

THE CAROLS OF CHRISTMAS: O HOLY NIGHT

Big idea: God's story is bigger than our fears.

Purpose: To help people turn from fear and surrender to God's story of love.

Passage: Luke 2:8-15 **Verse:** Luke 2:9-11

Overview: As we are invited into God's story, we can find ourselves confronted with fears. The story of the shepherds in Luke 2 reminds us of God's recurring invitation to turn from our fear and to surrender to God's transforming love for us and for the world.

Opening:

It was 1843 and the parish priest of a small town in France wanted to do something special to celebrate the new church organ. He decided to commission a local poet to write a poem for the celebration. The poet was not a religious person, but he decided to have a go. While he was travelling to Paris, he pulled out a Bible, turned to the gospel of Luke, chapter 2, and penned *Midnight Christians*—his perspective on what it could have been like to be present the night of Christ's birth.

This poet had a friend—a Jewish composer—who put music to the lyrics and, while the timing is a little unclear, *Midnight Christians* was performed at the church and became a beloved song all throughout France...until the church leadership banned the song from church liturgy because it was written by an atheist.

A decade later, this song found its way to America. In 1855, American abolitionist and minister John Sullivan Dwight adapted *Midnight Christians* and composed what we now know as *O Holy Night*. *O Holy Night* quickly became a popular song—especially in the American North—in support of the abolitionist movement with its clear spotlight on the sins of slavery and oppression.

So, *O Holy Night*—Written by a French atheist, brought to life by a Jewish composer, banned from French liturgy, recaptured by an American abolitionist— was claimed to have been the first song to travel through radio over airwaves in 1906. And if that isn't enough, Mariah Carey made sure that *O Holy Night* would be a Christmas classic in homes across the nation, if not the world.

Today, we are wrapping up our series on the **Carols of Christmas**. We've been looking at these beloved Christmas classics—learning their origin stories, seeing how they interact with scripture, and exploring the gifts they hold for us today as we celebrate the Christmas season.

Let's listen to those lyrics of *O Holy Night*:

*O Holy night! The stars are brightly shining
It is the night of our dear Savior's birth*

Long lay the world in sin and error pining

*'Til He appears and the soul felt its worth
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices
For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn*

*Fall on your knees; O hear the Angel voices!
O night divine, O night when Christ was born
O night, O Holy night, O night divine!*

*Truly He taught us to love one another
His law is love and His Gospel is Peace*

*Chains shall He break, for the slave is our brother
And in His name, all oppression shall cease*

*Sweet hymns of joy in grateful chorus raise we
Let all within us Praise His Holy name*

*Christ is the Lord; O praise His name forever!
His power and glory evermore proclaim
His power and glory evermore proclaim*

The poet who wrote the words to the original French version of *O Holy Night* was inspired by the gospel of Luke, particularly Luke 2. Turn with me in your Bibles to Luke, chapter 2, verse 8. I think this familiar story holds so much for us, especially in the year we've had.

Our scripture reader for today is Denise Douglas.

Scripture Reading:

Luke 2:8-15

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them,

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

Scripture Commentary:

Thanks Denise. Today, I want to focus on the shepherds in this story. I think they give us a path to follow as we seek to respond to the presence of God in our lives.

The shepherds are living out in their fields, doing their thing. They've got their lives and livelihoods figured out. The only disruption they are expecting that night is possibly a wolf coming to threaten their flocks of sheep. But instead of a wolf, **they were visited by the glory of the Lord.**

Luke 2:9

The glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified.

As crazy as this would have been, this is actually not a unique story in scripture. We see many examples of God showing up in the lives of regular folks, who are just doing their thing. Think of **Moses** and the burning bush, **Hagar** in the wilderness, **Mary Magdalene** in the garden after Jesus' resurrection.

As I read this story about the shepherds, I can't help but see these clear parallels with the story of Isaiah, the prophet, when he encounters the glory of the Lord in the temple. Turn with me in your Bibles to Isaiah 6, verse 1. This is Isaiah recalling his experience:

I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. Above him were seraphim, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. And they were calling to one another:

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty;

the whole earth is full of his glory."

At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty." (Isaiah 6:1-5)

In both of these stories—with the shepherds and with Isaiah—God enters into their story with an invitation to a bigger story. In both of these stories, their first, very human and very understandable reaction is complete and utter fear.

