

St. Andrew's Sermons  
The Rev. John D. Rohrs  
Christmas Eve 2016

It's evening in Judea, in a field next to nowhere. A few lonely shepherds watch their flocks. Everyone else has gone home to be counted in the census, but these shepherds stay in the field because it's the only home they know. They live outside because they are outsiders, scraping by on the margins of society.

Suddenly, a light fills the sky, and it is here, to these poor shepherds, that an angel shares the news: the messiah is born. At first the men are terrified by this otherworldly visitor, and who can blame them? Angels at midnight are unsettling. But what makes the rest of this story so powerful is precisely that it's not otherworldly. Jesus isn't born in the clouds, or in a gilded palace. He's born into poverty and fear. He's born into a world that we recognize. It's a world that knows pain and hunger. A world where bad things happen, where uncertainty reigns. And yet it is here, into this world that the angel speaks: "Do not be afraid. A savior is born."

In the past few weeks, I've had an unusual number of pastoral calls. It seems like a lot of people are hurting. They're hurting for themselves, weary with illness or anxiety or grief. And they're hurting for others, overwhelmed by the need they see in the world – whether it's Syria or South Sudan or in our own country or city. People are tired, worried, afraid; so here we are in this season of giving but for many folks it feels like there's not much left to give.

So imagine for a moment that you are one of those weary shepherds, fighting sleep in the fields. Imagine that you are the one to receive this impossible news, this message of hope and peace. How would you feel? What would it do for your soul? Will Willimon, the former dean of Duke Chapel, once wrote that the story of Christmas is not really about giving. We think that's what it's about. That's what we tell our kids and we give gifts to family and friends. But if you put yourself in the shoes of these shepherds, you realize the story isn't about giving at all. It's about receiving. It's about hearing this news, and learning that God has come among us to change the trajectory of human life. We are no longer destined for division and death. We are so loved that love itself took flesh to walk among us.

So take a deep breath. There is nothing more to do. There's nothing more to give. Not tonight. Tonight, it's time to stop for a few quiet moments and listen for the message of the angels. Let it fill you with hope and peace. Let it give strength to your soul. Do not be afraid. A savior is born.

Later, in the days and weeks and months ahead, we can respond. We do have a part to play, a gift to make in return. It's spelled out in a poem by Howard Thurman called "The Work of Christmas." He says:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flock,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among brothers,  
To make music in the heart.

That is the work of Christmas. But it's not the work of a day or a season; it's the work of a lifetime. And if we want to engage in that work, if we want to be sustained for the journey ahead, we first need to listen. Today, our only job is to stand with the shepherds and hear the unending cry of the angels in heaven: Glory to God in the highest and peace to all people on earth. Unto us this day a Savior is born. Amen.