



The Grinch or Gloria

TEXT
Luke 2:8–20

December 18, 2011 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

The shepherds, apparently the only ones in Bethlehem for reasons other than the decree from Caesar Augustus, came with stories to tell. Luke says, “All who heard it were amazed.” I guess so. The truth is, even after all these years, this story of God’s love breathing in Bethlehem — even in this season of wonder — is still nothing short of amazing.

We had a staff party this week. It’s a fun thing to do at Christmas. People who spend the day working together were telling stories and laughing a bit — and then Jarrett walked into the room, and everything stopped. Everyone began to smile, conversations shifted, all eyes were in his direction. It was like the lights came on because Jarrett walked in the room ... with Naomi. If you don’t know who I am talking about, I’m talking about my pastoral colleague, Jarrett McLaughlin; and Naomi is Jarrett and Meg’s absolutely beautiful six-month-old. There’s nothing like a baby to bring a full stop to a room of adults.

You should have seen the staff fighting over who got to hold Naomi — grown men talking in voices that you never hear on a

basketball court. Babies change us. They make us feel more hopeful, I think, more joyful — at least until they start wailing, and that’s when you give her back to Jarrett. But until then, everyone was saying, “Let me hold her. No let me hold her.” I told them to stop acting so silly. Besides, I was the Senior Pastor, so I got to hold her first.

Have you noticed that you look at a baby and the world looks different — both more hopeful and a little more frightening all at the same time? And if that is true with any baby, that is particularly true with the Bethlehem baby. Maybe it is because this Bethlehem baby is on our minds these days, but have you noticed how this time of year hope has a way of seeming more reliable? This time of year love seems a bit more trustworthy.

Luke says there were shepherds abiding in their fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. As I imagine it, they were telling stories mostly. They tell stories to get through the night, so they can get through the day and tell the same stories again tomorrow night. The fact that everyone knew they spent the night telling stories didn’t help

Then they came to Bethlehem, a village already over-

crowded; no room in the inn. Bethlehem, already short-tempered; who wants to have a family reunion convened by Caesar Augustus for the purpose of paying for his armies?

The shepherds came to Bethlehem with stories of angels; stories of hope; amazing stories. That’s the way Luke says it. He says all who heard the shepherds were amazed. “Really?” they said. “All of heaven pushed into a shepherd’s field; angels singing Gloria; peace on earth. Really?” The story they told was enough to cause a reasonable person to meet skepticism with full embrace.

Luke says all who heard these shepherds were amazed. I guess so. Who wouldn’t be amazed? Because this baby was born into Caesar’s world. We know about Caesar’s world.

It is the world where people are hungry of body and hungry of soul; the world where people are at war with one another and at war within themselves; the world where too many children have too little and expect nothing; and too many children have so much, and yet they couldn’t find gratitude with a telescope.

This is the world where those who have continue to get, and those who have not get angry.

This is a world where too many people who know lack wisdom, and where those who lack knowledge hold no hunger to know. This is a world of flesh and blood and anxiety and depression and stress. This is the world of Caesar Augustus, and it seems no place for a baby.

So when shepherds tried to sing the song they learned from the angels, and they tell us God's love is breathing in Bethlehem, well, the polite way to put it is "all were amazed." Me too. See, here's the truth. I'm not proud of it, but it's honest. And because it's the truth about me, maybe it's true for you as well. There is this battle in me. There is a war in me between hope I yearn to trust with my life every day and the cynicism that I find so seductive.

I hear the songs of the angels, but I know Caesar. I hear the stories of the shepherds, but I know about this world. There is a part of me that believes the truest part of me shows up when I look into the eyes of an infant, and the world seems beautiful and holy, and peace seems not only real, but something for which to sacrifice.

But then there is a part of me that finds that too amazing. I'm more cynical.

There's a part of me that sings Gloria with authenticity, but there's a part of me that's just Grinch. Cynicism takes hold, and my heart feels two times too small. Do you ever feel that way?

The story of this baby is that God's love has come into the world to tilt that battlefield in us toward hope, toward life, toward love. The birth of God's love in Bethlehem means this world is no

longer ruled by Caesar, but ruled by God's holy love. Do you believe that? Do you believe it enough to trust it tomorrow when you have to do whatever it is you have to do tomorrow?

The shepherds said, the love of God was breathing in Bethlehem. I've been to Bethlehem; it's a lot like it was then. Soldiers run the city. Children are hungry. People are afraid, and there is precious little reason for hope. There's a three-story wall standing as a monument to fear, racism and hatred. The wall is new, but the fear, racism and hatred isn't. So no wonder when shepherds came singing angels' songs and proclaiming that the world was redefined by a Bethlehem baby, no wonder all who heard it were amazed.

Maybe that's what we need: a little amazement. The truth is, from beginning to end, Jesus was constantly amazing everyone.

