

THEME: Journey to Bethlehem

“This Will be a Sign to You”

Sermon preached by Jeff Huber – based on a sermon series by Adam Hamilton

December 23-24, 2012 at First United Methodist Church - Durango

Luke 2:1-7

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! 12 And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

15 When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” 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, 19 but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. 20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

VIDEO This Will be a Sign to You - Sermon Starter

SLIDE This Will be a Sign to You

Over the past four weeks we have been unpacking the Christmas story here at First United Methodist Church. We have been drawing upon the resources of archaeology, history, theology and geography to really make sense of this story that we have heard over and over again.

Also during the past few weeks we have seen those who are opposed to this story like atheists and agnostics taking out billboards and questioning whether this story really happened. I have heard debates about whether God exists, especially in light of the tragedies in places like Connecticut that comes

streaming into our homes and seem unreal in terms of the evil that is being played out. I know that some of you may have come today because you were invited and you're not really sure about this story which seems rather strange and almost like a fairytale. You have angels flying around with shepherds and wise men showing up with gifts and a miraculous pregnancy and the baby born in a manger with all of the animals. Some of you are thinking, "It all makes for good Christmas carols, but is it really true? Did anything like this really happen?"

It almost seems too unreal for us and if you have questions like that I am glad you're here and I hope you continue to ask them. What I would like to do today is try and help us see the reality behind the story. To do that we are going to go to Bethlehem to the place where the story occurs and help you see what you would see if you were there today, and help you imagine what might've been happening 2000 years ago during the time of Jesus. Then we will ask what this story means for our lives today.

Let's begin with a little geography lesson. For those of you who have not been here the past four weeks this may be new to you but I want to show you the Holy Land in the time of Jesus. You will find this map inside of your bulletin.

SLIDE Map of Holy Land

The Mediterranean Sea is on your left. The Sea of Galilee is here at the top of the map with the Jordan River flowing out of it down the middle of the Holy Land and into the Dead Sea. The Holy Land can be divided into three sections. The North section is known as the Galilee. The center section of the country was the Samaria in the first century and now is known as the West Bank or Gaza. In the South is Judea.

The story began nine months before Christmas in Nazareth which is in the North near the Sea of Galilee, which is where Mary was from. Around two weeks before the birth of Jesus we find the Holy Family leaving Nazareth and traversing across the center of the country through these mountain ranges. They made their way down to Bethlehem which is in the South in Judea and is a suburb of Jerusalem.

Bethlehem is the hometown of Joseph and when they arrived there the guest room where they might have stayed in the past or at some other time was completely full because everyone in Joseph's family had to come back to Bethlehem to register for the census at the command of Emperor Augustus. The

people certainly would've given up their room so that Mary could have a child in the guest room but it actually made more sense for Mary and Joseph to go into what was known as the basement of the home. You might consider today the parking garage where the donkeys and camels and other vehicles of the day were kept. They would keep the rest of the house ceremonially clean since having a baby meant lots of blood and bodily fluids, but it also would give some privacy to Mary and Joseph.

Mary goes into this lower area in the house, what today we think of is a cave, to give birth to Jesus. If you go to visit Bethlehem today you will find many caves all around which are used to keep people's animals even to this day. It was thought there was a house built on top of this cave and the cave is where the animals would have stayed and where the Christ child was born.

Bethlehem was a fairly modest city in a time of Jesus' birth and it may have contained 500 to 1000 residents. Most of the residence would have been farmers who harvested grain or millers who milled the grain. There were bakers who baked bread and we know that because the name Bethlehem means "house of bread." Most of that bread was then transported to Jerusalem which was just a few hours away and would be sold in the marketplace in that large city. There also was at least one family of carpenters that Joseph came from and there were shepherds living in the fields outside of Bethlehem. You can still find shepherds living there today.

There was really nothing to see in Bethlehem during the first century except for one pretty large monument. It was King Herod's palace which was built across the valley from Bethlehem. King Herod was a megalomaniac. He had a deep desire for power, affirmation, wealth and luxury. He wanted to be known as the King of the Jews but he wasn't fully Jewish so he never could be that. What he did do was build himself a monument 20 years before the birth of Jesus. He patterned it in some way after the pyramids in Egypt. There was a palace on the top of the monument and it was built 50 feet taller than the great pyramid in Giza in Egypt because he wanted to best those monuments. Those of you who were here a few weeks ago saw this already, but let's take a look at it together.

