

Four Blessings:

4. All People

Fourth in the 2017 Advent sermon series
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Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
December 24, 2017—Fourth Sunday of Advent

- Luke 2:10 The angel said to them, “Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.” (Good News Translation)
- Isaiah 2:2-3-6-7 ⁶ A child is born to us! A son is given to us! And he will be our ruler. He will be called, “Wonderful Counselor,” “Mighty God,” “Eternal Father,” “Prince of Peace.” (Good News Translation)
- Theme: If God chose a group of shepherds to share the joyful good news of the Incarnation, then God intends it for all people!

Let us pray. Eternal, Innovative, Life-Giving God: speak to me... speak to us... speak to all of us in the words I share and the meditations you place within us. In the powerful and precious name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

“Can you keep a secret?”

When someone asks you that question, you know that what you're about to hear is potent somehow.

- Your “bestie” wants to confide in you about her boyfriend.
- A colleague has breaking news dealing with office politics.
- A friend wants your support as he deals with a medical issue he doesn't want shared with the general public.

“Can you keep a secret?”

In the field of international relations, diplomacy often depends on people being able to hold onto secrets until the appropriate time. In business often it's important to keep something secret for competitive reasons.

Even ministry can have its share of secrets. People don't phrase it to me quite like that, but in my work I often am entrusted with “secrets.” It could be sensitive information about a troubled personal relationship, perhaps, or someone's financial dilemma or a health-related matter or a spiritual struggle. When someone shares information that they want held in pastoral confidence, I don't even share it with my wife. People are often surprised when they discover that Mary *doesn't* know something they shared with me in confidence.

As a resident of Rocky River one of my personal community involvements is serving on the school board. As school board members often we're entrusted with information that *federal law* requires us to keep confidential.

“Can you keep a secret?” Being asked that question is both exciting and challenging. On Mary's birthday back in March we were told the news that we were going to become grandparents... but we also were told that we had to sit on that news – we couldn't tell a soul for nearly two months!

“Can you keep a secret?” We all like to think that we can, but sometimes the temptation is too strong. The information might be gossip-worthy. Knowing some restricted information might give us a feeling of power. Being able to share a secret might make us feel important, like an insider. But being asked to keep a secret is also a burden; it can be quite a weighty responsibility. Maintaining a secret requires strong character, personal discipline, an understanding and appreciation for the consequences of violating that trust.

Did God’s angel expect the shepherds to keep a secret?

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This is the final installment of my Advent sermon series called “Four Blessings.” Each sermon has focused on the same single verse from the Gospel of Luke’s Christmas story in Chapter 2. That verse is verse 10. Speaking to the shepherds in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night, “The angel said to them, ‘Don’t be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people.’” In that one verse the angel announces four blessings. On previous Sundays we’ve discovered the blessings of:

1. Don’t be afraid;
2. Here’s good news;
3. It will bring great joy; and finally this morning, the fourth blessing is,
4. It’s for all people.

The good news that will bring great joy is that the God of Heaven and Earth, of History and Hope has come among us in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. That good news is not just for those with special knowledge, or for privileged insiders, or for the elite, or for those who have proved themselves to be deserving. The good news of God’s love embodied in Jesus is for all people. Anyone can know. Everyone should know.

Perhaps that’s the reason God’s messenger brought the news to shepherds, of all people! Not to the power-obsessed bureaucrats in Herod’s Palace. Not to the movers and shakers of Roman society in Judea. Not to the religious officials of Jerusalem’s Temple. Not even to ordinary merchants or homemakers or tradespeople. But to shepherds.

To be frank, it must have seemed crazy that God would entrust such important news to a bunch of shepherds. You see, shepherds were looked down upon by all of Jewish society. Shepherds were filthy, unrefined, dirt poor, illiterate, crude. Many people figured that shepherds probably were dishonest, too. Spending most of their days in the fields, shepherds couldn’t follow the religious dietary and cleanliness rules. As far as most people were concerned, shepherds *deserved* to live in the fields far away from respectable society.

Ironically, it’s likely that it was because of their reputation that God chose to first reveal the Incarnation to, of all people, a scraggly bunch of shepherds. If they were deemed worthy to receive God’s good news, then people would realize that anyone must be deserving. What’s more, if this world-changing news was shared with the likes of shepherds (of all people!), then it was sure to be talked about and shared and spread wherever they went with whoever they ran into. Indeed, Luke writes in two places that that’s just what the shepherds did.

In verse 17 he writes that “When the shepherds saw [the infant,] they told them what the angel had said about the child.” “Them” meant Joseph and Mary, of course, plus whoever else happened to be there that night – the innkeeper couple, perhaps, or some of their guests, maybe, or perhaps neighbors noticing the commotion. The shepherds told whoever was there what the angel had said about the child. And Luke comments, “All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said.”¹

¹ Luke 2:18 Good News Bible

Then in verse 20 Luke brings the story to a close by writing, “The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen; it had been just as the angel had told them.” Imagine them walking through the narrow streets of Bethlehem in the pre-dawn hours singing boisterous songs of joy. Imagine them making their way back to the hillside pastures early the next morning shouting phrases of praises to God. No, it wasn’t going to remain a secret for long. Bethlehem learned the news. So did Jerusalem seven miles up the road. So would the lands to the east when the Magi—the “wise men”—headed back home. The news was spread by disciples and missionaries and preachers and teachers through Judea and Asia Minor and beyond because it was good news of a great joy... for all people.

God loves you, and me, and all people—that’s the good news! God accepts you. Let’s not keep this a secret! Follow the lead of the shepherds; let’s not treat this good news of great joy like a secret.

- When someone asks how you can stay optimistic in difficult times, you can say that the support you feel from your church community is like an embrace from God assuring you God will stand by you.
- When grief brings you low but doesn’t completely undo you, that’s because you know good news of great joy that God is with us always, even to the end of time.
- When friends wonder how you remain hopeful when plans unravel or people disappoint, you can tell them that you know God loves you and that inspires the hope within you to press on in faith.

The four blessings the angel announced to the *shepherds* have reached through time and space to be blessings to *you and me* as well. We need not fear, for God’s love incarnated in the birth of Jesus is good news of great joy for shepherds and peasants, for the confident and the curious, for preachers and pew-sitters... good news of great joy for all people.

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