

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of *our* hearts be always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, *our* strength and *our* Redeemer. *Amen.*

Are you familiar with the term “thin place?” In a thin place the distance between you and God is so thin it almost seems you could reach out and touch God and God would touch you right back. If you’ve ever been out in the middle of nowhere at night, away from the busyness of your everyday life, you probably know what I mean. If you were far enough from city lights and noises and looked up, you may have felt a peaceful stillness that reminds you you’ve been separated from the world. One of the most awesome aspects of God’s creation, one of the best thin places I know, is underneath the night sky. When the sky is clear and the air is crisp, the number of stars is almost overwhelming. No longer random little spots of light in the darkness, the stars become a ceiling of twinkling white on a background of midnight blue. It’s a vision that helps us recognize the enormity of God’s power and makes us understand how small we are in the grand scheme of all God has made and given to us.

On a cold winter night under a clear sky, lit by a canopy of twinkling stars, the shepherds watched their flocks. At the end of the day, when the sheep had stopped to rest, the shepherds’ job became easier. They still had to be alert, watching for unwanted visitors, for thieves or predator animals that might harm their sheep. But as the flock slept, the shepherds too could be still. Covered by the blanket of thousands of stars, they could feel the peaceful stillness replacing the constant movements of their day. In those nighttime moments, did they recognize the enormity of God’s power? Did they sense the thin-ness of the place, and their own smallness in the grand perspective of God’s creation?

Suddenly “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Luke tells us the shepherds were terrified. Of course they were! What if an angel popped into your office or walked into your classroom or suddenly appeared before you in the aisle of the grocery store? Is this real or is it a dream? When the angel spoke to the shepherds, they knew they weren’t dreaming. But they didn’t understand why an angel would appear to *them*. An angel was a messenger of God and the shepherds of the ancient world were the lowest of the low, disliked, disrespected, disregarded. But the angel said, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among them who he favors!” Being favored was a new concept for them. Suddenly they found themselves standing in that thin place where there was no doubt of God’s presence with them. That—and their curiosity about a Savior, the Messiah—compelled them to go and see.

Tonight, much like the shepherds, we’ve come to see the baby. What is it that calls *us* to seek him on this holy night? This is a beautiful place, and here we are surrounded by family and friends, [watching our children explore the wonder of the night,] hearing beautiful music, feeling something we can barely name. Is it the longing to know someone who is far bigger and much greater than we? Is it the desire for a softening of our wills, a respite from the hardness that surrounds us in our daily lives? There is a palpable feeling here in this place, especially on this night, that we are in the hands of someone much stronger than we. It’s a feeling of safety and security, of hope, and joy, and peace, a feeling that lets us lower our guard and let go of the fear of giving up our control. Perhaps that is the Spirit of Christmas, those feelings of trust and innocence and surrender, feelings so different from the reality of our lives that we cannot hold onto them for long. So the Spirit of Christmas seems to pass quickly through our lives—here today, gone tomorrow, hopefully to come back next year. But babies grow up. Cute and cuddly cannot, will not, last forever.

At a music program at another church, beautiful voices sang Christmas carols and holiday songs, accompanied by a video presentation. Just as we were getting comfortable with the whole touchy feel-good business of Christmas, the images on the screen jarred me back to reality. There, a picture of a tiny baby, soft and sweet, was followed by a shocking image of the grown up Christ, wearing a crown of thorns, carrying a cross. The words of the Prophet Isaiah came to mind: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace—the responsibility for creation on the shoulders of a tiny baby, a child whose purpose was decided and named long before he was born. He had no choice but to grow up and claim it.

And we, too, must grow up to claim our own purpose and take responsibility for our own roles in this baby’s life. Through the words of his Gospel, Luke constantly reminds us that the coming of the Son of God means change for the world, an overturning of “what is” for what God wills it to be. For this brief season of Christmas,

we escape into the dream of what we'd like the world to be like. And then we return to the reality that we are called to change it.

In his collection called *The Work of Christmas*, Howard Thurman wrote that

“When the angels’ song is stilled,
“When the star in the sky is gone,
“When the kings and the 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 the brothers
--to make music in the heart.

After they visited the newborn babe, lying in the manger, the shepherds “made known what had been told them about this child.” They were the most unlikely of all the messengers God might have chosen, yet they “returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”

Here tonight, we are in a thin place, where the Spirit of Christmas leads our praises and worship of the incarnate God, the newborn king. The *work* of Christmas begins as we leave here, carrying his light into the world. Let us proceed with haste, just as the shepherds did. *Amen.*