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IN FIELDS WHERE THEY LAY
Mark 13:32-37; Luke 2:8-10a
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Don't you just love the shepherds in the Christmas story? They are working the graveyard shift when suddenly an angel appears to them. It gets pretty exciting after that. The angel gives them an earth-shattering message. They get a heavenly serenade. They walk off the job to go see a new baby in Bethlehem, and then they can't stop talking about it. They tell everyone they see about his birth, like a grandparent bragging about a new grandbaby. (By the way, here is a picture of my new granddaughter.)

Over the next several weeks, this story is going to help us focus on our theme this year, "Where Heaven Touches Earth." With the way things are going in our economy or maybe in our lives, it may be harder than usual to see any heaven on earth. But this season reminds us that God never abandons us. It is like one of our Bedrock Beliefs says: *God is always with us*. God comes to dwell among us full of grace and truth. God keeps reaching out to touch our lives. To transform us. To make all things new.

Now here is one thing I really like about the story of the shepherds. God does not wait for us to get to church to touch our lives. The shepherds were at work when an angel of the Lord suddenly showed up. They were watching over their flocks by night. They weren't praying. They weren't thinking about God. They were on security detail. They were watching for wild animals and for thieves that might try to make away with one of their sheep. They were just doing their jobs.

This story tells us that angels can come any time, any place. Heaven can show up when we least expect it and in places we least expect it. Like in the mundane every day lives we live. Even at work.

Like the angel who showed up in our office here on Tuesday. My plan for the day was to do my usual Tuesday stuff – staff meeting, edit the eNews, work on my sermon. Plus there were things to do in here to finish getting ready for worship today. It was in the middle of staff meeting that a man walked in and like a good boss I sent Julia out to see what he wanted. I was mentally drumming my fingers with impatience. I had lots to get done before Thanksgiving.

Then I said a mental "Oh, no" when Julia came to get me to come meet this man. I was very cordial, but still drumming my mental fingers. That is, until he started talking. I won't tell you the whole story, but this man spent a good long while sharing with us his passionate love for Jesus because of what Jesus has done in his life. He asked us to pray for him and for his job and for his family, and we did. We held hands with him, and prayed, and throughout our prayer, he thanked Jesus, over and over. And then he

surprised me when he asked if he could pray for us, and he did. He prayed in English and then in his native tongue, an Asian language. He prayed for you, for our church, in the name of the Father, and in the name of Jesus, and in the name of the Holy Spirit. Then he talked some more, and tears ran down his cheeks, and he assured us they were tears of joy. And he asked for nothing, except the prayer we offered. He finally left, and Julia said, "I wonder if he was an angel?" Later she said, "It made crawling around on our knees under the Christmas trees seem really unimportant." (You had to be here to know what she meant.) It was like God knew we needed this man to stop by to help us gain perspective. And I believe he was from God. We were just watching our sheep when he suddenly appeared.

That's the way God operates. And so Jesus says in Mark 13 that we better stay awake and watch, because God comes when and where you least expect it. You don't want to miss it, especially if you have dreams of heaven touching earth.

Julia could have sent BJ on his way. I think she sensed something important we needed to pay attention to. We could get so busy with Christmas that we never see the angels God is sending our way. So anesthetized by the routine of our lives that we never give God a chance to say hello to us. So sleepy with the stupefaction of it all that we miss heaven completely.

Advent is about welcoming the angels God sends our way to point us to the hope of the world, to Jesus Christ who comes to save us from our sins.

But here is something else God has up His sleeve with these shepherds. **God wants us to be the angels who go where shepherds are in the fields watching their sheep by night.**

Have you ever thought about being an angel? It is interesting how we have come to think of angels as heavenly beings with wings, and almost always females. We seldom ever ask boys to be the angels in a Christmas pageant. We know what they would say. YUK! At Christmas, the angels are almost always played by little children. We love our little angels. We wouldn't trade them for the world. In their own way, they are little messengers from God. We see in them the innocence, the beauty, the joy God brings to our lives through them.

Maybe you can't see yourself in wings and a halo, but that's really a good thing. Because that's not the kind of angel God wants us to be. God does not want us to go around holier-than-thou. God is not looking for perfection. God is looking for human angels – does that make sense? – who dare to speak words of encouragement and hope wherever shepherds are lying in the fields watching their sheep by night.

You see, the shepherds in that field when the angel of the Lord came to them had plenty to worry about. Not only the wild animals and thieves, but the sheep market. The price of wool. The price of meat. They had families at home waiting for their return. Worried about their safety. These shepherds were real people with real fears about the future.

So notice the first words the angel spoke to the shepherds. "Do not be afraid." Do you know anyone today who is afraid? Maybe we don't call it fear. Maybe it is worry or stress or despair. Just as we should watch for angels, so should we as angels watch for those shepherds who are just doing their jobs, working their rear ends off, and yet have back stories we may not even be aware of. They too have plenty to fear, plenty to worry about.

What I am suggesting is that we think of ourselves as angels (messengers) God is sending to the shepherds in the fields. I don't suggest that we go around telling people that we are angels from God. But I do believe God gives to all who believe in Jesus Christ a message of encouragement and hope for the fearful. "Do not be afraid." Since we are angels sent by God, let's practice our message. "Do not be afraid."

I want to end with an inspirational story I just saw on the internet. This might give you some idea about how to be an angel that brings heaven to earth.

Barbara Glanz, a consultant, was hired by a large supermarket chain to teach its employees a customer service program that would help build customer loyalty. She told the employees: "Every one of you can make a difference and create memories for your customers that will motivate them to come back. How? Put your personal signature on the job. Think of something you can do for your customer to make them feel special; a memory that will make them come back."

One month later, a 19 year old bagger named Johnny called Glanz. He proudly told her that he was a Down Syndrome person and wanted to tell her his story. He said after her presentation he couldn't think of anything special he could do for the customers. After all, he was only a bagger. Then an idea came to him. After work each night, he went home and found a thought for the day. If he couldn't find one, he made one up. Then he had his father to type the thought on the computer, six to a page. They ran 50 pages. Johnny cut them apart and signed each one on the back. The next day at work, he told each customer in his lane, "Thank you for shopping with us," and dropped a thought for the day in each customer's bag.

One month later, the manager called Barbara Glanz to tell her what was happening. Johnny's checkout line was three times longer than anyone else's. The people were standing all the way back around the frozen food section. When he announced that others lanes were now open, the people refused to leave Johnny's line. One woman told the manager, "I used to shop

at your store once a week, but now I come in every time I go by because I want Johnny's Thought for the Day."

A few months later, the manager called Glanz again. Johnny's attitude had caught on with other employees. The flower department had started pinning unused flowers on customers. A wonderful spirit of service spread through the store, all because Johnny chose to make a difference.

Barbara Glanz ends this story by asking, "Will you be a Johnny today?" I want to change that slightly. Will you be an angel today? As I never tire of saying, we go nowhere by accident. God puts people in our lives for a reason. At least one reason is to give them encouragement and hope. Let us say to those who come our way, "Do not be afraid!"