

We are in a series called, "Picture Perfect Christmas." We all have ideas of what is a perfect Christmas: music, trees, lights, or quality time with family or friends. But we also feel the not-so-perfect elements of the season: stress, busyness, and disappointment reach their peak during the Christmas season. We are reminded that life isn't as perfect as we hoped it would be.

We're looking at the lives of the people at the first Christmas and how the arrival ("advent") of Jesus changed how they lived. We're going to look at the story of the shepherds who heard the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth. To see this familiar story from a new perspective, we're going to do a blend of story and song.

Here's what we're going to do this morning: we have three movements. First, Night. Christmas Day began at night with shepherds doing what shepherds do. The second movement is Glory. Luke draws a contrast between the night of the shepherds and the glory of heaven. Third, Love. The theme of Advent for this week brings together Night and Glory in a way that matters for all of us still today.

But we begin with the 19th-century composer, Frederic Chopin.

MOVEMENT 1: Night

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Luke 2:8-9

One of Chopin's most well-known pieces is Nocturne #2 in Eb major. (You can find this classical piece on the internet.) Developed in the 19th century, Nocturne is a type of music that is evocative of the night. There is a feel or emotion that comes with the Nocturne. It is almost onomatopoeic; if "night" had a sound, it would be these notes. Wide, graceful notes mark Chopin's Nocturne, and the melody is repeated three times, each with added elements. The second to last bar played without tempo, leaving the artist with the ability to create the feel he or she desires.

Chopin's Nocturne is a good place to start this morning because at night is where the story of the shepherds begins. It was night for people of the first Christmas. God had been silent for four hundred years. The people of God wondered when God would act in their world of oppression and injustice. They longed and eagerly waited for the dawn of a new day when God would put

the world right-side up. To tell the story of Advent is to start with a Nocturne.

We are not removed from the sense of "night." We know what it's like to long for life to change, to wait for God to answer, and to hope for a better tomorrow than today. We know the night of circumstances, and we know the night of our interior world - what a 16th-century Spanish mystic famously termed, "the dark night of the soul." We know what it's like to wonder if Light will shine on us.

We can rush to the arrival of Jesus and miss that Advent comes in the midst of people living and working at night. It is in the midst of waiting, longing, and hope that the arrival of Jesus comes.

You can sing of this longing with, "O Come O Come Emmanuel."

MOVEMENT 2: Glory

Night is where the story begins, but it is not where the story stays.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." vv. 10-14

The announcement of the angel was focused on "good news." The original word means gospel. Though today we often associate, gospel as a Christian term, the word existed before this night. Fifteen years before the first Christmas, Rome officially declared that the gospel had come through Caesar Augustus. Rome celebrated the birthday of Augustus (September 23) as the advent of a savior. An inscription from the first century discovered in modern-day Asia put it this way:

"Since the providence that has divinely ordered our existence...has brought to life the most perfect good in Augustus...bestowing him upon us and our descendants as a savior - he who put an end to war and will order peace, Caesar...[his birthday] first brought to the world the good tidings residing in him."

Christmas confronts the gospel of Rome with the gospel of Jesus. And it happens powerfully in one word: "today." "Today"

is a statement word. "Today" signifies the dawning of a new era, the fulfillment of the plan of God. When the angel said that "today" a Savior is born, the angel declared that the night was over because the Anointed One (Messiah/Christ) had come for all people.

Think about it. Christmas is for all people. Jesus is for all people. To be for people means that people - people like you and me - matter to God. Four hundred years of wondering if God cares was answered in a glorious declaration. As the prophet of Isaiah put it, "people who were sitting in darkness saw a great light." Yes, that is about the shepherds, but it also extends to all people including you and me.

You can see that in the phrase, "peace upon the earth." Just as Luke draws a contrast between night and glory, so we see the contrast between glory to God in heaven and peace on earth. Christmas is a heaven-centric event. It happened on earth. The realm of heaven is now connected to what happens here. To put it another way, Christmas - the arrival of Jesus - means our world is being changed for the good.

One can sing of this good news with, "Joy to the World," and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear."

MOVEMENT 3: Love

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. vv. 15-20

The last section is marked by movement and change. The angels go back to heaven, and the shepherds go to Bethlehem. Of course, they would "go;" if something has transformed you - if the nocturne is now a song about peace upon the earth - things don't stay in the same place. The good news of Christmas - glory confronting the night - creates movement.

And the good news of Christmas creates change in how people see themselves and their world. The people who heard the report of the shepherds were captivated and marveled at what was

taking place. Mary pondered the news. The word in the original language meant that "she was trying to put things together" (NET Notes). Mary saw the pieces of a grand story coming together in this holy moment. And the shepherds were changed - no longer were they only farmers, but they were now the recipients of glory, and took glory with them as they went home and went to work.

Movement and change happened because "today" peace has come upon the earth. The glory of heaven has now come to earth. The God of heaven is now a resident of His creation. God has come to bring hope and renewal to His creation. "Today" means tomorrow will be different. God cares so much for people that He steps into their night to do something glorious. The night of Advent is a declaration of love.

Love is the theme of this week of Advent. Each week during the season, we follow the tradition that highlights a candle lit to signify a different theme of the Advent story. For many people, love means up stirred up emotion, or the impression that you have to have it all together. But there is another aspect of love that's often overlooked. Love is the striving, working, sacrificing, and laboring to bring about the best for another person. Love is giving of yourself so that another person can have something better. This goes to the heart of the Jewish idea of "shalom" - what one scholar, Barclay, defined as "everything which makes for a person's highest good." Love is stepping into someone's else night to show them the light of glory.

This is what Jesus did. He arrived in a world at night. His teaching later was an announcement that the Night was over. His sacrificial death on the Cross would be the ultimate defeat of Night. We're told that at His death, the sky went dark - which was interesting since it was the middle of the day. People had no idea what was going on. But Night is the place where glory shines. Three days later, the Night was consumed by the bright light of Easter morning. A new day - a new creation - began with Jesus raised to life. Night. Glory. Love. At the center is Jesus whose arrival offers us life change that we desperately need. My hope for you this Christmas season is that you would see Jesus in a new way, confronting your Night with His glorious love for you.

Wherever you are, Jesus has come for you.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC South. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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