VIDEO Herodium (use from two weeks ago)

From anywhere in Bethlehem in the first century you would be able to see the Herodium which Herod named after himself. You can see Herod's palace on

this video that stood 400 feet in the air that was 40 stories high. As you come closer you can see the swimming pools that Herod had constructed for the entertainment of his guests. You can see his home theater with 900 seats. As you come out on top of the mountain you find yourself surrounded by his Palace complete with Roman baths. It was a feat to construct this that no one would imagine in the Holy Land in the first century. When you came to Bethlehem everyone wanted to see the king's palace and they wanted to see this Herodium.

SLIDE This will be a sign to you

It is important to see that because this is what power and wealth and being the king looked like for King Herod the Great. It was extravagant luxury and something that was so over-the-top that was hard to believe unless you saw it. This stands in stark contrast to the place that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. This child would be the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and when God took on flesh and came to live among us he wasn't born in a palace that was 400 feet in the air. He was born in a stable where the animals were kept. Let's take a look at the place where it is believed that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. By the end of the first century Christians were visiting that particular cave to remember the birth of Jesus.

VIDEO Church of the Nativity

The church you see on the video screens is the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. This is Manger Square where Christians are gathering today to celebrate Christmas. You bow before the Door of Humility to go in to the church and inside you will find a 1500-year-old cathedral that was built 500 years after Christ. As you walk towards the front there are two stairs which will take you down into the cave. This is the cave where tradition says that Christ was born. At the very front of the cave is the altar and under the altar is a star which marks the symbolic place where Jesus was born. You can crawl under the altar on your hands and knees to touch the star, or some people kiss a star, and pray and remember. To the left is the Altar of the Manger and it is said that this is where the feeding trough was that Jesus was placed into after he was born.

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At the very least I wanted you to see the actual places that are associated with this story that sometimes seems to be fabulous. What I wanted you to recognize is that those people who lived in the first century and read Luke's

gospel didn't read it the way we read today. We tend to think of the little drummer boy and all of the animals lowing and how silent the night was, but those in the first century would have read this story this way.

In the first century they may have read it this way, using 21st-century terms. Mary and Joseph arrived in Durango and they couldn't find any place to stay because it was Christmas and everybody was here to go skiing. They hitchhiked to get here and set up at the Volunteers of America shelter. Their baby was born in the closet of the shelter to give them some privacy. That's the story as those in the first century would have heard it in Luke's gospel.

What part of that sounds mythical or fantastic? Luke wants us to see this story as so real that it is uncomfortable the first century readers. When God came to earth, he was born among the lowest of the low in a place that no one should have to give birth to a baby, in a first century parking garage.

Let's take a look at the shepherds and the Angels for a moment. The birth of Jesus is very short in Luke's gospel and then he goes right into the next scene where there are shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. In the first century, shepherds were the lowest place you could be on the socioeconomic ladder in the Holy Land. They were typically uneducated. It was unpleasant to be around them for very much time because they smelled from taking care of animals all the time. Shepherds mostly were an irritant to people in the first century because they had sheep but they didn't have land. When they grazed their sheep, they would do so on other people's land.

I want you to imagine that your neighbor sends his dogs to do their business on your lawn every day. Then he sends his children to cut flowers down for his wife out of your flower garden. How do you feel about your neighbor? I'm guessing that after a while you would go have a talk with him because they are irritating you, but they keep doing it and doing it. That is what shepherds were like in the first century and they would put up with them but they didn't necessarily like them.

Today there are still shepherds in Bethlehem and they are still considered an irritant by people who live there because their sheep graze on other people's land. I thought it would be interesting to hear from a Shepherd today and so we have an interview with a man who owns 12 sheep. That is all that he owns in the world. He sells two or three a year which is how many are born into his flock each

year. He takes the wool from the sheep and he sells that and he also gets milk from them. He slaughters one each year so his family can eat and this is how he lives. This man is 72 years old and his wife is 45. He has had 17 children and 10 of them have died. None of them have had the chance to go to school. Let's listen to this Shepherd talk about what is like to be a Shepherd and why he thinks God might have invited shepherds first to make the Christ child on that first Christmas.

VIDEO Shepherd interview

You'll see in this footage first the camp of a Shepherd and you'll see his wife and his children in the background. Let's listen as he tells us about life as a Shepherd...

SLIDE This will be a sign to you

I think that is exactly what Luke was trying to get us to see when he told the story of the shepherds being the first ones invited to see the Christ child. Everybody in the first century would've known what shepherds are like and they would've read this part of the story and said, "You have got to be kidding! God invited shepherds to come and see the Christ first before anyone else? What was God thinking?"