Isaiah is freaked out because his whole life has been built around this system of purity and impurity. If you haven't done all the proper things to make yourself pure before going into the temple, before being in God's presence, you were going to die. In the Old Testament, God's holiness is treated like the sun: it'd just burn ya right up if you got too close. We can think of the laws in Leviticus like sun protection. You've got your sunscreen, your visor, your sunglasses, your SPF shirt. Isaiah didn't have all his 'sun protection' and thought he'd be ruined!

But then something remarkable and quite odd happens. Isaiah says it like this:

“Then one of the seraphim flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with tongs from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”
(Isaiah 6:6-7)

Rather than all the purification rituals making Isaiah ready for God’s presence, *God* made Isaiah ready for God’s presence. **God has atoned for all that was lacking, God made Isaiah holy by imparting holiness to him.**

And that was just the beginning of what God would do to bring reconciliation between God and God’s beloved world. When we sing *O Holy Night*, we are singing about the fulfillment of this hope. **The live coal brought healing to Isaiah, but now a Savior is bringing healing to the whole world.** I love how the song describes it: *a thrill of hope, our weary world rejoices. Now, made whole and holy by Christ, we can share in God’s presence and experience God’s communion.* We can be conduits of God’s healing love throughout the world.

Christmas is a time to be re-captured and re-wondered by this story. It’s a time to reckon with those fears that might keep us, like the shepherds, from entering in. I think this story holds some important invitations for us as we seek to embody our mission as a church to follow Jesus and share His love this Christmas. Let’s look at those invitations together.

Life Lessons:

Let Jesus speak to our fears.

The first invitation in Luke 2 is to let Jesus speak to our fears.

It encourages me that lots of people in the Bible were scared. The shepherds in Luke 2: scared. The prophet Isaiah: scared. Moses at the burning bush: scared. We focus often on the *“be not afraid”* message in the Bible, and rightly so. We need that message. It occurs hundreds of times in scripture. *But, in order to get to the “be not afraid” part, we have got to give Jesus access to our fears. We’ve got to let our fears be part of the story.*

Fear has been a buddy for me the last decade or so of my life. Particularly, my senior year in college was a fear-filled year for me. I remember one particular afternoon in the spring: I was between classes, lying on the top bunk in my room, paralyzed with fear. Decisions about the future were pressing in on me and I was in full-on panic. I remember crying out to God in the midst of that fear. As I lay there trying to breathe, I remember scribbling down a prayer on the notepad next to my bed. **“I will not fear, I will trust in your love. I will not fear, I will trust in your love.”**

That prayer continues to be a compass for me as I dance with fear in my life. Here’s the thing though: I can’t receive the comfort of that prayer—I can’t let Jesus speak to my fears—if I am pushing them down, unwilling to acknowledge their presence. **I can’t choose to trust God if I’m pretending there’s nothing to trust God about.**

When we—like the Shepherds, like Isaiah— behold holiness of God, the mystery of God, the radical ways of God’s Kingdom—if we are really honest with ourselves—are we not forced to reckon with our fears? Fear of not being in control. Fear of being exposed for who we really are. Fear of pain and discomfort. Fear of loss or hurt. Fear of the unknown. Fear of our shame and our weakness. When we catch glimpses of God’s glory, when we are invited more deeply into the story of God, our fears and inadequacies and limited ways of thinking are exposed and we can feel overwhelmed. **And yet it’s here, it’s right in those moments of vulnerable encounter, of humility in the face of holiness, that we can let Jesus speak to our fears: *Be not afraid. Be not afraid.***

The Bible isn’t scared of our fears. The Bible speaks to our fears. Let Jesus speak to your fears. **It’s okay to tell Jesus you are afraid.** Do you know that? Pastor Osheda Moore says that shalom happens—that wholeness and healing and transformation happens—when the love of God meets our most tender places. **Let Jesus speak to your fears.**

Surrender to God’s love.

The second invitation for us, as we engage Jesus in the midst of our fear, is to *surrender to God’s love.*

I got a massage this past week. I scheduled it a few months ago because my neck and back were hurting more from working at home and sitting on my couch a lot.

