

# ***“Go Tell It on the Mountain”***

## **Theme: The First Carols of Christmas**

Scripture: *Luke 2:8-11, 16-18*

Things I'd like to remember from today's sermon:

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**Meditation Moments for Monday, December 1** – Read Romans 5:1-11 – Why do people need Christ? The apostle Paul said people need Christ because he lived, died and rose again to reconcile us to God. Being reconciled to God does not just mean “fire insurance.” It opens us to a quality of life in which we see problems differently, knowing that “trouble produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope” (verses 3-4).

- One of the themes of Christmas is peace. How has guilt or an inner fear of being undeserving before God and people, robbed you of peace? How have you opened (or how can you open) your heart to the inner peace Christ offers this Christmas season?
- Paul was trained as a Jewish rabbi (cf. Acts 22:3). Rabbis used a rhetorical form known by the Hebrew words *qal wahomer*, or “How much more ...” In verse 10, Paul used that form to say, in effect, “If Christ was willing to die for us, how much more sure can we be that he will stay with us and strengthen us for our daily life?” In what ways do you depend on Christ's presence with you every day? How might it lighten your “spiritual load” to count on that more completely?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, thank you for your willingness to die for me before I was even born, and to draw my heart to you. And thank you for staying with me to guide me into your kind of life. Amen.*

**Tuesday, December 2** – Read John 1:9-18, 3:16-17 – People need Christ's salvation and reconciliation for the present as well as the future. John wrote that in Christ we can find our true identity. Christ, who was God, “authorized us” to become God's children. As we claim that identity, we realize that God is on our side, and find that as God's children we can live a life filled with grace and truth.

- John knew the sad reality that many people, then and now, turned away from the light Jesus brought into the world. What are some of the forces, external or internal, that lead people to ignore or reject the light of Christ? What influences helped you to overcome those forces in your own life, and respond to Christ's light?

**Prayer:** *Kyrie, eleison—“Lord, have mercy,” a prayer Christians have used for centuries. As I think of your light in the darkness, and your loving offer to make me your child, I pray it again. Lord, have mercy on me. Amen.*

**Wednesday, December 3** – Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9 – Paul wrote to the Christians in Corinth that they needed the church. One reason for that was that they could best use their gifts to carry out Christ's mission when they did it together (an idea he expanded in 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). God knew this basic truth all along: ten people can be more than ten times more effective working together than if they all work alone!

- Paul called the members of the Corinthian church, “Those who have been made holy to God in Christ Jesus” (verse 2). The rest of the letter made it clear that these people still had lots of room to grow spiritually.

How clearly do you sense that as you choose to follow Christ, you are “holy to God,” part of God’s family, even when you still have room to grow?

- Paul thanked God for the people in the church at Corinth, and he told them that by God’s grace, “you were made rich through him in everything.” Thanksgiving was six days ago. How has your intention to thank God “in every situation” (1 Thessalonians 5:18) held up through “Black Friday” and getting back to regular routines this week? What can you thank God for today?

**Prayer:** *Lord God, I thank you that you haven’t called me to make life’s journey all by myself. Thank you for those who walk the pathway with me. Amen.*

**Thursday, December 4** – Read Ephesians 1:15-23– “His body, the church, is the fullness of Christ”—strong words! Paul was sure that people need Christ’s church—not buildings or policies, but deeply committed people serving together. The church is an environment where God’s people can experience God’s power more fully—the same awesome cosmic power that was at work when Christ arose from the dead (verse 20).

- Verse 23 said Christ “fills everything in every way.” Scholar Dallas Willard noted that the Greek word often translated “heaven” (which we think is very distant) was plural—“heavens”—and for Hebrews included the very air around us. He wrote, “The Judeo-Christian witness regards space as full of God ... God occupies and overflows space ... we should assume that space is anything but empty.” When have you sensed God near you? In what ways can you make God, as the song says, “the air I breathe”?

**Prayer:** *Dear God, you are awesomely great, and wonderfully good. Your great power and gracious goodness are on my side. I can experience them as I worship and share life with your people. I thank and praise you! Amen.*

**Friday, December 5** – Read Acts 2:42-47, Hebrews 10:22-25 - The very first Christians in Jerusalem formed a congregation that met regularly, shared life and supported one another. As the gospel spread, Christians in other places also formed congregations, often more than one in each city. They knew they were part of something bigger than just their congregation, but they belonged, grew and served together in their specific churches.

