

Luke 2:8-20, 25-38(NRSV)

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When 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.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷**When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.** ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹“Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;

³⁰for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.”

³³And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

³⁶There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸**At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.**

When was the last time you gave the gift of Jesus Christ to someone else?

The Scripture passages for this week are about two very different groups of people though both end up on the same mission. We have some shepherds, pretty much the lowest rung on the Judean social ladder, and a pair of senior citizens. The shepherds have been visited by angels who tell them of the Messiah’s birth. Simeon and Anna, the generously aged, have laid eyes on the eight-day-old Jesus and they see him with crystal clear eyes.

What is their response? The shepherds feel compelled to go tell the Good News. So it is with the octogenarian, Anna, who must tell all who will listen that the redeemer of Jerusalem has been born. They must go tell; of course they must. Who could contain such good news? This news of the Messiah’s birth is the best news any of them have ever heard. It is the Best News possible.

So why are so many of us reluctant to share this good news. Why are so few of us ready to simply chat with someone about Jesus? Oh sure, we can talk about St. Andrew, or Seven Loaves, or the youth ministry, or Bible studies we belong to – but why are we reluctant to talk about Jesus, to tell them the Good News?

Angels

One can walk through any mall this time of year and see countless depictions of angels. Some are chubby little “cherubs.” Some are mere wisps with diaphanous wings. Some “angels” in the mall even have blond hair and are dressed in their underwear! But, who or what are the angels we find in the Bible?

Here’s the question: Will my wife, Patti, one day have wings of her own and join the company of God’s angels? In a word – no. Patti is plenty angelic but she is human. Angels are angels and humans are human.

In the Bible, angels are spiritual beings created by God. They are created by God, but they are not human. They are, well, angels.

The word “angel” is based on the Greek word, *angelos*, which means messenger. Often, the work of angels is to be God’s messengers bearing news of one sort or another. The angel named Gabriel brought the news of her miraculous conception to Mary. An angel brought the news of Jesus’ birth to the shepherds in the hills and a vast company of angels proclaimed the birth from the heavens. Angels have their God-given work to do, just as you and I have our God-given work to do.

The Bible also tells us about spiritual beings who have chosen to defy God. The Bible often refers to them as “demons” and the lead dog in the pack is named Satan. Satan, acting of his own free will, has chosen against God rather than for God. He stands against God’s angels such as Gabriel and Michael.

I am often asked whether I believe in the actual existence of angels and demons – good angels and fallen angels, as it were. I’ve come to believe that it is cheating to claim belief in good angels yet deny the existence of fallen angels, of spiritual beings who are working against God’s purposes. And yes, I believe in angels.

Redemptive Passion

The staff of St. Andrew worked last year with a consultant named Will Mancini, who helped us see more clearly what we needed to do to reignite the growth of St. Andrew, for there are always more folks who need God’s saving grace. One of Will’s observations was that we, staff and congregation both, needed to reignite our “redemptive passion,” i.e., the passion we have to share the Good News of Jesus Christ with others, to share the redemption that we have been given in Christ.

I’ve been a part of UMC churches for more than forty years. All the Methodist churches I’ve attended also needed to reignite their “redemptive passion.” These churches were all rightly focused on caring for those in need, but they had lost sight of the *need* to proclaim to all who will listen that Jesus is Lord.

Say the word “mission” to some Christians and they immediately think of making disciples. Others, however, will take “mission” to mean feeding the hungry and providing for the poor. I’d tend to put UMC churches in the latter category.

We have to guard against our tendency to chop up our concept of mission. If we concern ourselves only with disciple-making and neglect those who lack even the basics of life, then how are we truly emulating Christ? But if we provide food and clothing, yet do not tell the person of God’s love revealed in Jesus Christ, we are ignoring what matters most. We are to proclaim and to feed. We are to teach and to clothe. Both, together, constitute living the mission. As we go from Judea to Samaria and to the ends of the earth, we go with a Bible in one hand and a hammer in the other.

Cultivating and nurturing this redemptive passion is what we mean by “regifting” Jesus. Granted, this word “regifting” comes from a Seinfeld episode, in which someone “re-gifts” a label maker they don’t want by giving it to someone else. Jesus, of course, is the greatest gift of all, turning the notion of “regifting” on its head. Who could keep such a gift to themselves?

Regifting Jesus

It is, I suppose, one thing to talk about “redemptive passion” or even “regifting Jesus.” It is another to talk about “evangelism,” a word I’ve not often heard in some Methodist churches. How does the word “evangelize” make you feel? I, for one, often felt a bit scared when I heard it. Perhaps I’d had one too many poorly written, frighteningly drawn tracts stuck in my hands by strangers. Perhaps I’d watched one too many TV evangelists warn me about where I was going if I didn’t get right with Jesus and send in my check. Perhaps it was my memory of the time I was “saved” at thirteen at an old-fashioned, emotional, and very loud revival. As I recall, my “saving” didn’t stick.

