

Good evening church and good evening to you Lord.

Tonight we celebrate the beginning of the greatest miracle of all. Jesus; Jesus, who was sent to us so that we might know God in a deeply personal and intimate way. We long for proof that God exists. 'let us see you Lord' and we will believe! But to actually see God is beyond our ability. Part of the miracle of tonight is that by sending us Jesus, God allows us to see as much of God as we are capable of grasping. Part of Jesus mission was to allow us to get a glimpse of our heavenly Father, to know his divine nature and experience his unshakeable love for us. So what do you see when you look at Jesus? What images or thoughts come to mind?

As I was preparing and reading for tonight there were some words that caught my attention; words that evoked some new ways of imagining Jesus and some new insight into the nature of God. so I thought I would share some of them with you along with some of my thoughts. I invite you to consider what these words evoke in you when you consider Christmas.

The first word is Surprise. Imagine the number of surprises that occurred the night Jesus was born. A cosmic anomaly that produced a great light that led a group of unsuspecting, ordinary shepherds to visit an extraordinary baby. And Angels. I can't think of anything more surprising than for an angel to show up. Scripture tells us to always welcome strangers because we never know when we might entertain angels without knowing it. (Hebrews 13:2) If sheep are capable of surprise, imagine what they experienced when there were no shepherds around. The surprises of Christmas morning might remind us of the surprises that happened long ago. Can we be as surprised about the gift of Jesus as we are about our special gifts under the tree?

Delight. I imagine that Mary experienced great delight when she looked into the face of her child. How are we delighted by God.? Were you delighted when you come into the hall tonight and experienced the beauty that has been prepared here by the altar guild? When we consider what God might be calling us to do here at

St. John's and in the world is our response one of delight or of trepidation? What brings you delight as you consider God?

Anticipate. On that cold night could anyone have anticipated what would become of Jesus? Of the scope and glory of his life? Or his death? We have spent Advent in a state of anticipation. Are we prepared for the reality of the event that we have been waiting for? Are we ready for Jesus to be born in our hearts? I am trying to anticipate that Jesus really will show up when I need him rather than wonder if he will be there for me.

exult means to *show or feel elation or jubilation, especially as the result of a success*. What a rich word 'exult.' So the exultation that we offer in our hymns and in our praise are celebrations of the success of Jesus ministry.

Audacious. The events Luke describes are so very, incredibly small. A census called for by a leader who has no thought of a young pregnant woman and a noble father, or of angels or shepherds. An event so insignificant but which became the most significant event of

all time. Think about it. In our 21st century world, all the world knows about Christmas. But that night long ago it was a few shepherds, an unwed mother and a determined man ready to take on the audacious call of being the earthly father to the son of God.

Seeps. God's light seeps into the dark places of our soul, those places where we wonder if God's promises can really be true, those spaces where the world's darkness seems so much more real than the promise of a God we cannot see. But that is what this story is about; 'the truth that the light of Christ can overcome the darkness of the world to bring hope to the discouraged, a way home to the lost, and peace to all who long for it.' (David Lose)

Christmas is a time of homecoming, to family and perhaps to the church. Even if Christmas is the only day you come to church, I pray that you will take the Christmas story with you when you leave here tonight. See, you may leave Jesus here at church but Jesus follows you out into the world. No matter what is going on in our lives being together in church is like coming back to our roots. We

are born anew as we celebrate the birth of Jesus. Born anew when we remember how much we are loved by the good shepherd, born anew through the knowledge of our baptism that makes us the sons and daughters of God. Welcome home to God's family. When Mary heard the words of God delivered by the shepherds she treasured them and pondered them in her heart. May we also treasure and ponder in our hearts the miracle that is Jesus.

As we leave here today, may we be like the humble shepherds who left that first Christmas night glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Let us go into the world glorifying and praising God for all that has been told to us.

And one final word. **Love.** In the words of brother Curtis Almquist of SSJE:

Tonight is an answer to prayer, and the prayer is God's own. We are an answer to God's prayer. We are God's messengers to bring about the peace and goodwill on earth, and with justice, and provision, and the dignity of love. We are the Christmas gift.

You are the Christmas gift.