- Hebrews urged Christians to meet together, but for a specific purpose. “Encourage each other,” said verse 25. When have you found strength and courage for life through the encouragement you received from other Christians? How can you make it a holy habit to make your impact on others a consistently encouraging one?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, I thank you for your big, worldwide church, but I also thank you for “my” congregation. Teach me how to be an encourager, a person who builds up in my church. Amen.*

**Saturday, December 6** – Read Ephesians 4:11-16 – To whom does our church belong? The answer is straightforward: our church (and every church) belongs to Jesus Christ, its divine head! He is the one we can trust to lead us to God’s goal of spiritual maturity, “measured by the standard of the fullness of Christ.” As we serve and grow together, we must always be listening to his voice.

- Scholar William Barclay wrote, “Paul says that a body is only healthy and efficient when every part is thoroughly coordinated. He says that the Church is like that; and the Church can be like that only when Christ is really the head and when every member is moving under his control.” What does it mean in day-to-day terms for you to “move under [God’s] control”? When have you been set free from hurtful feelings and ways of thinking to move beyond your usual actions/reactions and step into God’s world, where love is the guiding principle?

**Prayer:** *Lord Jesus, be the head of my life, as you are the head of the church. I open myself to your wise and loving direction of my life. Amen.*

**Family Activity:** Read Philippians 4:4-7. Review the events of each person's day. Ask one another, "How often did you pray today?" Discuss what it means to pray in every situation and at all times. On a large piece of paper, draw the face of a clock. By each hour, write or draw a picture of what each person is most often doing at that time. Talk about ways to pray throughout each person's day. (You might also want to let each person design his or her own clock and then discuss.) Also, discuss how and when you can pray together more often as a family. Commit to adding one additional time to your family life. Pray together, thanking God for always being with us and for listening to our prayers.

**Theme: The First Carols of Christmas**  
***“Go Tell It On The Mountain”***

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber

November 29-30, 2014 at First United Methodist Church, Durango

**Luke 2:8-11, 16-18**

*8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. 9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!*

*16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished,*

**VIDEO        Go Tell It on the Mountain – Sermon Starter**

**SLIDE        Go Tell It on the Mountain**

When we lived in Denver, one of my favorite things to do was to go downtown and see the beautiful Christmas lights in the city center. Maybe you have seen this before.

**SLIDE        Denver City Building Christmas Lights (Graphic)**

One year we went to the botanical gardens in Denver and saw this scene.

**SLIDE        Denver Botanical Garden Christmas Lights (Graphic)**

If you live here in Durango then you no doubt have made it up to see this amazing display of lights that seems to add something new every year just up Florida Road.

**SLIDE        Durango Christmas Lights (Graphic)**

Or maybe you’ve enjoyed these characters that were here in Durango last

year.

**SLIDE        Durango Christmas Lights 2 (Graphic)**

My guess is that each one of us has something visual that stirs us and lets us know that Christmas is coming. Maybe you are one of the thousands of people who showed up at Walmart or one of the other stores which opened late on Thanksgiving for the “Black Friday” sales event. We no longer wait until Friday morning or even midnight on Friday morning, but now we open on Thanksgiving night so the rest of the world can become involved in the beginning of the Christmas season.

I don’t know how you feel, but I came to Thanksgiving and I couldn’t believe that it was almost the Christmas season. Did you have that experience? How did it become Christmas season already? It seems to happen like that every year, where it seems like Christmas season is here already before we know it. The reason that it doesn’t feel like Christmas yet is because we are just beginning the season of Advent, which is the four weeks before we get to Christmas. The purpose of Advent in the church year is to prepare our hearts and our minds for Christmas. Our culture announces it with the lighting of lights in the city and the kickoff of the shopping season. Here’s a picture from Thanksgiving evening that shows you what it’s like in those stores and how much joy they are all having at Target.

