

**Make Haste**  
**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**Bob Stillerman**  
**Christmas Eve 2018**  
**Luke 2:1-20**

Walking through the aisle at Lowes a few weeks ago, I noticed some stellar inflatable Nativity sets. They were magnificent, easily ten feet high, and nearly just as wide. And one day, I'd love to have one on my lawn!!!

But what I really love about those Nativity inflatables is HOW happy the shepherds look. They are having a blast!!! And then I started noticing other Nativity sets. One I purchased while in Bethlehem, and one my friend Cecil made for Mary Allen, and another given to us by Jacqueline's grandparents. To be fair, these aren't as cartoonish or jolly as the inflatables at Lowe's, but their characters are joyful, and they are SO peaceful. They recognize God's presence, and such a recognition leaves them with fullness, and wonder, and restful bliss.

The images of joyful nativities filled my mind as I read Luke's familiar words. The shepherds were living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And then... an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. And in their fear, they clung to one another. And I am struck by that word terrified.

Mr. Webster says that to terrify someone means to: "cause extreme fear." Synonyms include petrify, horrify, frighten, scare stiff, strike terror into, transfix, or my favorite: "scare the pants off of."

And it begs the question, "How did a group of people who were SO paralyzed with fear, become SO full of joy in a matter of a half-dozen verses?"

Well, for starters, God's presence is alarming – how else do you describe something that is SO big, and SO good, and SO mysterious, and SO life-altering? And all of a sudden it wants your attention?

And think about our setting. Authority is not gentle in any age, but especially in Roman-controlled Palestine. Power discarded what was considered as less than.

Like Zechariah and Mary before them, the shepherds braced themselves for something unpleasant. And like Zechariah and Mary before them, the shepherds heard familiar words: "Fear not."

Fear not, because God is not like Caesar. Fear not, because God is present. Fear not, because God looks with favor upon those deemed lowly. Fear not, because God doesn't come to dominate you, or to scare you into submission, or to make you feel less than. Fear not, because God has come to love you. And God has come to use you. And God has come to transform you.

God brings good tidings of great joy: A savior, a child, reminds you that God's presence has been and will always be with you.

"But don't just take my word for it," the angel said. "There's a manger in Bethlehem. And you should go and see it." And they did. "With haste," the text says. I love that.

And there they found two new parents, each one not too far removed from being terrified themselves. And these mangy shepherds and exhausted parents, gazed at new life. In the birth of a child, they realized that God had given them (and you, and me, and EVERYONE!!!) space to become God's people.

And so the shepherds made haste, and they proclaimed all that they had seen – no longer exiled to the fields they became messengers of hope.

And Mary and Joseph made haste into parenthood, protecting, nurturing, and rearing one who would help illumine God's vision of hope and love.

And it seems to me, that tonight, we too have the opportunity to make haste.

All across our city, God invites us into new possibilities. There are neighbors who are paralyzed by the status quo – some the victims of systemic poverty, others the victims of dependency on systemic wealth; some are lonely, some are depressed; some struggle with addiction, or illness, or grief, or broken relationships, or just the quicksand of blah. And they, and we, are all too often despondent, resigned to what IS or what HAS to be.

But we have the opportunity to live into what God tells us WILL be – a world bound up in love, respect, and dignity, for ALL people. A world that starts with a rebirth in each one of us.

I am reminded of Charlie Brown's Christmas Special. Linus played a shepherd. Lucy cast him for the part, and she was really annoyed that Linus refused to let go of his blanket. "It just won't look right," she said. But Linus persisted, "Well, this is one Christmas Shepherd who's gonna keep his trusty Christmas blanket with him." And so he did.

But at the end of the special, Charlie Brown asks about the true meaning of Christmas. And it's Linus that steps into the spotlight. He recites the Luke 2 story by heart. Musician Jason Soroski notes that in the middle of his speech, Linus drops his blanket. Empowered by the truth of Christmas, Linus no longer clings to the thing that offers a false sense of security.

Sardis Baptist Church, we cling to what know. We know a world that gives us our status, that tells us people are predictable, that tells us everything can be calculated.

But on Christmas Eve, God talks to old priests, and unwed teenage mothers, and mangy shepherds, and even city-slickers in Charlotte. And on the surface, God's presence, and the new world God is making manifest can be terrifying. God's gonna turn the world up-side-down, or maybe right-side-up. And in response, our first reaction, just like Linus, is to cling to our security blanket.

But if we listen closely, we'll hear words of comfort: "Fear not!" And perhaps these words will encourage us to leave our blankets behind, and make haste to be part of God's new and enduring world.

May it be so! And may it be soon!