far from home; they could not even find accommodations usually available for travelers, despite Mary having been, according to the King James translations, “great with child.” Yet, Jesus’ birth – his very presence in the world – calls Mary to show hospitality, to provide for and welcome him into the world.

The scene then switches to a group of shepherds watching their flocks in the fields at night. The land of Judea was (and is) mostly desert, so there were few grassy hillsides near Bethlehem. Grazing sheep meant constantly moving to find adequate food and water. Shepherds had to cope with the fierce desert sun by day and very cold nights once the sun set. More than likely, these were not the owners of their sheep, but were hired to care for them and to help keep the agricultural and food economy of the day going; away from their homes and families, enduring all kinds of harsh conditions, working deep into and through the night.

Driving back and forth to Kentucky earlier this week, I noticed that while gas prices have fallen mostly back under three dollars per gallon, the price of diesel is still over five dollars. Then, I noticed how many truck drivers were on the road; how, right before Christmas, they were away from home, working day or night, helping to ensure that almost ripe bananas, goat cheese or low-sodium chicken broth are always available.

In the early months of the pandemic, we made sure to include truck drivers on the list of essential workers: those in sectors of the economy that did not have the option of working from home, who we needed to stay on the road, or at the factory, or in the hospitals. A couple of years later, we seem to have forgotten again all that goes on behind the scenes to keep food on our grocery shelves.

That night, the shepherds were going about their normal routine, in the place they knew best, doing what they needed, and knew how, to do. Suddenly– in this unexpected place and to an unlikely audience – we hear the dramatic pronouncement of Jesus’ birth as “good news.” Not surprisingly, the shepherds were surprised by what they heard and saw; according to the King James, they were “sore afraid.” For, somewhere outside of

Jerusalem, in a not-so-grassy field at night, a whole heavenly host of angels showed up to tell these essential workers the extraordinary news that the Christ, the Messiah, was born.

Most nativity sets depict these two scenes together – the angel hovering over a barn, the holy family in an open-air structure, and the shepherds there worshipping the infant child – as though this all took place in one and the same moment. But, as Luke tells the story, the scenes unfold separately. We can only assume that when Jesus was born, Mary and Joseph didn't know what happened in the fields. Only later – when the shepherds arrive at the stable – would they learn what was going on elsewhere. Perhaps, to them, it seemed like the world was taking no notice.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, Luke offers several depictions of good news: the very presence of Jesus which calls for hospitality toward those who are displaced (literally or metaphorically) and away from the comforts of home. Sometimes this hospitality can be as simple as providing warmth and a place to sleep, as Mary did. This way of sharing good news is often without fanfare or public acclaim. Other times, we are reminded that God works beyond the bounds of what we can see or understand, and we might only discover it later on, as Mary and Joseph did when the shepherds arrived. Still other times, good news will surprise and perhaps even terrify us, appearing when we least expect it, when we're simply going about our normal days (or nights) in familiar ways and places, as happened to the shepherds. The birth of Jesus is unpredictable and uncontrollable, defying our expectations. It reminds us that God is already at work, out ahead of us, doing something new; even when we cannot yet perceive it.

There is – literally and figuratively – a true openness and vulnerability to Luke's telling of the story of good news. It all happens outside, in the open air; but also outside of the power structures of the day. Jesus is born not in Jerusalem, not even indoors, but in a stable. The angels appear not to political or religious leaders, not in the town center or at midday, but to shepherds out in the fields at night; to those who were surprised – even terrified – by what they heard and saw while doing what they know how to do; and what those who weren't there to see it needed them to do.<sup>2</sup>

We wonder, sometimes, why we are surrounded by so much bad news instead of good. Luke helps us to remember that the message of the angels is, indeed, intended for all people; that God's vision of peace and love might come through unheralded people in unexpected places and ways. It may call for quiet acts of hospitality, but might also interrupt our lives with something wonderfully, essentially, even frightfully amazing.

Merry Christmas to all; and to all – even to those we so often fail to see, those who are outsiders, literally or figuratively – a good and blessed night. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Michal Beth Dinklar from [WorkingPreacher.com](http://WorkingPreacher.com)

<sup>2</sup> Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*