What does this tell you about God? What does it tell you about God that when God came in human flesh on the Earth he was born in a stable in a homeless shelter, in a place where no one would wish to be born? What does it tell us that he was laid to sleep in a crib that was the feeding trough for the animals? What does it tell us that the first people that were invited to come and see the Christ child were the dirty, night shift shepherds?

I think we are meant to see that how God looks at us and how God values us has nothing to do with our net worth or the status that we have in society, at least as the world calculates it. We calculate net worth by dollars and cents and God says, "You have got to be kidding. That is not how I value people."

God looks at us and he sees through all of the façade and all of the layers and labels that the world has put on top of. Not only that, but what God values is not pride or arrogance. As a matter of fact, the Scriptures tell us that God humbles the proud and he gives grace to the humble. God is looking for people who are humble in their hearts and who will live humble lives and walk humbly before him. God is looking for people who don't feel like they are their press clippings, but people who live as servants. This is precisely what Jesus said just

before he was crucified when he got on his knees and he washed his disciples' feet. He said, "True greatness is found in serving others and not in thinking that you should always be served."

This story is teaching us about what it means to be authentically human and what it is to be a servant and you have a servant's heart. The story also teaches us something as we look at the Angels. The shepherds are keeping watch over their flock at night and an Angel shows up. Again, we often start thinking, "Here we go again with the fairytale and the myth. Sure, there are angels flying around with their wings and glowing in the night."

I want you notice that the Scripture doesn't say anything about wings or flying. They may have appeared that way, but the word Angel in Greek simply means "messenger." This was a messenger from God and most often in Scriptures the messengers from God look like ordinary human beings. Some of them probably were ordinary human beings. I've never seen Angels who fly around, however I have had church members who have had near-death experiences and said they have experienced something like that. Mostly I have experienced Angels as those who come and offer me encouragement and blessing and hope and challenge through their words and actions. At the very end of the Gospels when Jesus appears to his disciples he calls them and all of us to go out into all the world and to be his messengers. The Greek word is the same there as it is in Luke's gospel when it tells us that *angelos* came to the shepherds. We are called to be God's Angels, God's messengers, bringing the word of God to everyone that they were made by God to be loved by God.

We find this lone stranger approaching the shepherds at night, telling them, "Don't be afraid. I have come to bring you good news of great joy for all the people! For unto you this day in the city of David is born a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." This is a strange thing for someone to show up in the middle of the night and start talking to shepherds who usually don't get any company. Is this the thief? Who is it that is comes to bug them while they are trying to do their job? This is meant to be a source of great joy and who doesn't need joy? And there is to be joy because a child has been born and he is to be a Savior, Christ the Lord.

SLIDE Jesus as Savior, Christ and Lord

Let's talk about these three titles for a minute because we sing about them at Christmas and we have heard them before, but what do they mean? Christ literally means "Anointed One," or one who is set aside to rule. It has to do with being a King. Many kings were called Christ or Anointed One in ancient Israel. To be Lord means to be the ruler and owner of all things. Emperor Augustus considered himself Lord and he used that title for himself all the time. King Herod the great thought that he was Lord of the realm and all of Judea. But the Angel says to the shepherds that one has been born Christ and the Lord. This will be the rightful ruler over all things. This would be the one who is set apart by God to rule over God's people, and he will be a Savior.

Jesus is meant to stand in contrast and be a different kind of King than King Herod the great or Emperor Augustus Caesar. King Herod the great took a small army and destroyed the Parthians. He ruled by power and might and the same was true with Emperor Augustus who maintained the Pax Romano or the "Peace of Rome" by the force of the Roman legions.

Jesus was different because his kingdom is not geographically bound but covers the entire earth. Jesus didn't rule by military might but instead he said, "Come and follow me. Take up your cross and serve others. Deny yourself and when you follow me you become a part of the kingdom which starts here, in the heart."

Jesus' kingdom was different. He said that in his kingdom there were two primary rules. The first was to love God with all that is within you and the second is to love your neighbor as you love yourself. If you are wondering who your neighbor is then just know that it is anyone who is in need, so do unto others as you would have them do unto you. When your enemy hurts you, you bless them and don't hurt them back in retaliation. Forgive not just seven times but 70x7 because this is what the kingdom looks like. Blessed are the peacemakers and blessed are the poor. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. That is who is blessed in this kingdom.

To this day, over 2000 years later, over 1 billion people on this planet say, "That's my King, and I will follow him to my death." Jesus was a different kind of King whose birth we celebrate and who the shepherds went to see on that first Christmas.

