

“Singing with Angels”
A sermon by the Reverend Joe Genau
for Edgewood Presbyterian Church
Luke 1,2; John 1:1-5
December 24, 2017 - Christmas Eve

Y’all, I’m a sucker for Christmas. I love it so much. I love the singing and the candles and everything about this service. Give me Bing Crosby. Give me Tiny Tim. I’ll even take the Grinch. I adore the silly movies and the traditions and the music on the radio. I love the sentimentality around Christmas — I just can’t help myself.

That sentimentality is, of course, all spun sugar. It’s wonderful. I relish it. But it’s sugar that we’ve added, because the story we share tonight is wildly unsentimental.

It’s the story of a family wrapped up in divinity — in grand divine plans. And we know that things are hard for those to whom God gives purpose.

It is the story of God somehow, someday, deciding that the old way of talking to us, and working through us, and walking with us is not working, and that something new must arise.

It’s the story of God taking the next incredibly illogical step of *being us*. And so we get the *logos*, the Word, entering our world of dust and breath and fire and water and death. This cosmic bigness coming to be us in our broken world.

It’s the story of child birth in a time long before modern medicine.

It’s the story of ancient words of prophets coursing through the centuries and converging in a backwater of Rom. Empire. The prophetic oracles convene at a random house and they don’t use the front door. They go out back, with the animals.

This is the story of ragged, hairy sheep herders having one trippy night as they meet a holy visitor who tells them to “fear not,” and then the sky fills miraculously with song.

It’s a story that isn’t sentimental, but something much more real, much larger. And it’s a story that feels so out of place in a world in which cynicism has run rampant.

Those who know me know that I’m a big fan of irony and wit and what we now call “snark.”

But boy, it has been a cynical year. In Washington, in Montgomery, on every TV station and website, we find calloused hearts seeking pump cynicism through our veins. We hear a cynicism telling us that everything has an angle, that nobody is capable of real self-sacrifice, that dollars and power are the only things worth having on your Christmas list. Cynicism tells us that nothing is true and that nobody is trustworthy. It tells us that a search for anything larger than your own self-interest is a fool’s errand, a treasure hunt, a fairy tale.

We could see ourselves as faced with a choice between sentimentality for a glorious yesteryear that never existed, or a cynicism with no heart, no hope, and no magic.

In a few minutes we'll light our candles and sing one of the most sentimental hymns — with its Victorian myth of a silent baby. But there, in the final verse, is a bold proclamation that stands out for me:

*Silent night, holy night.
Wondrous star, lend thy light.
With the angels let us sing.
Alleluia to our king.
Christ the savior is born.
Christ the savior is born.*

Friends, we sing with angels tonight.

These angels are not cuddly, soft-faced cherubs, but rather messengers from God who go out into dark fields and have to lead with “y’all, don’t be scared” because their appearance made those shepherds “sore afraid.” We sing with angels, and so there is no room for cynicism in Bethlehem tonight.

A cynical telling of this story would find Mary saying “what’s in it for me?” And we’d have Joseph replying “yeahhhh...right...” And the angels would have sung “Glory to God, or whatever...maybe you should be afraid. Actually, fear! Fear everything.” And the shepherds would have responded: “You call that Good News? Sounds like fake news to me.”

This story is neither sentimental, nor cynical. It’s something much more holy. There was true and sincere reason to fear, but instead the responses we hear are: “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord” and “Glory to God in the highest heaven” and “Let us go now to Bethlehem” and “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”

On this holy night, we find salvation in vulnerability and relationship. We refuse to choose between sentimentality and cynicism, because this bigger, more holy thing has chosen us. And what we get instead is a little bit of holy magic, and a whole lot of love, and all the grace we could ever need, and a hope that will not be overcome.

And so, with the angels, let us sing, alleluia to our king. For Christ the savior is born. Alleluia and Amen.