**SLIDE        Grey Thursday Shoppers (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Black Friday Shoppers (Graphic)**

This is what the culture says it is all about in terms of getting ready for Christmas. This is also the season that many in churches lament the fact that we have lost Christ in Christmas. In schools we used to sing Christmas carols and have Christmas parties but now we have seasonal songs and holiday parties. There used to be several radio stations which played nonstop Christmas music from thanksgiving to Christmas and now you can’t find one here in Durango. There used to be a nativity set that was part of the decorations in front of City Hall and of course we no longer have plastic Jesus on the lawn of City Hall. People used to greet you, “Merry Christmas,” at Walmart or other places but now we say, “Seasons Greetings,” or, “Happy Holidays.” Many of us find ourselves a bit unsettled at the secularization of Christmas which now is really the holiday season.

I actually have a different perspective when I see these things. Part of what I remember is that as long as our culture is celebrating Christmas and is telling our story as Christians, even though it is a sort of an anemic and watered-down version of the birth of Jesus, it is telling our story. This is part of our defining story. I'm not expecting the employees at Walmart to tell our story for us. I'm not expecting City Hall to tell our story for us. I'm not expecting the public schools to tell her story. It's okay if they want to borrow our story, but I'm not expecting anyone in the public arena or on the radio airwaves or on television to tell our story for us. This is our story and what I am reminded of each Christmas season is that if people are going to hear our story it shouldn't be at Walmart or in some other secular setting. They should hear the story because we tell them the story as followers of Jesus Christ. We are the ones who are called to tell the story.

As we begin the season of Advent I want to encourage you to be modern-day angels. Remember that the Greek word for Angels that we find in the New Testament is not about supernatural beings with wings. Some of them appeared like human beings, but they were seen as messengers. We are called to be modern-day messengers, or angels, who tell the story. We are called to be modern-day shepherds who proclaim this story and share it because we have experienced it. We are going to learn something from the story today and the Angels and the shepherds and then we will come back to the story on candlelight Christmas Eve.

As we begin this journey, I want to invite you to take out of your bulletin your Meditation Moments and your Message Notes. If you're watching at home or online you can grab a pen and paper or you can download this resource right off our website. Specifically, towards the end of the sermon, I will be asking you to write some things down so please have that out and ready to go. There also may be other things that you feel the Holy Spirit speaking to you and I do believe that God will speak to us each time that we worship, and you can use the space to write those things down as well. You will then find our Meditation Moments which are daily Scripture readings and prayers for you to use as we move into the season of Advent. I encourage you to read the Bible on your own in this way and all of those readings will tie back into today's message.

In Luke's gospel, the birth story of Jesus begins this way in verse eight of chapter 2.

**SLIDE        *8 That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.***

This is interesting that God sent the Angels to announce the birth of the long awaited messianic King, the Savior of the world, to the shepherds to have them tell the story. If you have been reading the story in the first century, no matter where you were in the Roman Empire, you would have been shocked by this part of the story. This is actually very scandalous because you would've expected that the God of the universe would have sent his messengers to King Herod, to announce in the courtroom of the King, that the great messianic King had been born. Of course Herod was paranoid and we understand why that might not have happened, but at the very least you would have expected the Angels would've gone to the Temple courts in Jerusalem.

It would make more sense if they would go to the Temple Mount and blow the trumpets and at least announce to the Sadducees and all of the Jewish priests that the King who was the long-awaited Messiah had been born. It would make more sense if they had gone to the Pharisees who were the pious and holy rabbis of the day, but the Angels don't go there either. They don't go to the monks living on the Dead Sea or the Herodian's who were the wealthy and educated upper-class in Jerusalem. The Angels don't go to any of those people!

God sent the messengers to the night shift shepherds keeping watch over their flock. The reason why this is scandalous is because the shepherds were the bottom rung in society in the first century. We've talked about this before but they were typically low income and they were homeless because they didn't own any property except for their sheep and their tents. They moved from place to place so they could graze their sheep wherever there was grass. They weren't really allowed to graze their sheep where there was good grass and good land because that was used for crops and for those who were wealthy and had livestock. Even to the present day, you find these Bedouin shepherds in the southern part of Israel which is much more barren and almost a wasteland or wilderness, compared to the northern region of the Galilee. I thought I would share with you some of the photos that we took to get a picture in your head of what shepherds may have looked like.

