

Christmas Eve 2022, St. David's, Luke 2:1-20 (Elizabeth Felicetti)

I tripped up over something in the text this year: "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and *saying*." The word "saying" surprised me because I always picture the angels singing. I thought surely this was a translation issue and looked up all the English translations and sure enough, every single one uses "saying." So why was I so sure the angels were singing? Probably because of the song Silent Night telling me so: "Heavenly hosts sing alleluia." Or the hymn "Angels We Have Heard on High." I always picture angels *singing* on Christmas Eve. Don't you?

For the past almost three years I have dreamed of Christmas Eve as it was in 2019 and the years before, singing "O Come All Ye Faithful" while processing down the aisle. Two years ago, only a few of us were in here having Christmas Eve in front of the camera, and while Bonnie and Billy played their instruments, we had two choir members wearing platypus masks singing, but the rest of us didn't sing. Last year we had a service, but everyone was masked, and we used electric candles. This year we have real candles instead of electric ones. A few of us, like me, are still masked, but even so our singing is like it has been in my dreams.

So, it surprises me that the story I read is from Luke on Christmas Eve is not exactly like the story in my head, because the multitude of the heavenly host was speaking, not singing, to the shepherds. I envision that throng singing the way we sing the Gloria at the beginning of our service. At least, we sing it at the 10 AM Sunday service. At the 8 AM Sunday service, we say it.

Can that shed any light on that first Christmas? It wasn't a festival Eucharist. It was more like a quiet early service: the shepherds out in the fields, watching their flocks by night. That must have been so quiet: a field at night.

Or if not silent, at least different sounds than we hear in a city or suburb. Wherever I am, I love night sounds. Fewer people are awake and moving around. Those shepherds would have been watching out for predators like wolves that could harm the sheep in the quiet field at night, but they were not expecting something supernatural, whether singing or speaking.

What else isn't in the text besides singing? We don't have an innkeeper, even though such a person is popular in pageants. Think of the Charlie Brown Christmas pageant, where Pigpen plays the innkeeper and Frieda with her naturally curly hair was assigned, to her dismay, to play the innkeeper's wife. Neither of these characters actually shows up in this reading. Some scholars dispute the translation of the word "inn," suggesting that the Greek was a word for a room in a private home, and that Mary and Joseph would have stayed with relatives.

We also don't see explicit mention of a stable. We may assume they are in a stable because baby Jesus is sleeping in a trough, but animals weren't necessarily kept in the same way back in ancient Bethlehem that they are now.

I love close studies of biblical texts, seeing what's really there and what isn't. This is one reason I love Bible study so much, and I hope more of you will join our Wednesday morning Bible

study. But on Christmas eve, these finer points aren't as important as the reminder that God so loves us that God sent Jesus: a child born for us, a son given to us, named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

On this Christmas Eve, as we prepare to sing Silent Night with our actual, non-electric candles, we can find singing all over our liturgy even if those angels didn't actually sing to the shepherds. Just look at tonight's psalm. Sing to the Lord a new song; sing to the Lord, all the whole earth. Let the field be joyful and all that is therein. Those quiet shepherds in the field: let them be joyful.

They were joyful, weren't they? They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. Then they returned to their fields glorifying and praising God.

How do you think they glorified and praised God? Were they singing?

How are you glorifying and praising God this Christmas? Tonight we sing joyfully together, as well as quietly, in the dark, with Silent Night. Will you remember the Christ child when you go home tonight after the service? What about tomorrow?

What about the next twelve days of Christmas? We are past the season of Advent now and tomorrow will be the first day of Christmas. Christmas culminates in Epiphany when the wise ones found Mary and Joseph. For these next twelve days, we Christians are invited to remember God loves us and came to us as a baby: good news of great joy for all the people.