

## ***Journey from Night into Day***

Scriptures: Isaiah 9: 2-7; Luke 2: 1-20

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### **I. Introduction**

A couple of weeks ago, our wonderful musicians put on a production called *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, about a young shepherd boy who one night answers the door and finds there three strangers who have been following a star looking for a new king. And throughout this Advent we've been picking up on this theme of night visitors and who are those unexpected voices that we encounter and what do they have to teach us, whether they're visitors from another land who come to our shores as refugees or visitors who interrupt us on the street corner or visitors who may be family or friends that we weren't expecting, what are the voices that they bring to us.

And we've been looking at how God speaks to us through those visitors and we're finishing that journey tonight at the manger that holds the Christ Child. And that night is a night that is full of visitors. The shepherds on the hillside experienced a visitation from the choirs of angels who send them on in their turn to be visitors to a family who has just arrived in Bethlehem, who are visiting Bethlehem from a different land at the whim of a faraway government. And all of these visitors in their own way are bearing a word from God. The angels bear the good word of miraculous birth, a new king, and the shepherds bear that good word to the family in Bethlehem, and Mary bears *the Word* as it comes into the world.

### **II. Unexpected visitors**

And the first thing to notice about all of these visitors is how dramatically unexpected they are. The shepherds are minding their own business, going about what they do every day of the year in caring for their sheep and are dramatically surprised by this overwhelming vision of angels; the family in Bethlehem as far as they know are there knowing no one until this raucous band of shepherds stumbles into their stable in the middle of the night proclaiming good news. And the narrative of the world is shuffling on blithely unaware that the creator of all the cosmos has chosen that night to enter into human history.

Likewise, our passage from Isaiah talks about how God is often found moving in unexpected places as well. Isaiah puts us squarely in the middle of a warzone; the territories of Zebulun and Naphtali were crossing roads in the ancient world where the great superpowers of their day often met and clashed. It was called Galilee of the Gentiles because it was a place where foreigners were often deported to. And Isaiah prophesied hope for the residents who were frequently overrun in armed combat. The scene is hard and violent and desperate. War, violence, forced resettlements, poverty -- these are not the traditional or the typical cultural images of Christmas Eve, and yet for 1500 years our church has been reading these words as a reminder that the light came into the darkness at its very darkest point. The light shone in the darkness, the light to the Gentiles. This is what our church is about on this holy night --

comfort for those who are suffering injustice, that is where God chooses to pitch God's tent, to become flesh among us.

And that's an important word for us to keep in mind on a night like tonight, because in a society that gets as focused as we do, our immediate reaction to interruptions, to visitors that we aren't expecting is resistance and sometimes anger and frustration. We don't want to be interrupted on the street corner as we're going from one place another because we've got some place important to go. We don't want to have to take a detour because I'm late already because I was cramming one too many things into my schedule. And yet, the message of Bethlehem is that almost always the important things that God is about are found in the interruptions. They are words that are spoken by people that we didn't plan on having to listen to and sometimes they happen in places that we weren't planning on finding ourselves. Unexpected voices in unexpected places.

### **III. Disruptive visitors**

We don't like the interruptions because they disrupt an already chaotic life. We've got more than enough chaos in our lives already and particularly at Christmas when on top of the normal level of chaos that we can barely keep control of, now we've got parties to go to and presents to buy and family coming and maybe unexpected people coming, and we've got to stretch ourselves just one more bit, and if I have to do it any more I know I'm going to break. All I want is a silent night. I just want a little bit of quiet. Because maybe if I had just a moment of quiet, I could hear that still small voice of God seeking to speak a word to me. Maybe if I had just a little more quiet I could hear where God is calling me to go.

But maybe seeking the quiet is not what this night is about, because Bethlehem all of those centuries ago was surely not a quiet, silent, holy feeling night. It was a night in which a frightened young woman was giving birth in a filthy stable surrounded by noisy animals and interrupted by that raucous crowd of shepherds. It is in the midst of chaos that the Word of God is born. So maybe, maybe what the word for us is tonight is to start looking for where God might be moving in the midst of the chaos. What are the signs of the Holy Spirit being at work in places that feel completely out of control? Or maybe the call is to figure out how to create a little, tiny bit of silence inside ourselves in the midst of the chaos, much as Mary does as she ponders all of these things in her heart.

### **IV. Conclusion**

See, the message of Bethlehem is that God often, perhaps most often, speaks to us just when we are in the midst of something else, something that feels more important, that feels more timely, that feels more pressing, and we get that nudge to stop and listen in a different sort of way. Maybe our call tonight is to stop on the street corner when someone speaks to us and to hear what they have to say. Maybe it's to not get frustrated with our children as they interrupt us in the middle of that last present or the last card that we're writing and to hear what they are speaking to us, to take a moment to engage in a different way. God speaks to us through unexpected voices at unexpected times and in the dark of this night a child cries out, an unexpected voice knocking at the door of our overly busy lives, an unexpected visitor, the

Word of God who cannot yet speak a word inviting us to open the door so that our whole world can change.

Amen.