While still an infant, they took him to the old man Simeon, who was in Jerusalem. Scripture says the Spirit of God rested upon Simeon. When they brought Jesus into the room, Simeon stopped everything. "Let me hold that baby," he said. Simeon didn't make funny faces or talk in those funny voices like we do with babies. He said, "I can die in peace now, for I have seen God's salvation. Even Mary and Joseph were amazed."¹

While still a boy, they would find him in the temple teaching the teachers — and they were amazed.² He would amaze them his whole life.

He preached his first sermon: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon

me ... to proclaim good news to the poor." They were amazed at his preaching.³

He cast out demons and amazed everyone.⁴

He spoke the word and the winds and waves of a violent storm were all of a sudden at peace. And even those closest to him were amazed.⁵

He came across a man who could not speak and gave him his voice, taught him to sing hymns of praise to God, and all were amazed.⁶

He was just halfway through his ministry, and Luke says they were all amazed by everything he did.⁷

And ending as it began, when the morning light was just breaking, Peter ran from the tomb, and Luke says he was amazed.⁸

There's no way to talk about Jesus without amazement — because to talk about Jesus is to confess that God thinks we matter. To talk about Jesus is to talk about good news for you — not just good news in abstract, but good news for *you!* It was Martin Luther who said, "What good would it do me, if he were born a thousand times and if this were sung to me every day with the loveliest of airs, if I should not hear that there was something in it for me and that it should be my own?"⁹

I know all the reasons that stories like the ones the shepherds told should be met with skepticism. We live in Caesar's world; at least that is what we think. That's what they tell us on the news. That's what they tell us in the marketplace. So many of those who call themselves our

leaders are constantly telling us: “Be afraid, there’s not enough, they are after you. Be afraid, be very afraid.” This is Caesar’s world.

But the angels said that is not true. We live in God’s world. Better yet, God lives in our world. Love has come, so don’t give up . . . on yourself or one another. Love has come, so don’t give in . . . to cynicism because cynicism denies the central reality of the Christian faith: that *love* has come, that God’s love was born for you.¹⁰ This is no longer Caesar’s world.

When I was in high school, I worked selling shoes in the mall shoe store. That was the year of the cordovan wingtips, if you were here for that sermon several weeks ago. I worked one Sunday afternoon. I left church and went straight to work. The mall closed at 5:00. I was driving home on I-285 in Atlanta. It was misting, as it had all day long that November Sabbath. Somehow, and I really don’t know how, a few cars in front of me locked up. There was a lot of swerving, and I ended up being number three in a four-car pileup. No one was hurt. There were lots of blue flashing lights. I asked a policeman if I could call my mother. I walked down the embankment to a Union 76 station and stood in one of those Clark Kent phone booths and dialed. She answered, and I said, “Mom.”

I don’t know how it is that moms can tell, but they can. I just said, “Mom,” and she said, “Tell me where you are. I’ll be right there.”

She didn’t say, “What did you do this time? How could this

happen?” There was no “I’ve told you to be more careful. Do you have any idea how this will affect your insurance?” There was none of that, just, “Tell me where you are. I’ll be right there.”

You know, when love comes into the world, it always amazes, doesn’t it?

That’s the shepherds’ story; it should amaze us. That’s God’s promise at Christmas. It was Caesar’s world — or so it seemed. It was the world of power and oppression. It was the world where people were expendable and greed was the order of the day. It was the world where kindness and generosity and peace seem the stuff of fancy, not to be trusted.

But then God’s love breathes in Bethlehem, saying, “I’ll be right there” — and the whole world changes. We no longer belong to Caesar and his lust for power; we know a new power. It’s odd to think of a vulnerable baby showing us what power really is in this world. But you know what I’m talking about because there have been times when you have sensed that child in the room, and it has caused everything to stop, and you find yourself more hopeful. You find love trustworthy. God’s love is breathing in Bethlehem, which means God has decided you matter. God has reached into this world to tip the battlefield in our hearts away from cynicism toward hope, toward life, toward love.

It looks like Caesar’s world out there, but we have a different amazing story to tell. In this world of flesh and blood and anxiety and depression, this world could

use a little light, a little hope and a little music of the angels.

Give skepticism full embrace, if you wish. But when that leaves you confident, but empty, listen again.

There are shepherds who have come — with stories that will amaze you. They have come with songs of angels, and they are bringing pictures of David’s grandson. Listen as they do their best to sing like angels. Listen carefully enough, and maybe the Grinch in us will give way to Gloria.

¹ Luke 2:33

² Luke 2:47

³ Luke 4:22

⁴ Luke 4:36

⁵ Luke 8:25

⁶ Luke 11:14

⁷ Luke 9:43

⁸ Luke 24:12

⁹ Luther, cited in *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Vol. 1 (2010), p. 116

¹⁰ Douglass John Hall. *Thinking the Faith: Christian Theology in a North American Context* (1991), p. 412

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The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church’s Web site: www.villagepres.org/sermons.