

Preached by Carl Rush
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church
Alexandria, VA
December 24, 2008 – Christmas Eve 7:00 PM

Isaiah 9: 2-7
Titus 2: 11-14
Luke 2: 1-14

CANDLE POWER

Long ago when I was an associate pastor replete with disposable income, I entered on an adventure. I was young and the minister where I was serving did most of the preaching, so I busied myself with lots of visitation. I had come straight from a tour in Scotland and in that time in that country people stayed home. Not everyone worked sixty hours a week. And if I didn't make more than 30 visits a week, I was chastised by my bishop, the head of the church.

And so when I was ordained in the Presbyterian Church as an associate pastor, I would often visit upwards of 15 to 20 or 25 families a week. And still, somehow, I had more time and more money than I knew what to do with. So I decided to build what my father used to call a spec house. I would get up at 4:30 or 5:00 and go out and oversee the beginning work that my father had made look easy. To make a long story short, after about seven months, I made God a promise. If he would just let me unload that house, I would stick to preaching. And I would leave the grand dreams to the professionals.

But as it turned out, on that one little house (and a smaller family), I made enough money to buy a sailboat. Now, it wasn't much of a sailboat; and after I bought it, I found out it had just a small hairline crack in the engine block. It never showed up until the engine reached a certain temperature. But most of the time the engine reached that critical temperature at the exact time that I needed to be saved from disaster.

One night we came in to our dock—to be honest, most of the time my wife wouldn't sail with me; I actually had to bribe other people to go out on over night excursions—the fog was thick. We were still operating off a Loran, which is ancient technology now, compared to a GPS. And I had all of 50,000 watts of candle power in a spotlight. And in the fog as we came up into our anchorage, I was certain we were going to run into a bridge. It stretched all the way across what was supposed to be open water. The fog was intense—now there are lights with candle power up in the millions—but I had just enough light to be totally confused. And he won't admit it now but the general presbyter of our presbytery, Wilson Gunn, who was on board with me was also equally confused. He considers himself the ultimate sailor and even though I owned the boat, I was still only the first mate.

And so we set the wheel hard to the right and went in circles while we tried to figure out where we were and what we were doing. Even that diminished hand-held light, by today's standards, was too much. So we did something really crazy. We lit a kerosene or oil lamp that we would normally hoist to the top of the mast when we were anchored. And that candle power—infinitesimally small compared to that hand-held light—

somehow acted like a fog light, and that bridge that we were so frightened of turned out to be nothing more than our own dock, the place we were headed. Candle power—the light of one single candle (and we'll see it later in this service)—is enough to defy our deepest darkness. One flame burning courageously overcomes the shadows that we often create by our own zealous attempts to be all things to all people. One candle lit in the midst of the darkest cell can reorient us and put us on the right path.

Luke's gospel is the quintessential candle of the New Testament. He doesn't do what Matthew does. He shares the story of Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And in doing so, he gives us ever so tiny a bit of light that we might understand not only their journey but where they stayed and where they find themselves as a family. Luke transports us beyond fairy tales into history. Real history. With grime and sweat. And as our old testament said, "with cloth soaked in blood."

The couple go to Bethlehem because this is Joseph's family home—his connection to King David. And this is a warm story even though it is beyond fairy tale; it is a story of a family at a critical moment in their life. And it is also a story about so much more. It's a story that begins in the desperate grips that poverty has on so many lives.

Did you hear the message for a nation in recession in the book of Titus? Stop living foolishly, filling yourself and your life with that which does not satisfy. Here in Luke, I wonder if we can grasp the context in our modern-sensibilities life that a shepherd faced day in and day out. These are people no one really trusts because they are so destitute.

If you were a shepherd in Jesus' day, you had less hope and fewer possessions than any of the people who live in shelters around our community in the metro area. We have people who survived the depression in this room tonight. No matter how poor you were or your family was during the depression, you had more than the shepherds ever dreamed to have. The people who live under the bridges in our area are better off than the shepherds of Jesus' day. And so God takes action—surprising action—and offers the divine message to the poorest of the poor, the most destitute of the down and out. "Unto you, shepherds, unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior."

Matthew doesn't even dare to use the words that Luke uses. "Unto you is born the Messiah, the chosen one of God." Only Luke is so bold. Only Luke talks about the action of God in such a way that we understand a child in the line of David, who used to shepherd his father's flock; a child who comes from such beginnings would bring in the reign of peace.

If we knew what Luke knew; if we had experienced the world in which Christ came into life; that we might know life, we would know how completely in the face of all authority such a claim would be. You see, there had been a child groomed to be emperor: Augustus was also a boy-king and now, at age 66, his reign was known as being a reign of peace. Now, Luke boldly says there is a new one who brings peace. Real peace.

Luke and the shepherds, the Christmas story, remind us that we are all able to feel God's presence right in the middle of our darkest night or when we are finishing a long day at work. While we are trying to calm our minds during a coffee break. While we are opening presents with one another. While we are sharing another turkey dinner. While we're worrying about our finances, or grieving the pain experienced by a loved one with a loss we feel in their passing.

God is with us. And God says "Do not be afraid for unto you is born a leader who will help you on your journey. Who will walk before you and give you a light that will be a light unto your feet. A candle. Enough candles to light the way."

This Christmas we are being asked, "Will we offer God who we are today? Will we offer God what we are? And where we are? And will we allow God to make that worship?"

Our greatest treasure is one another. For, you see, when we look around and see one another in this room and in our homes and others under the reign of Christ who brings peace—when we see them, really see them, we see Jesus. And we have together the opportunity not only to be neighbors but to be brothers and sisters in Christ.

Our greatest gift this season is our contact with one another and then our combined contact with those who are in need. If you are in need tonight financially, spiritually—if hope has slipped from your grip, if joy has been taken from your heart—if you leave this sanctuary without speaking to me or to Rev. Shannon, you are denying us the opportunity to be the body of Christ.

There is no need too great, there is no pain too intense that God cannot meet us and bring us healing. And that's what this meal is about. Let the light that the angels brought to the shepherds overcome your darkness.

Amen.