**SLIDE        Shepherd Tents in Israel (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Shepherds and Sheep in Israel (Graphic)**

We visited the place called “Shepherds Field” in Bethlehem and here is what it looks like from the outside. There are a series of caves which run underneath and one of my favorite places was underneath this location where we saw small places of worship where believers have gathered throughout the centuries to remember this event.

**SLIDE        Shepherds Field (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Shepherds Field Caves Exterior (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Shepherds Field Caves Interior (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Shepherds Field Caves Interior 2 (Graphic)**

**SLIDE        Shepherds Field Sheep and Shepherd (Graphic)**

One of the reasons that they weren’t liked is because when they would graze their sheep they would do it on other people’s property. They don’t own property and that would irritate people in the first century. It would be like people coming by with their dogs every day to do their business on your lawn. After a while, you would be a little irritated by this and that’s how it was in the first century and even to the present day where you find people who get upset with shepherds because they are grazing their sheep and goats on other people’s property. Shepherds were considered by many people to be shifty and not trustworthy. In the court of law and the first century many of the courts did not allow shepherds to testify because of the sense that they were not trustworthy people.

So when God goes to announce the birth of the Messiah, who do the Angels get sent to? The messengers are sent to low income, uneducated, shifty, untrustworthy, lower rung of society shepherds. They were just any shepherds but they were the night shift shepherds who were the lowest of the low. I love this about God. Don’t you love this about God? There’s something in this telling us about the nature and character of our God and how God sees the world and people differently than we tend to see them and value them and measure them as humans.

The Scripture says that God, “exalts the lowly” and God, “humbles the proud.” This is what we see in the story because when God came to us and the King was born, he was born in what was the equivalent of a first century parking garage, because there was no room at the Inn. You remember that his crib was



the feeding trough for the animals and he was wrapped in strips of cloth instead of a nice warm baby blanket.

When we were in Israel in February earlier this year we met several shepherds and Palestinians as we went through Samaria and the area that we now call the West Bank. They were all very cordial and polite and often times invited us into their homes and workplaces and served us like we were royalty. They were all very friendly and one of the things that we learned about shepherds is that they are known for their hospitality. You can be walking along the road and they will invite you right on into their tents. It got me thinking. How many of us, if a Palestinian walked down our street, would invite them into our homes? What I know is that as we have more stuff we tend to be more cautious and we build security systems and gates around our homes. But when you don't have much like these Bedouin shepherds, they are very welcoming and willing to open their homes.

Here's what I want to encourage us to think about. During the season of Advent we have a lot of visitors come to our church. Christmas Eve candlelight service we will have several hundred new people who will visit our church. I know that we as a congregation want to be friendly and caring and welcoming of people. I don't think there's anybody in here who wants to be rude or unwelcoming or uncaring. But in order to demonstrate radical hospitality we have to be intentional about it. We tend to come to church and sit by the same people every week and talk to the same people every week. Sometimes new people sit around us and we are not sure what to do about that. Someone that we don't recognize sits near us and we get a bit anxious. Yes, the preacher makes us greet each other during the greeting time at the beginning of the service, but beyond that we can often stick to ourselves or the people that we are very familiar with.

If you haven't been to church in a long time, it takes a tremendous amount of courage just to walk in the doors of a church where everything is new and you don't know the rituals. It's not easy to come to a new place like this, especially when it's hard to find a parking space. I don't know anybody and I have not been in the church in a long time. Nobody really talks to me and people stick to themselves and no one seems to care except for that few minutes at the beginning of church. Nobody notices that I'm not sure where my children should go. Am I coming back? It doesn't really matter how good the sermon was or how good music is, if I don't make a connection with some people and I don't feel

valued then I'm probably not coming back.

If you finally get the courage to come and then you decide you want to volunteer for something and get involved in a ministry, it's still very important that you feel valued and welcomed. If you're showing up for the first time to volunteer and you don't really know anybody and nobody reaches out to connect with you that it feels like you're really not welcome here. You don't fit and it doesn't feel good and so you probably leave a bit discouraged. What I know is that none of us mean to exclude people or not be welcoming. But I know that if we are not intentional about extending radical hospitality then people feel disconnected and they never get to that place where they feel like this is their church.

