

Christmas Eve, 2007

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see— I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

On this most holy night, when the hopes and fears of all our years are gathered in our hearts, here, as we worship and wait together, on this most holy night, we listen again to the most familiar and sacred of words. *In those days a decree went out.* We know this story. Everybody knows this story. People throughout North America who know little or nothing about the Christian faith know about the shepherds and the angelic chorus.

But shepherds? Angels? Even as we are consoled and inspired by these beloved images, we may wonder what meaning they hold for us here and now. What do we know of nomadic shepherds, now, in 2007 in Jamaica Plain? And what do we post-modern and progressive people know of angels?

Shepherds. Those of us who were here for the marvelous Christmas Pageant yesterday heard, *Here come the shepherds, there goes the neighborhood!* Among Biblical historians there is debate about shepherds: were they lowlifes, truly marginal, semi-criminal types, or were they simply, along with 90 percent of Jesus’ contemporaries in the ancient Middle East, what we would call “the working poor”? The latter idea, that shepherds lived on the lower margins but were not thieves or villains, seems to be gaining ground.

Perhaps we could think of the shepherds the first century’s undocumented workers. They don’t seem to have rushed home to be counted in the census, they are out in the fields, tending their sheep. So they are working, they are poor, and they are nomadic, but they are not necessarily criminal and that debate among biblical scholars may begin to resemble, in an uncanny way, our current debate about the status of immigrants and immigration policy. *Here come the (fill in the blanks), there goes the neighborhood!* Maybe the role and meaning of the shepherds is not so remote, after all.

And the message that these shepherds receive from the angel: *Do not be afraid.* What about that? Well, that surely is a message to console and comfort all us here tonight. That is one of the timeless messages of Christmas, of the Good News of the coming of Christ, *Do not be afraid.*

Because the angel's message is delivered to the shepherds, but is not meant exclusively for them. *I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.* The good news is for all of us. And part of that good news, surely, is, *Do not be afraid.*

So, whatever burdens of anxiety, stress, foreboding, or guilt, we bring with us tonight, here is God's reassuring word: *Fear not. I am with you. I am with you in a new way, a way you never imagined. A way the world never imagined. I am with you, and together we will overcome.* If this is a word of consolation for the shepherds, the undocumented workers of their age, how much more consolation must we be able to hear for ourselves?

And the word from the angel, the Good News from the angel is also a word of *peace, peace on earth.* More than anything, perhaps, that's what we come hear seeking tonight. Peace in our hearts, peace in the world. And these two words the injunction to *fear not* and the promise of *peace*— these two words are intimately connected. What causes fear — fear of anything from what may happen at our family dinner table tomorrow to fear of the next terrorist attack— is surely the absence of peace. And what causes the absence of peace — in our hearts or in the world— what causes the absence of peace, surely, is fear.

So here is what the angel proclaims, to the shepherds then, and to us, now: the banishment of fear, and the coming of peace. And what about that angel? What do angels have to do with us here, tonight, at the close of the year 2007, in Jamaica Plain? The angel may seem even more antiquated and irrelevant than those shepherds. As I pondered that question I remembered the poem I selected for one of our recent Advent Meditations, a poem by Richard Wilbur entitled *Love Calls Us to the Things of This World.* And, if we think of it, that title sums up the meaning of the Incarnation, the birth of the Messiah, love calling God to be born in human form, love calling God to the things of this world.

Love Calls Us to the Things of This World

The eyes open to a cry of pulleys,
And spirited from sleep, the astounded soul
Hangs for a moment bodiless and simple
As false dawn.
Outside the open window

The morning air is all awash with angels.
Some are in bed-sheets, some are in blouses,
Some are in smocks: but truly there they are.
Now they are rising together in calm swells
Of halcyon feeling, filling whatever they wear
With the deep joy of their impersonal breathing;

Now they are flying in place, conveying
The terrible speed of their omnipresence, moving
And staying like white water; and now of a sudden
They swoon down into so rapt a quiet
That nobody seems to be there.
The soul shrinks

From all that is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed day,
And cries,
"Oh, let there be nothing on earth but laundry,
Nothing but rosy hands in the rising steam
And clear dances done in the sight of heaven."

Yet, as the sun acknowledges
With a warm look the world's hunks and colors,
The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and rises,

"Bring them down from their ruddy gallows;
Let there be clean linen for the backs of thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure floating
Of dark habits,
keeping their difficult balance."

May your morning air tomorrow be all awash with angels! Merry Christmas!
Alleluia, Alleluia! Amen