

Luke's Operetta: Scene 5—2001 Version
Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-9
Luke 2:1-20

Perhaps it's foolish to stand here and add more words after we've just heard again those deeply familiar verses from Luke 2. Sometimes words, no matter how many we add to the mix, simply can't handle that job that needs doing. In a way, that's the central lesson of the mystery we celebrate tonight. God had poured out a river of words over many centuries—we have quite a few of them recorded in this thick book we've read from—but wondrous, deep, and truthful as they were, somehow the people still sat in darkness. Indeed, "they dwelt in a land of deep darkness," to borrow a few of Isaiah's words.

God's response? *Word made flesh*, who dwelled—and still dwells—among us. It was a risky solution, a daring last word, for as we know all too well, flesh can be mangled, beaten, and killed as easily and surely as words can be twisted, abused, and forgotten. But that's what God did, risking literally everything, so there might be some other way besides, "a land of deep darkness," to describe us and our world.

We've just heard Luke tell the story once more—using words, of course. And what a story it is! It's full of all the curious reversals Luke loved about the gospel of Jesus, a story that turned everything upside down. The great event happens in a most out-of-the-way place, and when angels, no less, are dispatched to share the good news, to whom do they go? Shepherds! Not the executives in town who traded sheep on the commodities market, but the guys out in the field who lived with the sheep and both smelled and talked like it. Old-fashioned bikers might be as close as we could come to an equivalent in our era. People locked their doors when these guys came to town.

How would the shepherds know which child to seek if they went to check the story out? "He'll be wrapped in swaddling clothes"—which is ancient lingo for diapers and a blanket, and meant the child would look pretty much like any other. "And lying in a food trough," the message continues. Which probably seems unusual to us, but perhaps not if you're a shepherd and can't click on a web site and have somebody deliver a field crib for your newborn child.

From our angle, we can see the whole of Luke's story emerging already here at the beginning. If the savior shows up in such a place, we'll not be surprised to find him most anywhere, including out in the caves where demoniacs howl at the moon, or in the home of little Zacchaeus, tax-collector and public enemy. And, of course, all too soon we'll find this Jesus, Mary's baby, swaddled again in long, soft linen cloths, prepared for burial.

It's all there in Luke's birth story—the whole gospel. But God knows, and Luke knew, that our hearts would not know quite what to do with all these words, even so beautiful and profound as they are. Which, of course, is why that particular Bethlehem child is born in the first place. And which is also why Luke didn't use mere words to tell us about it.

Luke 2, which we've rehearsed this evening, is Scene 5 of a six-scene, dramatic operetta Luke employed for sharing the good news with us. Luke's musical began with old Zechariah meeting up with Gabriel in the temple. Gabriel had difficulty communicating with that sensible, realistic old cleric, so Gabriel had to sing in order to get the point across. In Scene 2, Gabriel encounters a young woman who understands biology just as well as the old priest, so once more the angel sang young Mary through the meaning of what she was asked to participate in. We still sing the great songs of Scenes 3 and 4, now known as the *Magnificat* and *Benedictus*, the first of which Mary sang for Elizabeth, and the second Zechariah sang when he got his voice back after John's birth.

And that brings us to tonight's scene in this musical drama. Swaddling clothes and a food trough will help you find the newborn savior. But that much merely confused and startled the shepherds, so, of course, the angel chorus was obliged to sing. "Glory to God in the Highest," is the title in English. Luke's version is Greek, but many of us know the Latin, "*Gloria in Excelsis*." It must have been amazing to witness the heavens ringing like that in song.

I, too, have heard angels sing that song, right here in this place. The very same angels who are singing tonight, actually—Christopher and Maura, and some the others (whom I know are angels because they appear but once a year to sing in public!). I can still close my eyes and hear their song from a couple years ago ring through this holy night. I'd been lifted as far toward heaven as one could expect to get on an evening like this one. They'll sing again this evening, as will we all when I'm finished with these few words of interruption between songs.

Pay attention, fellow shepherds, as the angels sing here in the darkness. Close your eyes later on when we all sing "Silent Night," and notice where you are. Hardly any of you will stay here in this room. Oh, your body might, but you will travel to other times and other places, to join loved ones in distant churches, living rooms or dining rooms.

**O little town of Carlinville [or Sheboygan, or Chesterton],
how still we see thee lie;
the hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight!**

I'll travel, too, when we sing, to a faraway place where just a year ago my father lay on his deathbed, wrapped in swaddling clothes and a diaper. Even in a manger, sort of, for his hospice bed sat where the dining room table belonged. One day, near the end,

when words had failed that tired, old man thanks to cancer in his brain, two young angels climbed up on his bed and began to sing for their Papa. “I am Jesus little lamb,” they sang, along with other shepherd songs. About the time we thought to move them to another venue, we heard a third angel join them. “Away in a manger, no crib for a bed,” sang the raspy, older voice. The younger two knew that one, so they joined in.

**Be near me Lord Jesus, I ask you to stay,
Close by me forever and love my I pray,
Bless all the dear children in thy tender care,
And take us to heaven to live with thee there.**

Surely you have such places, too, where you will travel tonight when we sing. Each one is another scene in Luke’s drama, of course, a part of that moment near the end, when Mary’s Jesus, still a young man, was stripped of all his clothes and left to die amidst strangers. But there was one more song left to sing, the one we call Psalm 31, which includes the line, **“Into your hands I commit my spirit, O God, thou Faithful God.”**

And then came more swaddling clothes, the sort used for burial—an outfit that belongs to each one of us, for it’s the baptismal garment we all share. And oh, how we’ll rejoice to wear it on the morning that finds us singing whatever chorus comes when the angels appear one more time to announce to fishermen and shepherds and children everywhere, “He is not here among the dead, but risen.” I don’t know what chorus that was, or is, or will be, but I’m sure it sounds much like “*Gloria in Excelsis*,” or perhaps, “Joy to the World.” Indeed, I can hear it now. . .