

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2007

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Emanuel Lutheran Church (ELCA), Dallas, Texas, USA

*(Enter after solo in shepherd costume.)*

Good evening. My name is Zebedee. I came to talk to you because winter nights like tonight, when the moon is full and the night sky is quiet and bright, so many memories come back to me. You see, I am an old man now, but for many, many years, I was a shepherd. And many, many years ago, when I was just a boy, there was a night, an unforgettable night, when the heavens opened, and the world changed. Maybe I should back up a little.

At first, it was a night just like any other night. The sheep had quieted, we were huddled around our little fire, talking about everything, and nothing. And then, all of a sudden, there was a brilliance, brighter than fire, brighter than lightening. And we could see a form, or something like a man or woman, but different. And a voice saying something. I was too scared, all I remember was something about a baby being born in Bethlehem, and about him being a King. Then in an instant, the whole sky was like daylight, and a sound like singing, only filling the night like thunder, or the wind. It was so beautiful, almost joyful, and hopeful. But soft like love, and calm, like peace. Then, just as suddenly as they came, they all disappeared. And the night sky was nothing but moon and stars again. We sat for the longest time, only half-believing what we had just seen, the sweet song still filling our minds.

Until finally, old Zach said, why don't we go to Bethlehem, it wasn't that far away, and see if there even is a new baby. We didn't recall anyone who was expecting, but with all the travelers coming and going with the Roman census, there might be some travelers in town, maybe someone at the inn. So off we went. It took awhile, but we eventually found him, and his mother and father.

Only they weren't in the inn, or at someone's house. They were in a stable. All huddled together, the little baby bundled up against the cold. There wasn't anywhere else to lay him down so they put some straw in the cow's food box and laid him there. He was sleeping, and so tiny. I'd never seen a newborn baby before. And while the other shepherds talked with Mary and Joseph and told them about what we had seen in the sky and what the messengers had said, I just looked and looked at that baby Jesus. Wondering to myself, would he really be a King someday?

He must have been something important because not long after that some strange visitors came. We heard they were from far away and they brought that little baby gifts, like gold and stuff. And right after that Herod's soldiers came. We all feared that the little baby who was going to be king had been killed with the rest. But some said they escaped. Most of us didn't think about him too much for a very long time. I grew up, got married, had babies of my own. But I still remembered that night, I wondered what it all could have been for. I spent many a winter night gazing up into the night sky, wondering, and never knowing what it had all been about.

And then, just a few years ago, we heard stories of a man named Jesus from way up in Nazareth. We heard tell that he was a powerful healer, a wise teacher. People came to him from all around the country. He was kind to most folks, especially those who everyone else ignored or treated badly. He wasn't quite so nice to those who thought they were better than everybody else. People started to follow him everywhere. My sons did too. They would come home from time to time and tell me his stories, mostly stories about God, what God is like, and how God isn't like what the high priests and Pharisees are always saying he is. How God loves us, like a Father. How God forgives us, even without us having to make a sacrifice at the temple. This Jesus talked about us loving each other, even loving our enemies. He talked about being fair, about trusting God to care for us. I was never sure whether he was going to a king, but he talked often about a Kingdom of God. Just where that was, I never rightly knew. But just listening to him talk about life, and God, made me think a lot about my own life, and how I lived, and how I treated others.

That was, up until this last spring. Last Passover, in fact. That's when it all came to a terrible, terrible end. A lot of us still are not sure how or why it happened. Or who it was that did it. But they crucified him. In no time at all he was arrested, tried of some kind of trumped-up charges, and hung up on a cross to die. I remember that day too. The women cried and cried. The menfolk of his followers all ran away to hide, afraid they would be next. The sky turned all dark. One could hardly stand to go out to see him, though I did, for just a little while. His arms were stretched out wide. His hands and feet with nails through them. Those hands that had touched and healed so many were bound and bleeding. Hands that had blessed and broken bread, fed the crowds, now were nailed to the cross.

But the most amazing thing was his calmness. He didn't yell or curse and cry out like so many do. When he did speak, he spoke calmly: to his mother, to a follower, to the soldiers, to God, I suppose. He was perfectly calm, almost as if he knew there was some reason for it all. Some purpose for him being up there to die. I never could understand, but maybe he knew something more that I could know. At the end of the day they took him down from the cross and buried him. We all thought it was the end of the dream, the end of that Kingdom of God that he talked about all the time, the end of knowing God the way he taught us. But not long after day, day or two at most, there was even more amazing news. They said he rose up from the grave.

I don't know if that is true or not. I never saw him again. But his followers all still get together like they did when he was there with them. They still do all the things he did, they heal people, and help people. Their learned ones talk and talk about what it all means. All I know is his words changed my life. Knowing God the way he taught us saves me from always being afraid of God and afraid of God's punishment. It has changed the way I look at the world, and how I think about the people around me. I don't always do it right away, but I try to forgive people. I try to think about others before myself. I don't know what those scholars will come up with, but I know one thing for sure. He changed me, and my life. And on cold winter nights like tonight I remember that first night, those angels, and him. And I wonder if anyone will even remember him. Will anyone tell his stories after he is gone? Will anyone teach the things he taught us, about

loving and forgiving, about that Kingdom of God place? Will his message about God's love go on? Will anyone remember at all?

I hope you will. Amen.