Jesus was also a different kind of Savior. Emperor Augustus called himself a Savior. He was the Savior of the Roman Empire. King Herod the great saw himself as the savior of the Jewish people. Jesus was a different kind of Savior because he wasn't going to save them from the Parthians and the Romans or anyone else. Jesus saves us in a different way.

How does Jesus save us and what does it mean that he is a Savior? I have a good friend who is walking through a divorce right now and he saved my friend from feeling like he is all alone and there is no hope after this. Jesus saved my best friend who was a drug addict, a drug dealer and in Jesus Christ found the power and the drive to walk away from something that has made slaves out of many, and into freedom as a pastor who now tells others about what a Savior really means. Jesus is meant to free us from guilt and shame that we feel when we have done something and we can't find any way to let go of it. We carry it with us until we realize that Jesus was crucified for us. We find grace and mercy.

Jesus saves us from the lowliness and despair or hopelessness or the feeling that we are loved or the feeling that there is nothing beyond this life. I spoke with several people who lost loved ones this past week and Jesus saves them by giving them hope that this is not the end. Jesus saves those families who lost children last week in Connecticut because he said, "Let the children come to me, for to such belongs the kingdom of God." Jesus saves us because in his kingdom there will be no more death or sorrow or pain or evil gunman or terrible tragedies.

Jesus saves us from having a life that is built on material things and believing that is what life is all about. Jesus saves me from being more of a jerk than I am sometimes. Jesus saves me from focusing on things in my life that don't really matter and he saves me from brokenness and death and he brings new life.

That is what the Angels were proclaiming on that first Christmas morning. A Savior has been born to save us from all the things that plague us as human beings. Jesus came to set us free.

Something strange happens next for the shepherds after that first angel appeared to them. More strangers come out from the shadows and they start singing, "**Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace for all upon whom his favor rests!**" There is an angelic host and the word host in Greek literally means "army." There is a heavenly army which comes from God. These messengers, and they can't keep quiet anymore because what has happened in

Bethlehem is astounding. God has done something that has never been done before or since and it is the answer to the problems that plague us as human beings. This is the key to our salvation and our hope as the human race—this is the child who has been born.

These simple messengers are speaking good news of great joy. This story is actually a call upon our lives to be the messengers of God as well. I got an e-mail two weeks ago from a member of our community who doesn't go to church here. They have never been to church or been a person of faith. She has no family and her husband left her with three small children and he literally disappeared, leaving them to fend for themselves. She had come to the end of her rope wasn't sure how she was going to make ends meet because the medical bills were piling up from her cancer treatments. She wrote her e-mail through tears, not of sadness but of disbelief that some members of this congregation had taken it upon themselves to care for her and her children as she goes through this difficult time. They literally had become a sign to this woman and her family, reminding her that God had not forgotten her.

How do you feel when you get to be a part of something like that? It makes you feel alive and it becomes a God moment when you get to be a messenger. In this story, part of what we see is God's concern for the least and the last and the lost and the humble and those who are going through dark places. If you are going through those dark places right now then this story is all about you and God's concern for you. But part of this story also calls us to be modern-day messengers, Angels who bring hope and good news of great joy that God has not forgotten and there is a Savior who has been born who is Christ the Lord.

Just two weeks ago we commissioned 9 more Stephen Minister bringing out total to 21 who have been trained to give one on one care to those who are hurting. I received this notice this last week about Stephen Ministers from local churches in Newtown, CT.

Two Stephen Ministry congregations are located right there in Newtown, with more than two dozen additional Stephen Ministry congregations within a 25-mile radius. We've been communicating back and forth with Stephen Leaders from a number of these congregations, who are coordinating efforts to make Stephen Ministers available to those in need. One of those congregations has opened its sanctuary to the community twelve hours a day, with Stephen Ministers (taking three-hour shifts) available to anyone who comes by. Please keep these

Stephen Ministers and Stephen Leaders in your prayers, as well as all those affected by this tragic event. Stephen Ministers will undoubtedly be providing care to those affected for years to come.

They are be messengers of God's love.

I received this e-mail this past week from halfway across the world and I wanted to share with you to let you know how you have been messengers, Angels from God, to children who have lost their parents to HIV AIDS at the Hope for Orphans Rescue and Education Center.

VIDEO HOREC

Dear Pastor Jeff,

Cordial Christian greetings. It's that time of the year when we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ. In HOREC we have a double celebration during this time of the year. First the birth of Christ and secondly the support FUMC as accorded since 2009. During 2010 and a time like this, the FUMC congregation made a sacrifice that saw HOREC sink a borehole instead of using the money to buy gifts for themselves and their families.

