

“Tonight’s the Night”
Rev. Janet Scott
December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve, 5 pm service

I can still remember counting down the nights before Christmas with my sister, with whom I shared a bedroom. Each night from early December on, we’d have a little harder time getting to sleep. And then, on Christmas Eve, we’d say to one another at bedtime, “Tonight’s the night!”, and fitfully doze off, bursting with anticipation of what we’d find under the tree on Christmas morning!

How many of you know any children who are wound tight as drums, so full they are of excitement?

Well, “Tonight’s the night!” The magical night is finally here! The day has finally arrived. It’s Christmas Eve!

Families have traveled long distances to be together. Feasting and exchanging gifts add to the joy and spirit of the holiday. And houses are all decked out with lights and wreaths. Here we have the soft, warm glow of candlelight in the sanctuary; the brilliant poinsettias in the lobby. And there is music—lots of wonderful music to add to the gladness and festivity.

For most of us, it’s an incredible evening, Christmas Eve!

But that wasn’t the case on the first Christmas Eve. Those shepherds were out in the field, just doing their job. They were poorly-paid members of a lowly-regarded, disgusting occupation. Shepherds couldn’t find decent jobs. Their reputations were all so bad that their testimony was not even allowed in court. And they were outcasts among the Jews because their work prevented them from worship in the synagogue or temple.

There they were—lowly, scorned, disrespected, outcast shepherds. Just out in the field, doing their jobs.

But then something incredible happened!

God said, “Go tell my people, Angel Gabriel. All of the people must know what I am about. Tired and lonely and scattered and scared, all of the people must hear about my love for them. Go, good Gabriel. Go down again. Go, tell a few to tell the others, till every child has heard it. Go!”

And so it was that the angel of the Lord appeared to weary shepherds. The dark was shattered, for the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were afraid.

The angel said to them, “Don’t be afraid.”

But the light was like a hard and holy wind, and the shepherds shielded their faces with their arms.

“Hush,” said the angel, “hush,” like the west wind. “Shepherds, I bring you good news of great joy, and not only for you, but for all the people. Listen.”

So the shepherds were squinting and blinking, and began to listen, but none of them had the courage to talk or to answer a thing.

“For unto you is born this day in the city of David,” said the angel, “a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly the sky itself split open, and like the fall of a thousand stars, the light poured down. There came with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying:

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace—

Peace to the people with whom God is pleased!”

“But hush, you shepherds. Hush in your wonder. For the choral singing is soon ended. The hosts ascended, and the sky was closed again. And then there came a breeze and a marvelous quiet and the simple dark of the night. It was just that, no terror in that then. It was only the night, no deeper gloom than evening. For not all of the light had gone back into heaven. The Light of the World himself stayed down on earth, and near you now.”

So writes Walt Wangerin.

It’s incredible! Incredible that shepherds should be the first to hear, incredible that they obeyed, incredible that they told what they had seen and heard, and incredible that their testimony was received, treasured, and pondered!

It’s an incredible night, and an incredible message: A Savior, Christ the Lord, is born—for you! The Light of the world has come to dwell on earth!

Imagine that - born for shepherds! Shepherds, who’d only received the scorn of others, now receive the message of the angels: “Shepherds, a child is born—a child from God—born for you! For you!

And not only for shepherds—but also for you!

In the delightful story “The Best Christmas Pageant Ever,” the Herdman children—the ones from the wrong side of the tracks—wander into the first rehearsal and become interested in the Sunday School Christmas pageant. The story is so new and fresh to them that they want to hear it, absorb it and, eventually, live it. To the dismay of the adults whose children were supposed to star in the pageant, the Herdman children end up with most of the main roles.

Most are certain the pageant will be a disaster. But in one memorable scene, little Gertie Herdman steps forward as the angel, announcing the holy birth. She points to the shepherds—her brothers among them—and shouts, “Hey! Unto you a Savior is born!”

With that one important line, she’s supposed to be finished. But now Gertie is on a roll. For once in her life, she’s got center stage, and she’s caught up in the story, and she just keeps going in her excitement. “Hey! Unto you a Savior is born!”—and she begins pointing to people in the congregation. “Unto you...and you...and you...and you...AND YOU!!”

To lowly, stinking shepherds, to the Herdman children from the wrong side of the tracks—and, yes, to you and I!—a child is born; a divine, holy, life-giving child!

That’s right—unto every one of us, tonight, a Savior is born! A Savior from the darkness and fear it creates in our world, in our lives. A Savior from the loneliness and discouragement and emptiness that are too often our companions. A Savior from all that makes us less than God intends us to be. A Savior is born!

God’s incredible, awesome gift is now given to us! A child is born, a Son is given, a Savior, Christ the Lord—given to us - this day!

And what important words for us who would follow God and know the life God makes possible—those little words, “this day.”

We’ve been waiting these past weeks—waiting to fully celebrate, waiting to sing the carols together, waiting to hear again the angels’ wonderful announcement. We’ve been waiting.

Perhaps we’ve been waiting for a long time. Waiting for life to make sense. Waiting to discover a reason to hope. Waiting to know that we are loved by someone—any one! Waiting for a little peace in a violent, chaotic world. Waiting for a little taste of joy. Waiting. The waiting gets so long, and so hard, and so, so heavy.

But tonight—tonight it’s different! Tonight, the waiting is over! Tonight, there is good news—enough good news to last a lifetime, even an eternity! Tonight there IS reason to hope, and laugh, and rejoice! Tonight there is reason to love—because we are loved by God with a deep, lasting, eternal, certain love! Tonight there is Good News: A Savior is born; a Savior is born for you!