**Sermon Christmas Eve 2022**

Tonight, we heard the birth story of Jesus. No matter how many times we hear it—it is always good news. We need to hear again about that the Son of God enters a messy, smelly stable to remind us that we are not alone.

The last few years have been rough in a lot of ways. We thought we had gotten past the Covid pandemic, only to get hit this fall with more Covid, RSV and flu. We just got through another very contentious and stressful election. There seem to be a lot of characters yelling to get our attention. And then there’s social media and all the dissension it causes.

So, this year, it seems appropriate to turn in the Christmas story to the humble shepherds who were quietly minding their own business that night.

It was a dark night—well all the nights in Jesus’ time were dark. There were no city lights to block the starlight—no blinking red and green holiday lights. So, for the shepherds watching their flocks by night---it was “can’t see my hand in front of my face” dark. Sure, they probably had a campfire, but still—very dark. And suddenly, they were surrounded by angels.

Now, the angels could have gone into the city. They could have gone to the town square, or to the houses of the rich and famous. And yet, God sends word first to the humble shepherds. The angel of the Lord appeared, and the **glory** of the Lord shone around them. And suddenly, they were no longer in the dark.
 So, right from the beginning of the story as Luke tells it, it seems those who are outside, on the margins of respectable Jewish society, those who work in the dark, --- are those to whom God’s messengers herald the good news.
 An angel appears to those shepherds–literally and figuratively people who are living on the margins of their culture, and the message to each of them is: do not be afraid–
we come with good news that will bring great joy, good news that is given to everyone, everywhere, for all time.
 It turns out the shepherds are *not* outside the margins after all; they are as much a part of God’s promise as Mary, the faithful Jew who is also the unwed, teenage mother engaged to a man who is not the father of her baby.
 Even though Mary is stigmatized for her pregnancy in a culture where unwed mothers are candidates for stoning, she is still included. Stigmatized within her culture, yes, but she is never excluded from all that **God** has promised.
To you–and you–and you--- is born this day a Savior, a child wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger.
 So, a lowly stable—a bunch of animals—and it is really dark.
 And a manger—can’t forget the manger. Just a few pieces of rough wood strapped together to form a trough where animals eat.
 On that dark night there was a change in the stable. A man and a woman are there, and the woman is great with child. The animals seemed agitated—they have an instinct for this---they know when a baby is going to be born.
 And it’s still pretty dark. Then a baby cries. And something very strange happens. The light in the stable gets brighter and brighter. The whole stable glows---but especially the baby.
 And God is born---born to unwed, teenage parents--born as an infant, trusting that he will be cared for—fed—clothed—and loved. Born for us.
 The woman wrapped the baby in some cloths She placed the baby in the manger.
 A rough, lowly, wooden manger had received the glory of God.

Then other people started to show up. The shepherds came. They knelt and prayed-- and talked about an angel that had appeared to them.
 Much later, some people showed up who had traveled a great distance. They brought expensive gifts for the baby. It would seem this baby is special for everyone---the poor and the rich, the near and the far, those who have little opportunity and those who are worldly and wise. **Everyone**

We need to enter this wonderfully familiar story very carefully. It stimulates memories of heart-warming renditions of Christmas pageants and traditions--- and thus we may miss the radical message of inclusion, the extravagant message of welcome. So tonight, when you come to the communion rail—and you are all invited and welcome to receive communion, -----------------when you place your hands together to receive the body of Christ---remember that **you too** are making a manger to receive the glory of God.
 And remember, no matter who you are, or where you live, or what you do---you too are included in all that God has promised.

Come let us adore him