

“O Holy Night”

A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2016

Christmas Eve

A fellow Presbyterian minister who lives up north in a place where there's snow in December fell in love and married a farmer. Karin's farmer husband is a sweet guy, but he's extremely practical about their livestock. These are farm animals, not pets, no matter how cute they are. They graze and produce and reproduce to earn their keep.

On Karin and her husband's farm, there are about six dozen head of sheep. Normally, the little baby lambs arrive in April, which makes Easter very hectic for a pastor like Karin.

Well, just about two weeks ago, they had a December lamb arrive. It was bone-chillingly cold and another snowstorm was about to blow in. Karin's husband went out to check on the sheep a bit later in the day than he would have liked. He left Karin inside the house, but he took his mom along - and thanks be to God, for without his mom's witness, this story would never have been told. They found the flock wandering around near the barn - as sheep do - and the farmer could tell that one of the ewes had just given birth. Rejoice - a new lamb!

But the farmer saw no baby in the crowd. He looked around, alarmed. The night suddenly felt like it was rushing in and pushing away the light. The farmer and his mom began to methodically search the pasture. Karin's mother-in-law took the tree line. Karin's husband started from the opposite side. The wind was blowing and Karin's mother-in-law couldn't imagine how they'd see anything in the white fields as dusk approached. Suddenly, she saw a blur across the pasture. It was her son, the farmer, bolting toward the fence, and then leaping over it into the pasture. He started removing his winter coat and his sweatshirt before he even got to the lump in the snow. Quick as a jackrabbit, he wrapped the newborn lamb in the shirt first, because it had been closest to his body.

They rushed back to the barn and the farmer — generally a kind, soft-spoken gentleman — began screaming at his mother to bring him a bucket of very hot water. He rejected the first bucket she brought. It wasn't hot enough. His mother was afraid of scalding the lamb, but the farmer demanded she follow his orders. The mother ewe's body would have been 105 degrees! Bring another bucket! He kept checking the lamb's throat to feel for any warmth or signs of movement or life. The lamb was still and cold. A sufficiently hot bucket of water arrived and the farmer plunged the lamb into the bucket and rubbed it's little body over and over.

The farmer told his mother to keep rubbing the lamb while he went to find the mama sheep. After a few minutes, with some warmth pressed into it's flesh, the little creature awoke and started to move around. The farmer brought the mama into the stall, and she started calling for her baby. The lamb perked its ears and, freed from the bucket, toddled over to its mother and began to nurse.

When the farmer and his mother returned to the house, he told nothing of this winter miracle. He simply and joyfully told Karin, “We had a lamb! We named her December.” He’s a humble and unsentimental guy, and he probably knew that if he told Karin, that she’d go and tell all her pastor buddies and he’d be famous in churches around the country this year. But his mom couldn’t be stopped. She told Karin everything. She was so proud of her son, the farmer and shepherd, whose name happens to be Joseph.

By the way, if you want to see what December and her mom look like after the service, I’ve posted a picture of them outside my office.

This is the night when holiness pervades. This is the night when cynicism gets pushed aside. All the little details we fret and sweat about dissolve in the face of something cosmic. And then that cosmic thing is sharply focused on something so ordinary and particular and messy as a birth in a village halfway around the world and over two thousand years ago. In Sunday School with our elementary-aged kids, I’ve asked them this month about the sounds and smells and sights they imagine finding around a manger. And your children did not disappoint with their answers. Suffice it to say they’re pretty sure it stunk in there. We take this messy and ordinary event, and we point to it as a game changer.

This is the night when holiness insists that you drop your guard and hope a little. The world is full of shadows and terrors and chaos and we Presbyterians diligently encounter the world with the gospel in one hand and the newspaper in the other. Much of the time we scan the pastures for signs of hope and stay just this side of “sore afraid.” And often we’re right there with the shepherds, unsure of whether it’s angels or demons we see before us. The whole world at the end of 2016 seems sore afraid.

But tonight? Tonight, determined as we may be to write off anything good in the world, we hear a story that makes us wonder if God just might be able to do something with us - even “sore afraid” us. I know it was Adrian Steward that read that passage, but in my head those verses always sound like Linus from A Charlie Brown Christmas. It was on TV Thursday night, and if you pay close attention to the part where Linus gives his big speech explaining to Charlie Brown what Christmas is all about, you’ll see that he drops his beloved security blanket just as he delivers the line, “the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not; for behold, I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.’”

On this holy night, in the midst of a globe full of chaos, we are reminded that there is hope and life and perseverance. And that there are people determined to scan the pastures looking for the lost and the vulnerable and the sore afraid. And that some are willing to jump over fences and throw off their coats and demand that something be done. On this holy night, we find the one who would be called the Good Shepherd, who would go in search of us when we go astray, and who, in full resurrection glory, would tell his followers, “Feed my sheep.”

On this holy night we are a people, found by our God,, held together in love, surrounded by a hope seen and heard in mysterious power laid before us in humble grace. We are a Christmas people. Alleluia. Amen.