

Christmas Eve – Year A – December 24, 2019 – The Rev. Canon Joan Anthony

Christmas pageants are a staple of the Christmas season in Churches. I've seen many and even participated in a few, as I am sure is true of many of you. Every year I am reminded of a most memorable Christmas pageant. It was many years ago, in a large congregation in this diocese. The parishioner who put on the pageant had done it literally for years and she had it down to a science.

Children who were participating were grouped by age, 3-6-year olds were sheep, 7-8 year olds were angels those 9-12 were shepherds. Mary, Joseph and Gabriel were teenagers. And the baby Jesus was a doll! In the year I am remembering, all was going according to plan. The 3-6 year olds were gathered in one classroom, outfitted with capes around their shoulders. White cotton balls had been glued on to the capes to resemble fleece. The children were given caps, white with little pink ears. Most of the children were cooperative, looked a bit dazed and not quite sure why anyone thought this cape thing was a good idea or really why they were there at all. They were lined up at the back of the church and at the appropriate time sent down the center aisle to the front. The script called for the sheep to go up three steps into the chancel, and settle down in a circle stage left. Sheep did not have a speaking part. There were the occasionally Baaa's of mostly little boys who were bored with the whole process and thought to really get into character. On this memorable night, the sheep settled in and then one little girl, Kendra, went completely off script. Before the shepherds could get down the aisle, she stood up, moved to the center of the platform, looked calmly out at all of the adults in the pews and said in a loud voice. "I have come to see the baby Jesus." She looked around expectantly and then went back to her place in the flock.

Luke, in writing the account of Jesus birth many years after the event, was trying to help us see Jesus, wanting to help us see God and the gift that God had given human beings on that night in Bethlehem when Jesus was born.

Christmas is a liminal time, a time when the edge between the material and the spiritual thins out and we can more easily experience the presence of God in our midst. But that edge time when we can recognize that God is near is fragile, easily missed in all of the business of our lives. Today, (tonight), in this place, we have the opportunity to slow down and listen in a deeper way to the message of the angels. Today (tonight) we have the chance to see with the eyes of faith, to see God.

Angels are not the cute, chubby beings we see in paintings and on our Christmas cards. Angels are messengers of God. When they appear, they startle those into whose presence they come. They tend to erupt into the situation and as a result human beings react to their presence with more than fear, often with terror. That was true in the fields outside of Bethlehem where the shepherds were watching the sheep.

Imagine, it's late, the work of the day is done, you are sitting near a fire for warmth, wrapped in a cloak, drowsy with sleep. The sheep are bedded down for the night and all is

quiet. Suddenly, without warning, an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. Glory of the Lord, the poetic way of sayings that God was there. Glory is the presence of God among human beings. The angel appeared, literally was seen, and they were terrified with good reason.

And so it makes sense that the first words of the angel are “fear not, I bring you good news.” Good news, brought not only to the shepherds, not only to the people who would follow Jesus but good news to us as well. What is this good news?

“...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.” In those few words, there is the cause for great joy, and there is the recognition that God has given human beings in all time a gift. That gift is peace. Peace not as a condition or but as a way of living, as the design that God has for humankind. When we come to see the baby Jesus, deep within our souls we know that what we seek is this gift of peace. Another way of hearing the words of the angels is to understand them as peace to people of good intention. People who are willing to open their hearts and minds, their very souls to receive the gift of God, that peace which we know can pass understanding. It is in receiving the gift of peace that we experience salvation.

As we seek to see God, it is well to remember that God is also eternally and always seeking us. That is the pull of that God shaped hole in our hearts. God seeking us and we seeking God. When we meet God who seeks us with a seeking heart, we can find the peace that is the promise of the angels. It is a peace that is not a condition but rather a way of living and being. It is the peace of faith deep and abiding. It is ours for the grasping.

The shepherds response to the words of the angels was to get up and go to see for themselves this wonder that had occurred.