

## Christmas – the Sequel

Luke 2:15-21

December 31, 2017

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LISTEN: <http://www.fbcic.org/sermon/christmas-the-sequel/>

How many of you have already put away your Christmas decorations? Christmas décor started going up in stores as early as August and it seemed like Christmas would never arrive. Now, Christmas has come and gone almost overnight. Many of you were back to work the day after Christmas. Others are fully aware of what is ahead as the calendar turns to a new year so we need to make the most of the days, putting away the last of the tinsel and the garland as we prepare ourselves for what is next in our planners and on our calendars.

I love Christmas. It is my favorite season and holiday. I love nearly everything about it except for fruitcake. I decorated before Thanksgiving. I actually started listening to Christmas music in October. Before you judge too harshly, I was on vacation in Colorado and the first beautiful snow fell. I couldn't help myself – snow, mountain cabin, warm fire, hot cocoa – it was screaming Christmas. I had no choice. Yet even with the earlier than normal start to the holiday season this year, my decorations are still up and I am still watching Hallmark Christmas movies I recorded. I'm just not ready to let it go yet. And technically, in the church's liturgical calendar, Christmas isn't over. The Christmas season, or Christmastide, begins immediately after Advent ends on Christmas Eve. Christmas continues for twelve days until January 6 which is known as Epiphany, the day celebrating in part the arrival of the Magi, or the three kings or Wiseman as they are often referred to, to see the Christ child. Christmas may not be over on the global church's calendar but for the majority of us, it is boxed up and packed away until next year.

But what if it could still be Christmas well after December 25? I'm going to propose to you this morning that Christmas doesn't have to end. Don't worry, you don't have to put your lights back up but perhaps there are some things about Christmas that can still be on display that light up our world.

Doyle just finished a series last Sunday on *The Music of Christmas* and I thought I'd continue it for today with one of my favorite Christmas songs - "Someday at Christmas" written in 1967 by Ron Mills and Bryan Wells and song by a multitude of artists over the years. My favorite rendition is the original sung by Stevie Wonder. I want to read a few of the lyrics to you this morning in case you're not familiar with this beautiful song.

Someday at Christmas there'll be no wars  
When we have learned what Christmas is for  
When we have found what life's really worth  
There'll be peace on earth

Someday at Christmas we'll see a Man  
No hungry children, no empty hand

One happy morning people will share  
Our world where people care

Someday at Christmas there'll be no tears  
All men are equal and no men have fears  
One shining moment my heart ran away  
From our world today

Someday all our dreams will come to be  
Someday in a world where men are free  
Maybe not in time for you and me  
But someday at Christmastime

What I love about this song is what I love about this season – HOPE. Hope for a better day. Hope for a better people. Hope for peace on earth.

During Christmas, it feels like people are a little bit kinder, a little more generous, a little more oriented toward the things that matter like family. It's like we try a little harder this time of year to be the kind of people God dreams us to be – generous, compassionate, others-focused, peace-oriented. More than any other time of the year, we are intentional about these things.

And it gives me hope. Hope that maybe, just maybe someday at Christmas, or some other time of the year, we will live as our very best selves. We will choose to walk the Way of Jesus each and every day – not as perfect people but as forgiven people; not as shallow, sugary happy people but people who, content in the Lord, overflow God's peace, joy and love to all we encounter.

Yes, I am a "my cup is half full" kind of person. I've been called a Pollyanna more than once. And I don't care. "With God, all things are possible." Not some things. ALL things. And if you believe our world is too dark for God to break into, well then, you've completely missed the miracle of the Christmas story.

For into the darkness of the world, Jesus Christ was born. Immanuel, God with us. Jesus left the privileges of heaven and humbled himself, becoming human, and lived among us, in the mess and the dark, and taught us a new way of loving and living.

Our text this morning focuses on the shepherds, the sheep herders whom were overwhelmed in the middle of the night by the angel of God who shared with them the good news of great joy for all people – to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. You'll find who swaddled and in a manger. Then, a whole chorus of angels joined the angel singing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill among all people."

