Rev. Dan Welch Christmas Eve 12-24-24 Text- Luke 2:8 and 20

The Most Beautiful Thing to Hear

'Twas the night before Christmas, but in the fields surrounding Bethlehem ***a lot*** of creatures were stirring, so it was certainly *not* a time for a long winter's nap. The vigilant eyes of the shepherds peered into the darkness, alert against wandering sheep and vicious predators. There were plenty of wild animals lurking in the darkness who would like nothing better than a mouthful of fresh mutton, and it was up to the shepherds to keep watch over their flock by night.

It was not a job for wimps; this work called for a keen eye and an iron will. Shepherds were tough, hardened men- and neither rain nor sleet nor gloom of night could keep them from their appointed tasks.

Tonight on this silent, holy night, I would like you to think about those shepherds and those fields surrounding Bethlehem. In those shepherds you and I have the most direct link with what this night is all about. Because after all the excitement and joy and even the craziness of Christmas is over, you and I, like them, have to go back and do what we've been doing all year long.

It was an extraordinary scene in a very ordinary place, as St. Luke tells the story. We've heard the words so many years- so many of us- that we've lost the punch of what happened there. The first proclamation of the ***Gospel*** was done by an angel- a heavenly messenger of God- to men who were very earthly, ***earthy***, even; men who lived and worked most of their lives not among human beings in civilized surroundings, but out in the open fields with sheep.

There was no magnificent sanctuary there, no fancy pulpit- and it was not a particularly admirable sermon, as sermons go. No moving emotional appeals, no finely crafted phrases- and probably one of the shortest sermons on record, too: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord."

It was so simple and straight-to-the-point, & yet all the sermons ever preached cannot hold a candle to this angelic sermon. There that first Christmas night in those ordinary surroundings- this most extraordinary news was announced: that God had become a man- a Baby.

"This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." And on that silent, holy night, this is what made the night so holy. That the Holy One of Israel appeared among His people wrapped in human flesh. It sounds too good to be true, and it indeed it would be

unbelievable if it were not for the power of the Holy Spirit, who gives such faith to human hearts to believe God's Holy Word.

And so, hearing and believing, the shepherds "hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, Who was lying in the manger." And when it was all over the shepherds returned to their fields, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen- it had been just as the angel told them.

That's what it's all about, this crazy commotion we call Christmas. It's not a celebration of human kindness and goodwill. It's a celebration of ***God's*** good will toward a fallen world. Demonstrated there that silent, holy night as it was one dark and dreary Friday afternoon when the Hope of all the world hung upon a cross to die.

Yes, I would be remiss this ***afternoon/ tonight*** if I didn't tell you that the manger and the cross belong together. And when they meet in heart and mind, there Christmas finds its ***true*** meaning.

Dear friends in Christ, ***this is what Christmas is all about***- that this Baby, God's own Son- God from God and Light from Light- and yet at the same time Mary's Son, with our human flesh and blood- that He has come to save us all from the slavery of sin. Being made a curse for us, He died a sinner's death, though He had no sin of His own- taking all our sin upon Himself, He gladly endured the Father's wrath unleashed upon Him at the cross- all for us and for our salvation.

You might be on cloud nine tonight, with thoughts of presents, Christmas dinners, and family get-togethers on your mind or you might be really struggling, longing for Christmases just like the ones you used to know.

But whoever you are and whatever your circumstance, stand among the shepherds tonight to hear the wonder, comfort and joy of this silent, holy night: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born *to you*; He is Christ the Lord." That truly is the most beautiful thing in the world to hear tonight and you and I needed to hear it again**.**

And ***now*** this is the sign for ***you***; the Lord Jesus is wrapped up for ***you*** tonight in the swaddling clothes of His holy Word. There's not one burdened soul present among us that cannot find release in Him. And there's not one lonely, broken heart here tonight that cannot be mended in His love.

It would be nice to linger at the manger (pause), but all too soon we, like the shepherds before us, have to go back to ***our*** work and every-day lives. May you, like them, find your hearts made new and clean and whole in Christ's

redeeming love. May you, like them, tell what you have been told concerning this holy Child.

But for now, may all of us simply open up our mouths and in simple childlike faith glorify and praise our God for all we have heard and seen this silent, holy night. We sing “Away in a Manger” (LSB 364) as we bring our offerings unto the Lord.