One of the reasons we built the Welcome Center was to give you a place to spend some time together before or after the service. When you meet somebody new, we hope that you will take some time to get to know their name. I try to get to know people's names as best I can, but there are so many of you that names pop in and out of my head sometimes and I don't always get it right. What I know is that we all do need a place where people know our names and I can't do it all by myself. People also know that I get paid to do it, and it makes a difference when you who are members here make an effort to reach out and really get to know other people's story and don't just act like it's an inconvenience when someone sits in your seat or where your friends normally sits.

I think the reason why God went to the night shift shepherds is because they were the people most likely to open their arms up wide. They were willing to go see a baby who was born homeless and to love that child like it was their own. They were willing to celebrate in that moment and not worry about the hygiene conditions.

I was a youth pastor at three different churches before I came here to serve in Durango and each youth group that I came to had the same issue. There would be a core group of maybe 6 to 10 kids and some of them were very popular in school and so other kids would come to youth group to check it out. But that core group of kids who grew up together in the church would often just spend time with each other and they wouldn't reach out to anybody new who came and over time kids would come and they would go and new kids would never get to connect. Within the first few months I was always sitting down with each group of

kids just to remind them of something. I would remind them that our mission was to welcome kids and help them get to know Christ and grow in their faith. I would look those kids and tell them, “I need you to see when that 13-year-old girl walks in and she doesn’t know anybody and she’s hurting and she’s off by yourself and she doesn’t know anybody. You all are talking to each other but she is sitting there by herself and she needs someone to talk to her. I’m going to go and talk to her but it’s not the same as if you reach out. Some of you need to go and invite her to sit by you. Get to know her name and remember her name. When those 12-year-old boys come in the youth group for the first time they need you to go and talk to them. It’s great that you want to talk to your friends but your mission now is to reach out to these kids.”

I was so proud of the day that Neil came into our youth group and he was a skinny and small seventh grader with bright red hair. David, who was one of the most popular kids in high school, went over and picked him up and carried him around youth group on his shoulder for a while introducing him to everybody in youth group. For Neil that was the coolest day of his life that one of the coolest kids in high school picked them up and put them on his shoulders. He knew his name and introduced and everybody else and from that time forward Neil knew he was somebody and he had a friend.

I don’t want you to pick people up and put them on your shoulder. Some of you would get hurt, but I do want you to be the kind of people who take the time to get to know people’s names, love them and bless them. That’s part of our mission here when it comes to being Jesus Christ to the world. When someone gets the courage to come to church you have a chance to influence their spiritual lives and their spiritual future. It’s highly dependent upon how we love each other, not whether we get the doctrine just right or that we know all the different parts of the Bible, but it starts with people and caring about them and seeing them. It’s not just about what is spoken from the pulpit or the music that we sing.

I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’ll put this in business terms for you. If you are a visitor or guest to our church then we look at you as a customer and we want to do whatever we can to serve you. But when you move to that place where you make this your church and you become a member then you become a non-paid employee. Your task, part of your mission and purpose, is to offer radical hospitality to others and in that way people’s lives are changed.

The shepherds being chosen as the ones to whom God would send the good news first should not surprise us because it's a theme we find throughout the Scriptures. God always shows concern for the pushed down, the people who were made to feel small, the poor, the weak, the least of these and those who are considered nobodies. A common theme throughout the Bible is that God cares about the underdog. That's why the first Christmas celebration happens among the shepherds who were out in their field at night and were considered inconsequential in the first century in Palestine.

If we are going to observe Christmas then, somehow our celebration must be about bringing good news to the poor and the destitute in the downtrodden. We should be bringing joy to people whose lives might seem relatively joyless because that's what God did on the first Christmas. This is why every year at Christmas Eve we give away the entire Christmas Eve offering. It will be our largest worship experiences of the year as last year we had more than 1500 people here for Christmas. We give away the entire offering you designate for Christmas Eve to those living in poverty in Honduras, Kenya and here in La Plata County. We invite you to give generously as part of the offering and give a birthday present to Jesus that is least as much as you will spend on yourself. The reason we do that is because we think Christmas is in part about announcing good news to those who may not have much to celebrate otherwise.

We told you last week about where the offering was going but let me remind you again today and give you a few more details.