But that was all pretty silly wasn’t it. Somehow, we’ve got to past it. Jesus *is* Lord. He *is* Lord of all creation and all persons in it – whether they acknowledge it or not, whether they’ve

Why December 25?

From its earliest days, the Christian church celebrated Jesus’ resurrection at Easter. However, it was several centuries later that Christians began to celebrate Jesus’ birth. A common, but probably incorrect, belief is that Christians picked December 25 because it was in the middle of an important Roman pagan holiday celebrating the winter solstice. The problem is that the first mention of a date for Christmas is from about 200AD and the earliest celebrations that we know about were late in the third century – before Christianity became the state religion and began to incorporate pagan customs. There is a better explanation for December 25.

In keeping with Jewish traditions about the prophets, many early Christians believed that Jesus was conceived and died on the same date. One early and prominent Christian, Tertullian, writing about 200AD, calculated that the day of Jesus’ death recorded in the Gospels was March 25 on the Roman solar calendar. Thus, March 25 would have been seen as the date of Jesus’ conception. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of the Annunciation (the announcement to Mary that she would conceive) on March 25 each year. By 400AD, Augustine was referring to the “tradition” of Jesus’ conception and crucifixion being on the same date. December 25 is simply nine months after March 25 and, thus, a very appropriate date to celebrate Jesus’ birth.

heard of Jesus or not. *We are* created so that we might live in a loving relationship with God. Why can it be so hard for many of us to talk about Jesus with others, to reach out in love to those who, for whatever reason, have not come to embrace Jesus as their savior and shepherd?

How are they to hear?

Despite having the greatest news of all, despite the promise of a restored relationship with God that transcends the troubles and anxieties of our day-to-day lives – despite this Good News, why are so many of us reluctant to talk about Jesus? That is a conversation worth having, perhaps one that we can set ourselves to in 2012.

In the meantime, we can simply challenge ourselves to invite our friends, family, and neighbors to hear this Good News proclaimed and to see it lived?

I’m not talking about evangelizing, though God calls each of us to that mission. I’m just talking about a simple invitation:

- “We’d love to have you join us this Sunday. Why don’t you come with us. We can meet you in the lobby or even pick you up.”
- “I’m part of Mom-to-Mom, a wonderful group of young mothers that meets weekly at St. Andrew. How about I pick you up next week? There is even free childcare!”
- “St. Andrew offers the most wonderful small groups and classes. I’ve been going for awhile. Why don’t you come with me this winter. I promise that you’ll be glad you did.”

There are some at St. Andrew who are really good at inviting others to join them. And I’m sure there is a long list of reasons that most(?) of us are sometimes reluctant to invite people to St. Andrew. When we hesitate about inviting, we might remember Paul’s words: “How are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?” (Romans 10:14).

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Try to imagine the very best news that you could take to your friends and neighbors. Maybe it is a cure for cancer. Or the end of hatred. Maybe money pouring out of the sky . . . or the promise of eternal life. Would you hesitate to invite them to join in this exciting news? Wouldn't you pound on their front door until they answer? Wouldn't you wake them in the night?

Yet, too many of us hesitate when it comes to telling others the Good News that is Jesus. Why do you think that so many of us hesitate? What makes us hesitant believers? Is it our own lack of excitement? Is it a public world that increasingly insists the messenger keep the news to himself? How could we begin to overcome our hesitancy? How could we help each other in this? How could we all become better inviters?

Daily Bible Readings

The Advent Readings are all drawn from the Common Lectionary. You might ask yourself why these Scripture passages were chosen for Advent.

Monday, 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 A dynasty for David and his family	Tuesday, Micah 5:2-5a The Messiah is to come from Bethlehem.
Wednesday, Luke 1:47-55 The song Mary sings when she meets her cousin Elizabeth. It is called the "Magnificat."	Thursday, Matthew 1:18-25 Matthew's telling of the birth of Jesus
Friday, Romans 1:1-7 Paul's introduction to his letter. Take the time to read it carefully.	Weekly Joys and Concerns

Scott's Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We meet at 11:45 in room 127 on Tuesdays.

We have begun a study of the gospel of John.

Join us whenever you can.

This is very "drop-in." Bring a lunch if you like.

Bring a study Bible.

Coming – beginning January 23

Dr. Scott Engle will begin a weekly Bible study that will meet every Monday evening from 6:45 to 8:00 in Piro Hall.

The first course will be *Paul and the Galatians*

11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages. The class is led by various St. Andrew pastors and is usually organized into series:

No class on Dec 25 and Jan 1

Beginning Jan 8: a four-week series with Rev. Arthur Jones

Whose Jesus is the Real Jesus?:

The Gospels and Other Takes on the Son of God

Beginning Feb 5: a four-week series led by Dr. Scott Engle

Sin: A History

The story of sin and forgiveness from Genesis to now