We've had several teams from FUMC including youths and we thank God for them. Through your support HOREC is now Canaan. We don't purchase greens thanks to the funds you provided to sink the borehole. The community has also benefited from the same. FUMC is a vessel that is being used by our Heavenly Father to better not only HOREC children but many others in the community.

You have done so much for us and we appreciate every deed. You are our Christmas angels. I would like to wish you, your family and our FUMC brothers and sisters a Merry Christmas and a Happy New year.

May our heavenly Father shower you with blessings.

sincerely yours,

Christine Wambui.

Director/ HOREC

SLIDE This will be a sign to you

Jesus was born in the midst of poverty, and the lowest place that one could be born. The first people that God invites to celebrate his birth are the night shift

shepherds. This tells us about the heart of God and what God is hoping for from us, that we would see ourselves as servants and humble ourselves before him.

The messengers come to announce good news and this story is inviting us to be people who, from this time forward, take that good news with us and live it and announce it by our actions and by our words. We find ourselves alive when we participate in being the presence of Jesus Christ in the world.

Let me end with this. When the shepherds arrived Luke tells us that they found Jesus lying in the feeding trough. We read three times in the story that Jesus was placed in a manger which is where the animals would've eaten from. The Angels tell the shepherds this when they announce the words we read from today's Scripture.

SLIDE ***And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger...They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.***

What is the significance of Jesus being born and then placed in a feeding trough and why is that a sign? Of course this reality tells us something about his humility, but I think there is something more that Luke wants us to get. I think we are meant to see in this story that Jesus is laid to sleep where God's creatures go to eat.

Moses said that we do not live by bread alone. There is something else that we need as human beings besides just food. Isaiah the prophet asks why we spend money for food that won't satisfy us. He is recognizing that the people in his day were going out and spending all of their money on stuff they thought would make them happy and yet somehow inside they were still hungry.

You know that it is almost like a sickness. The more you have and the more you eat, the more hungry you become and yet you never seem to be full. Jesus said, "I am the bread of life. Those who eat of me will never go hungry again."

At the Last Supper, Jesus took the bread and he blessed it and he broke it and he said, "This is my body, given for you."

In referring to the feeding trough three times, I think Luke was trying to tell us that everyone of us has a hunger inside of us they can't be satisfied with what is going to be under the tree on Christmas day. The hunger that we have inside of

ourselves can only be satisfied with the one who gave birth to Christmas. We come to the feeding trough and the way that we eat is simply by saying yes, ***"Jesus, I want to follow you. I wish to be one of your people. I wish to live according to your will. I wish for you to be my Christ and my Lord. I need you to save me. Save me Lord from this world and for myself."***

When we walk with God and talk with God and live with God, we find what our hearts are really hungry for. I think that is the message and the meaning of Christmas. It is what is lived out by the shepherds as they left that night. This is what we read happens in the story.

SLIDE ***The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.***

My hope and prayer for you this Christmas Eve is that you would walk away after lighting the candles and singing the songs, glorifying and praising God for all that you have heard and seen.

Would you bow in prayer with me?

SLIDE **Prayer**

While your heads are bowed and your eyes are closed, I know that there are some of you sitting in this room or in our overflow area who desperately need to be saved—saved from fear, from anxiety, from overwhelming grief—saved from hopelessness and despair—saved from addiction and pain—save from hate and bigotry and resentment and hurt from the past. You need to be saved from yourself and from believing that you're really something, and you're just a person, a child of God like the rest of us. You need to be saved from loneliness, saved from lovelessness. You need to be saved, and Jesus is God's sign to you. Jesus is God's sign that he is with you and that he loves you and that he will forgive you and that he will walk with you and that you are his.

So here's the invitation today, that you might simply say something like this quietly under your breath.

"Yes Jesus, I need you. Save me..."

If you are in need of forgiveness and grace, why don't you to say something like this, *"Lord, please forgive me for this...and he'll take away..."*

Then, because he is not just our Savior but he is also our Lord, you might say something like this, *"I wish to follow you as my Lord. I want to do your will in my life. Help me to do that..."*

Lastly, when you leave this place today, is going to be time to go be Angels for someone else. So I invite you to say something like this, *"Lord, use me and help me to be a blessing to others..."*

God, thank you that you came to this Earth to remind us of your love and what it means to be human—that you came born in a stable, placed in the feeding trough—that you invited the night shift shepherds to come and see and behold—that you sent the messengers to announce the good news. Help us to learn from this story and to leave this place seeking to follow you each day. We pray in your holy name. Amen.