**SLIDE          Honduras (Graphic)**

Care 4 Communities is in Sandy Bay, Roatan, Honduras. Kerry and Mike Tichi, members of our church, are founders of this non-profit which offers an after school program for the community children, utilizing sports and education to mentor and raise up Godly leaders. While living in this community for several years and getting to know the villagers, they found a real need for leadership training. Building up individuals, based on their unique gifts and talents, has proven a worthy endeavor. As these mentored youth begin to mentor others in their community, positive change is taking place!

After renting space for 4 years, seed money was raised to place a down payment on our site, where our new classroom space is becoming a reality! Your financial gift will help to secure this permanent location, as well as provide

the opportunity of hope, through our soccer and English mentorship programs. The Mission Outreach Team here at FUMC has approved approximately \$11,000 to secure a permanent location for this ministry and another \$11,000 to provide the mentorship programs to 20 participants a year.

**SLIDE        Boys and Girls Club (Graphic)**

\$24,000 has been allocated for academic success, character & citizenship, and healthy lifestyles for the Boys and Girls Club of La Plata County which will give scholarships. The Club serves approximately 1000 students each year.

**SLIDE        Obaga, Kenya (Graphic)**

\$30,000 has been approved for a Library for the Community of Obaga, Kenya. This includes construction of the building, shelves, desks, tables & chairs, 2 laptop computers, a new latrine at the school with separate sides for boys and girls, and a hand washing station for children at the Primary school

There are children in Honduras, here in the Durango area and in Kenya who will be blessed by what we do at Christmas this year. In that we are following in the Christmas tradition of Nicholas who was born in the late to hundreds and lived until 343 AD. After his death he was canonized as a saint and became St. Nicholas. He was born into relative affluence and when he was a child both of his parents died. He was left with a large inheritance and became a committed follower of Jesus Christ. He recognized that Christmas had something to do with children that were poor, and that was one place where God would put him to work. He was a priest and took part of his inheritance and placed gold coins in bags to give to the poor. One day he took one of those bags and threw it into the home of a family that was poor and it landed on top of a stocking which was setting on top of the shoe in front of the fireplace to dry overnight. From that time for the tradition developed of hanging your Christmas stockings at the fireplace as you wait for Christmas and then placing gifts and those stockings. St. Nicholas understood that Christmas had to do with bringing good news to the poor.

This is why each year I challenge you to give away in the Christmas eve offering an amount equal to what you are going to spend on everybody else's presence in your life this year. I don't know what it looks like in your life, but in our life my wife and I sit down and figure out what we're going to give the kids for Christmas. We look at our parents and at our nieces and nephews and other

relatives and think about what gift cards are gifts were going to give. You can spend \$25 for this level of relative and \$40 for this level of relative and less or more depending on how much you love them and what they did or didn't do to you during the past year. Sorry, I know some of you are pretty disappointed that the pastor thinks this way, but I know that all of you do too so don't hold it against me.

The challenge is every year, what do you buy for people who already have everything they want? Do you ever feel that way? What more are we going to go buy that they couldn't go buy themselves? This is the dilemma when we feel like we need to buy everybody a gift. This is one of the reasons we encourage you to give away more in the Christmas Eve offering than you would spend on each other, our kids and our entire family combined. We make these really cool Christmas gift cards with beautiful pictures on them from the different mission projects we have chosen so you can send those and tell people what you are doing in their name or in their honor as opposed to getting them a sweater they will want to return the next week. If you scale back on someone's gift, you can simply note that in the card and that you are giving a gift in their name equal to the amount you spent on their gift so that children in poverty can be blessed this Christmas.

This practice forces us to simplify our Christmas a bit, but it also leads to a richer and deeper appreciation for Christmas. Most family members who know what you are doing will think it's really cool and they will appreciate knowing that they get to be a part of this giving as well. You may not be able to do the entire thing this year, but maybe your family could take a step towards doing that because it might change how you celebrate Christmas. If you let your kids know it allows them to picture in their own minds what Christmas is all about and what it really means and what it is supposed to look like.

David Wilson is a car dealer in Laguna Beach, California which is a pretty upscale community in Southern California. He knew that when he was a kid his mom would struggle to get things for the kids for Christmas and she would put things on layaway so she could buy them for the kids over time. He called the Kmart in Costa Mesa, California which is a much less affluent community and has a number of poor families living in it. He asked for the total amount that people had put on layaway at Kmart just before Christmas. He offered to pay off everyone's balance that was under \$100 and pay off \$100 off the top of anyone



whose layaway bill was over \$100. The manager wondered if he was for real or if he was just kind of crazy. He was serious and so she called him a couple days later and said the total amount due was \$15,919.61. He took a check by to Christian Lawrence who is the manager of the Kmart store who spent the next week calling her customers and telling them they could come in and pick up their Christmas gifts because they were paid for by a Secret Santa, a secret St. Nicholas.