After the angelic choir exited, Scripture says that the shepherds huddled together, talked it over, and then, left **running** to Bethlehem. They ran with hope. They ran with a sense of

urgency that what was told to them must be true. And when they found the baby where the angel said he would be and dressed the way the angel said he would be dressed, they told everyone what had happened. And all were impressed. All were amazed.

By why the shepherds told them. Some of Israel's great heroes were shepherds -- Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David. Both Psalm 23 and Jesus compare God's care to that of a Good Shepherd. But why did the announcement come to them at all? Why not to priests and kings? Who were they that they should be eyewitnesses of God's glory and receive history's greatest birth announcement? Who are they that should be the honored first visitors to welcome the Christ child?

In Christ's day, shepherds stood on the bottom rung of the Palestinian social ladder. They shared the same undesirable status as tax collectors. Only Luke mentions them.

During the time of the Patriarchs, shepherding was a noble occupation. But over time and under the influence of Egyptian captivity, shepherds became despised in everyday life and were considered second-class and untrustworthy. Scholars document the fact that shepherds were deprived of all civil rights. They could not fulfill judicial offices or be admitted in court as witnesses.

So, these shepherds could not be admitted in court as witnesses, yet, God chooses a handful of shepherds, marginalized by the social and religious elite, to be the first witnesses of the Messiah's birth.

And they didn't let God down. Upon meeting Christ, they proclaim to all what God has done. And upon leaving their encounter with the Christ child, they let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen.

This is the last mention of these shepherds in Scripture. But I'd like to believe that until they took their last breath, they were telling the story of all God did that night over and over again to anyone who would listen. Can you just picture them down at the local watering hole, saying, "Did I tell you about the time the night sky filled with an angelic choir?" "Yeah, Bob, you told us." And Bob just continues anyway like old men sometimes do, "oh man, it was incredible...."

They met Jesus and they were never the same. Christmas lived on in their stories well after that night. And although they could never bear witness in a court of law, no one could stop them from bearing witness with their lives.

The shepherds did this because what they were told came true. We have the gift of being on the other side of history knowing that it indeed all did come true. That this baby in the trough grows up to be a Savior who preaches good news to the poor, who heals the sick, who sets the captives free. We've seen it all come true and the Gospel message persist over 2,000 years. How much more should we let loose glorifying and praising God since we have seen it come true?

We are the Christmas sequel. We get to continue the story of God at work among us and within us. And we do that best in how we live and how we love, proclaiming with our lives and our words that we have met Jesus and he has changed everything.

In his 1927 Christmas message to the American people, the first of its kind, President Calvin Coolidge said, “Christmas is not a time nor a season, but a state of mind. To cherish peace and goodwill, to be plenteous in mercy, is to have the real spirit of Christmas. If we think of these things, there will be born in us a Savior and over us will shine a star sending its gleam of hope to the world.”

Christmas doesn't have to end on December 25. The spirit of Christmas can continue on in each of us. Galatians 5:22 says that when we live God's way, God brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard – things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. Don't these gifts sound like the spirit of Christmas?

These fruits of the spirit are meant to appear in our lives year-round, not just for a season.

We've taken the decorations down out of our homes, out of this sanctuary. But may the spirit of Christmas linger in our hearts and inspire our living well into the new year. We may put away the tree but let's not the generosity. We may pack up the lights but not the kindness. We may remove the stockings from the mantle but may compassion still be on display in our lives each day.

What if instead of cramming all this Christmas joy and hope into just a few days, we spread it throughout the year. Even Scrooge in Charles Dicken's “A Christmas Carol” gets it. Spoiler alert: At the end of the story, Scrooge learns his lesson and says, “I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year.”

We, like the shepherds, have a story to tell. May we do as they did – letting loose, glorifying and praising God for everything we have heard and seen – honoring Christmas in our hearts and throughout the year.

**Benediction:**

May the God who gave us this year  
and the Savior who walked at our side each day  
and the Spirit who filled us with life abundant,  
grace the coming year with peace and hope and joy,  
Amen.