

Let us pray: Almighty God, you revealed your incarnate Son to the meek, the humble, and the lowly. Grant that we may be like the Shepherds, approaching the incarnation with joy and hearts open to receive your love. Amen.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

So goes our Gospel Reading this Christmas Eve. And the reading will be awfully familiar to those of you living in households where *A Charlie Brown Christmas* plays every year. It was such a cliched constant of my childhood that I almost feel embarrassed to remind you all of that climactic scene when Linus somehow recites (from memory) this miraculous annunciation to the shepherds from the Second Chapter of Luke – in the King James, no less!

Some background, for those of you who have either not seen this movie or perhaps have only experienced the sanitized Hallmark version of *Peanuts* that’s all smiles and happiness and warm puppies: the world of *Peanuts* is a harsh and often cruel universe. The comic strip adventures of Charlie Brown consist mostly of failure and disappointment. Charlie Brown is a loser. He will never kick the football. He will never win that baseball championship. His own beloved dog thinks of him only as “that round-headed kid who brings me my food.”

“I’m depressed,” Charlie Brown announces at the beginning of the famous Christmas special, a sentiment that is sadly relatable for many people during the holiday season.

The movie seems to revel in poor Charlie Brown’s misery. His friends put him in charge of their Christmas play only to ignore his directions. They send him out into the cold to do the jobs they’d rather not do only to laugh at him when he returns with his tiny, plucky tree.

In that moment, overwhelmed by the world’s cynicism and materialism, Charlie Brown cries out: “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

Linus’s answer is tonight’s passage from Luke.

Not unlike the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*, it’s too easy to overlook how bleak and downright weird the Christmas story found in our scriptures is. Israel is a land occupied and stripped of its freedom. The world has one master, and that master is Caesar. Time is recorded and shaped by those holding power. Joseph and a heavily pregnant Mary are forced to travel 90 miles (no small feat for first-century peasants!) for reasons of tax compliance. And when they arrive at that crowded inn there is no one who can find it in their heart to make room for this pregnant woman.

And so Mary gives birth in a barn. The creator of the universe, the king of the heavens, comes into the world not only as a helpless infant but in a stable, surrounded by dirty hay and animals. Not exactly an auspicious start to God’s saving mission. We talk about Christmas miracles—it’s a miracle Mary and the newborn Jesus survived the night.

It must have been cold in that stable.

And it must have been cold, that night out in the fields.

The Shepherds out in the hills of Bethlehem were probably not the most religious men in Judea. They were hardly pillars of the community, the wise or the powerful. They were the Charlie Browns of the world, sent out into the hills to do a job no one wanted to do. On a normal day they could not have cared less about some stranger's baby lying in a manger.

But it is upon these shepherds that the heavenly host descends—to deliver glad tidings. Tidings not of woe or despair or dread, but of joy! The sight of a newborn lying in a barn alongside his poor, exhausted parents is not a condemnation of humanity but an affirmation of God's love this cold, hard world. The angels fill the skies with praise, summoning the shepherds—and with them, us—to greet the coming of God into his own world.

Scripture does not tell us exactly why these shepherds, these humble men, were chosen to be the first to bear witness to Christ's incarnation. But it doesn't need to. God did not come into the world to be affirmed by the great and the powerful. The heavenly host sings its praises not to the Temple elite in Jerusalem—so close to Bethlehem, and yet so far!—nor to Caesar's mighty legions, but to a gang of peasant shepherds whiling away the hours on this cold, dark night. From the beginning, we know the end. God came into the world not as a mighty king or conquering hero, but as a shepherd not unlike the ones racing through the hills to see this promised savior lying in the manger.

In the stillness and quiet of Christmas it's easy to forget the purpose behind that tender scene in the manger. Christ's incarnation happened for a reason. Our creed makes that clear. "For us and for our salvation, he came down from Heaven." A hard road lies ahead for the baby in that manger, a road leading up the slope to Golgotha. But tonight we sit with the shepherds in quiet adoration, basking in the love radiating out from the infant Christ and his weary yet joyful parents.

The incarnate God comes into the world almost entirely unnoticed by the great and the powerful. What to the strong, is one more peasant baby in a crowded empire? It is often too easy for us to overlook the love of God that flows out through the world. Like Charlie Brown's tiny Christmas tree that love is crowded out by the looming metal trees, the cares and burdens of our life together in this precious, broken world.

At Christmas we are reminded of the deep, abiding, and eternal love made manifest in that small, fragile infant. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.

Hold that love with you tonight, that small, flickering candle. Carry it with you out into the darkness. Share it with your loved ones, with your friends, and with the whole world.

On this cold, quiet night, know that you are loved. Know that God came into this world for a reason, and that reason was a deep and eternal love for you, for me, and for all humanity.

God Bless and Merry Christmas.