Other people got wind of this as the new story made it around the web and pretty soon people wanted to join in. Another Kmart nearby received a check for \$8000 from someone to help pay off layaway debt, including a gift of \$47 from a seven-year-old girl who broke open her piggy bank because she wanted to help people who had a hard time paying for Christmas presents. You see how this works, don't you?

That's what we invite you to do each year through our Christmas Eve offering. So as you're making your plans and preparing for Christmas I invite you to think about doing something really big this year with your Christmas Eve offering because you know it will help children in several parts of the world as well as here in this community. For Christmas, David Wilson gave his wife a card saying that he had paid off \$15,919.61 at the Kmart for people who had used layaway for their gifts and that was going to be her gift this year because he did it in her name. The person who wrote the article on this interviewed his wife and asked her what she thought about this and she said, "It was the best Christmas present I ever received. My husband really understands what Christmas is all about and I couldn't ask for anything more."

The author of the article reporting on this amazing gift summarized with these words.

**SLIDE      "God's messengers are everywhere! They are in everyone who lives the message of the Jesus story and in any one who finds a way to make light shine in the darkness."**

Are you making light shine in the darkness anywhere this Christmas season? That's part of what it's about to be the messengers of the good news. Jesus said, ***"You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they might see your beautiful deeds and give glory to your father in heaven."***

One of the invitations of the story is that we would be a part of bringing

good news to the poor. God cares about those who are poor and we are invited to celebrate Christmas the way God celebrated that first Christmas some 2000 years ago.

We read this next part of the story in Luke's gospel.

**SLIDE**      ***9 Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified, 10 but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. 11 The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!***

We are going to spend the next few weeks reflecting on this idea of Jesus being the Savior and the Messiah and Lord, and will come to the conclusion of that at the end of this sermon series on Christmas Eve. But I want us to look at what happens a bit later on in the story.

**SLIDE**      ***16 They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. 17 After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. 18 All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished,***

From this time on in Luke's Christmas story there are no angels. The angels came to announce the news to the first group of humans and from that time on it was the humans' responsibility to share this good news with others. The shepherds were told the good news and then they hurried and shared with others what they had seen and heard. Those others who heard this good news were astonished. After sharing the story they went home and they rejoiced and they praised God. There was joy in their lives after they told the story of Christmas.

Let me remind you again of how I started this sermon. I'm not counting on Walmart or JC Penney or Big 5 to tell our story. I'm not counting on City Hall or the public schools to tell our story. This is our story and it is our responsibility. While some of the people in those places are Christians, they can tell the story on their own. The city or the schools or the stores are not the shepherds and the Angels. This is what we do because we are the church.

If anybody is going to hear the Christmas story anymore, it's going to be



because you told them. This is our mission. This is our task, which is why we are to go and tell others what Christmas means to us. We go and tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ was born. We tell others the good news.

This requires courage from us. Last week I invited you to share with others in the room what difference Christ has made in your life. While I'm not going to make you pair up and go visit with somebody again this weekend, I do want to encourage you to think about question.

**SLIDE      What difference does Christmas make in your life?**

Why is Christmas important to you? Are you willing to live that out in your life, in your workplace, at school?

I had a woman come up to me as she was leaving church last week and tell me, "I wanted to introduce myself to you. This is my very first Sunday at the church and I have been struggling for a long time, trying to find something. I wasn't even sure what I was trying to find. I have been missing something in my life. My good friend has been telling me about her faith and she's been telling me about this church. She's been encouraging me to come to church and so I came today for the very first time. I wasn't sure I wanted to stick around after and maybe talk to some stranger I didn't even know, but I think I found what I've been looking for. Thank you."

I got an email from her friend this week telling me how excited she was for her friend because she has been talking to her for weeks about faith and about God. She said she was so excited about her friend and how her friend was going to come back and maybe even bring her family on Christmas Eve. She said this would be the best Christmas gift ever if her friend came with her family to church on Christmas Eve and she found here what I have found here, which is meaning and purpose and how much I am loved by God. Wouldn't that be the best thing ever?

