

Riverside United Church

December 24, 2024

Scripture Lesson: Luke 2: 1-20

The Birth of Jesus

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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 Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Prayer of Illumination:

God of Life, may the words of my mouth,
and the meditations of all our minds and hearts,
lead us to deeper understanding of you,
and the love you call us to live. Amen.

“An Echo of a Gloria”

In Celtic spirituality, there is a concept of a “thin place.” It’s an experience, a time when the distance between heaven and earth, between the holy and the ordinary is thin - the distance doesn’t feel very large. A thin place is experiential - not always predictable or experienced by everyone at the same time.

One of the gifts of our memories is that based on past experience, we can anticipate and expect a time or place to be a thin place. And I think that Christmas Eve worship is one of those thin places for many. On this ordinary night, on this silent night, on this holy night, we gather to feel, to know the gift of holy love as we sing, as we hear the story, as we share in communion, as we share in a candlelight time of wonder and peace.

One of the thin places of Celtic spirituality is the island of Iona off the west coast of Scotland. And our family spent a week on Iona 13 years ago and it holds many wonder-filled memories of meaning and connection. But one afternoon we traveled to the uninhabited (at least by people) island of Staffa. One of the features of Staffa is Fingal’s Cave and the acoustics within the cave were amazing. Mendelssohn visited there and Fingal’s Cave inspired his Hebrides Overture.

When we were in the cave, there was a group and we broke out in song singing “Amazing Grace” and the sound was incredible as the sound and then the echo in that cave reverberated. I imagine that the inhabitants of the island - the puffins - may have heard the echo of the songs sung. It was July so none of us thought to sing Angels We Have Heard on High. But I would have liked to have heard the echo of that “gloria” from that carol.

One of the ways that tonight may be a thin place is that the gloria of the angels so long ago continues to echo in our souls. We need to know the echoes of a gloria. Glory to God in the Highest and Peace to All on Earth - Gloria in Excelsis Deo.

The Christmas story is so rich in meaning and we can imagine the reaction and response of the various characters. Earlier this afternoon we acted out the story here, it was a little bit more chaotic than this service here and we had a little bit of a crisis, because no one wanted to be Mary. How can you have the story without Mary, but then again who would want to be Mary? The shepherds - I love that the shepherds are part of the story, because that is a reminder to us that this story is offered to all of us. The shepherds were not very high on the social ladder of the time. They probably didn’t interact much with the town folk.

They had a tough and probably largely unappreciated role of looking after the sheep. And it's to them that the angels announce the good news.

And that is a reminder that the good news is offered to all of us. The echo of a gloria is known to each of us as we gather on this night. The echo of a gloria can reverberate in each heart and soul - those who have been to Christmas Eve worship as long as they can remember and to those who are experiencing this for the first time. The echo can be heard amidst our questions, and convictions, and doubts and beliefs. The echo can be heard amidst various realities and dynamics of living, including grief, sadness, brokenness, fear and longing for meaning and peace.

The echo of a gloria may be heard or known as a deep sigh of gratitude, as a moment of wonder, as a hearty round of laughter, as familiar words sung by memory, as a phrase of a song or poetry that touches our heart or intrigues our minds. The echo of gloria may linger over a family gathering or be known in the silence of solitude. The echo may be heard as a whisper or as great chorus of "gloria in excelsis deo. "

We may picture angels as dressed in white with wings - but messengers of God, revealers of the Holy may be dressed in various disguises representing the great diversity of humanity and creation.

The message delivered on that Bethlehem hillside transcends time and space and continues to proclaim peace on earth and goodwill to all. For unto us is born a Way, a Truth, a Love that inspires, intrigues and challenges us to live deeper into who we are called to be.

We hear the power of that story on this night and the power of that story breaks down the divide between the Holy and the ordinary, the spiritual and the mundane. This Christmas story is a thin place because God is revealed as a baby - the human and divine are not separate, but one.

That unity, that thin space truth, invites us into wonder, into gratitude, into hope. May the light of God glow in our souls, so that we may learn to hear and to recognize the echoes of the good news and truth of this night, of this Holy story. May we hear the echo of a Gloria reverberating into our world, and we pray that our world may hear the power of the angels proclaiming and promising peace and goodwill to all.

Amen.