

“Let’s go!”

Christmas Eve 2018

Church of the Ascension

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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. 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 Savior, 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 favors!’ 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, glory-fying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. - Luke 2:1-20

“Let’s go!”

Many of us here may have recently heard, or spoken, those words. There was the holiday party, or an annual pilgrimage to see family or friends, or, even in the past hour or so: *“I love it when we sing Silent Night. Let’s go.”*

“Let’s go” is also heard in the story of Christ’s birth that we just heard. Some shepherds have been doing what they’ve done on a thousand other nights. Tending the fire. Making small talk. The ongoing cold snap. The wolf that was spotted last night. And who would be stuck with the late watch?

And then suddenly out of nowhere, an angel, and light so pure it could only be described as the glory of God. Later, they all agreed: the angel seemed to have been sent to *them*, to tell *them* of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. *And* it had taken place nearby, just over in Bethlehem.

To emphasize the divine message, or maybe just as a show of God’s own joy, the angel was suddenly accompanied by *“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 favors!’”*

And then: the darkness returned. Utter silence. No one dared to breathe or move.

The moment passed when, all at once, the same impulse seized all of them: *“the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go!’ ‘Let us go right now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’* And they did go. And they saw the Truth of the angel’s proclamation. And they themselves became witnesses to the savior’s birth. *‘Let’s go.’*

In religious language, what the shepherds experienced was an *annunciation*. Think of it as *God’s announcement of God’s plans*. Most of us know of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel to Mary, without which there would have been no subsequent annunciation to the shepherds and

without which none of us would be here tonight. But there are many annunciations in the Bible: Moses and the burning bush; Isaiah in the Temple, Paul on the road to Damascus.

None of these annunciations, or others, would be in the Bible were it not for the fact that, in every case, the recipients responded by saying 'Let's go.' Or, in many cases, it's more solitary: 'I will go.' "Here am I, send me."

In our faith story we boldly contend that these local and personal responses have made all the difference in the world. How often, though, do you or I consider or believe that our own local or personal responses to the divine moment may make all the difference in the world? Where in the world is mercy or justice or forgiveness or hope waiting for you or me, for us, to say, 'Let's go!'

In the case of our shepherds tonight, "... *they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger ... [and] they made known what had been told them ... and all who heard it were amazed ...*" The shepherds' response to their annunciation appears to have been immediate and unified and exuberant. But let's not overlook or forget the fleeting prior moment, when we are told that they were *terrified*.

Terror is apparently a common first response to an annunciation. Or if not terror, confusion, or questioning. Moses at first says to the Lord, "*They won't believe me. And, you know I'm no good at public speaking. Please find someone else.*" (Exodus 4:1,10) Isaiah says, "*I'm unworthy!*" (Isaiah 6:5) Mary boldly asks, "*How can this be?*" (Luke 1:34)

This initial terror or resistance or questioning may be familiar to you or me from some annunciation in our own lives ... "*But hold on,*" you may be thinking. "*I'm no Moses! I'm no Mary!*" And it's true that you or I may not be the great luminaries—at least not yet.

But in the case of tonight's annunciation of the birth of the savior—did you notice or wonder about the fact that it came to unnamed migrant laborers? These shepherds are emblems and heralds of a main and subversive premise in Luke's gospel, God's inclusion in God's plans of those whom the world deems unimportant. And if these shepherd's, why not you or me?

The poet Denise Levertov asks us this: "*Aren't there annunciations of one sort or another in most lives?*" She answers:

"Some [of us do] unwillingly
undertake great destinies,
[we] enact them in sullen pride,
uncomprehending.
More often
those moments
when roads of light and storm
open from darkness in a man or woman,
are turned away from
in dread, in a wave of weakness, in despair
and with relief.
Ordinary lives continue.
God does not smite [us].
But the gates close, the pathway vanishes."

Where, we may ask, is the divine now seeking to be born in your life, or mine, or ours? Whose voices or what dreams or signs might be our annunciations, giving us inklings, pointing the way for us? What would it be like to push through the terror and resistance, and to find our true heart, and to say 'Let's go!'