Her friend showed up because she was willing to talk about her faith in ways that were not threatening or weird or condemning, but compassionate and caring. She was able to tell her friend what Christ meant to her and what her church means to her.

Do you know that is how everybody comes to faith in Christ? Every single one of you is a follower of Christ because somebody shared with you the good

news like the shepherds did some 2000 years ago. Somewhere along the way a human being actually said, “Why don’t you come with me and check out the Christmas story?”

That’s why we give you postcards so you can invite folks to come with you on Christmas Eve. We have people who worship with us online each week after we post the sermon on the web because they can’t get into town or for some reason haven’t come to the church, but they still get to hear the Christmas story. I had someone tell me recently how they invited a friend to check us out online first and then they came to church after that. Many of you in this room are very creative and entrepreneurial and could probably come up with even more creative ways that we could share the good news as a congregation in this community and beyond. If we saw one person’s life change as a result of your big idea, it would’ve been worth it.

It’s not Walmart or City Hall or the public schools or the radio stations that are responsible for sharing the story. It’s us. Jesus said that we are to be the witnesses who share the good news that unto us is born a Savior, a Messiah who is Christ the Lord. So there are three specific things I want to consider you doing this Christmas season. If you would, please write them down on your Message Notes or on your bulletin.

**SLIDE        Here’s what Christmas means to me.**

I want you to complete that sentence and 140 characters or less. We talked about a tweet several weeks ago and it’s supposed to be 140 characters or less which includes spaces. Tweets are sent out on twitter. How many of you are on twitter? How many of you are on Facebook? How many of you send email? How many of you know it’s the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

After you have written down what Christmas means to you in 140 characters or less, I want to encourage you to tweet it. If you are not on twitter then you can post on Facebook or send out emails. You can even blame me and tell them that your pastor asked you to do this. I hope you will share the Christmas story in your own words.

***Christmas hope life light love mercy and grace joy the birth of my King***

***Christmas no room in the inn born in a barn night shift shepherds come to see homeless refugee in Egypt Emmanuel***

***Christmas Savior Messiah Lord King Word made flesh Emmanuel love incarnate O come let us adore him***

If all of us on Twitter, Facebook, email and old-school for those of us who still send Christmas cards or letters, sent what Christmas means to us to everyone on our list, what might happen? Those of you who sent me Christmas cards and letters, by the way, I read all of them and I pray over you and your family. I also look to see if you said anything about Jesus in your letter. Most of you do but some of you don't. What if you simply included this year, "My pastor challenged me to include in my Christmas letter in 140 characters or less what Christmas means to me," and you put that in your Christmas letter this year.

All of us have at least 20 people we could send this to and this weekend will have about 600 people in worship. If we all were to do this we would send out at least 12,000 messages of what Christmas means to us today alone.

**SLIDE      Christmas Eve Offering**

The second thing I want you to write down is Christmas Eve offering and to be planning for that now and how you will share with your friends and family, without bragging, what you want to do this Christmas season.

**SLIDE      Find one friend to invite to church this Christmas**

Would you pray about who you might invite to candlelight Christmas Eve service this year and invite them? All of us can find one person that we work with or that we know in our neighborhood or that we know from school and perhaps life might be changed because you took the time and gathered up the courage to have the conversation and be an angel, a messenger, who shared the good news with them so they might come.

That's what I want us to hear today from the story of the shepherds and the Angels. If you're willing, please put your hands out on your lap, palms open and up as if you are receiving a gift. Please offer up this prayer to God as you repeat after me these words, or put it in your own words.

**SLIDE      Prayer**

***Lord, help me to remember the real meaning of Christmas.***

***Help me Lord to care for the least of these***

***...to offer them good news of great joy***

***Use me to extend hospitality to the stranger.***

***God, help me to reach out to my friends with your love this Christmas.***

*Lord, I thank you for every person in this congregation and those listening online. Pour out your spirit upon them this Christmas season. I pray thee would give them visions and dreams today of how they might reach out to their friends and their community for you, that together we might proclaim the good news of great joy for all people. In your holy name we pray. Amen*