You know we think massages are relaxing, and they are, but they are also a lot of work! You have to really surrender to them. There was this part where the masseuse was working on my neck and I had to basically let my neck and head go limp in her hands. Have you ever had to do that?

Or maybe, when you’re stretching, and in order to really get the benefit, you have to breathe into it and relax any muscles that might be gripping. Whenever I do stuff like that, I realize how deep my tendency is to be gripping and bracing with my body. It seemed like every 30 seconds during the massage I had to remind myself to let go and surrender my muscles to that healing work.

I think my soul can be kind of like that, too. It’s a hard world. We have learned survival instincts of bracing, gripping, self-protecting. The shepherds could have stayed in fear. They could have continued to watch their fields, to protect what they already had. But instead, they risked surrender. **They risked the wonder of surrendering to God’s love.** In a big way, this is the choice we make when we choose to follow Jesus, but it’s also a daily choice, an ever-deepening surrender to the love of God at work in our lives.

Author and priest Henri Nouwen puts it this way: *Do I want to . . . surrender myself so absolutely to God’s love that a new person can emerge? [This] requires a total willingness to let God be God and do all the healing, restoring, and renewing. As long as I want to do even a part of that myself, I end up with partial solutions.* (Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son*)

Like in my massage this week, am I willing to surrender to those sometimes-painful pressure points in order to benefit from a healing work? It felt vulnerable to relax my neck

into her hands, but I trusted that she knew what she was doing. **Do we also not trust in God's capability to hold and shape and heal our lives?** To surrender to God's love is to learn to trust that God's vision *of* me and God's vision *for* me is so much more whole than my vision of and for myself. **To surrender to God's love is to embrace the healing reality that I am not in charge.**

Tell me that you don't also experience some of the same struggle here?

Where might God be inviting you to surrender more fully to God's love? Where do you have some gripping and bracing and striving going on in your life? Maybe it's with your finances, or how you spend your time. Maybe it's with a relationship? With your kids, a friend, your coworker, your spouse. Maybe it's with a hurt or a hope? Maybe it's just a general sense of waiting for the next shoe to drop? I know I can experience gripping and bracing in all of that.

But when we do surrender to God's love, when we do—like the shepherds—respond to God's proclamation of something new, we begin to taste the life that is truly life and the freedom that God intends for us. Like in *O Holy Night*, we can actually sing sweet hymns of joy, trusting in the mysterious and yet unwavering love of God.

Ok, most of you know me by now, and if not, you're about to learn fast. I'm not interested in just talking about this stuff—I like to get us engaged. I want to invite you to practice embodying some surrender with me. Most of you are in the privacy of our own homes right now, so no one other than your family or housemates are going to see you...

Sometimes our bodies can be real gifts to us in leading the way for our hearts and minds. Here's what I'm inviting you to do: I want you to pick a part of your body where you can clench and grip your muscles—a leg, an arm, your neck and shoulders, your hands, or if you want to go all out, go ahead and brace your whole body. Ready? Clench, brace, grip!

Now I want you to take a big breath in and, with that exhale, just surrender that part of your body. Keep it relaxed and take another deep breath in and out. Can you feel the difference? I want you to remember this sensation. Let it lead you as you identify areas in your life this week that God might be inviting you to surrender more fully to God's love.

Participate in God's love.

Finally, the third invitation for us is to participate in God's love.

Let's look back at those shepherds. After they traveled to Bethlehem, after they risked embarking from their comfortable, normal life in order to see this thing that God was doing, they found themselves caught up in this story. God's disruption of their normal day to day, led to this experience of wonder and LIFE. They found themselves telling everyone about it. They could not hold it in! They began to participate in the story. They began to participate in God's love.

You know, when you think about it, there's a pretty good chance that God would have carried on doing things even if the shepherds decided to stay in fear and double-down on their life of security. But the shepherds said yes to participation, and they "*returned*,

glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

As we let Jesus speak to our fears, as we surrender to the love of God at work in our lives, the fruit of that is our participation. **God’s love is on mission in the world.** And while it is God’s good work, **we are invited to participate.**

Participation is not about performance. It’s not about duty. **It’s not about conjuring up good behavior to keep God happy with us.** *Participation is about overflow.* It’s about sharing the reality of God’s love in the unique ways God has created you and positioned you to do so. It’s not a formula.

In the New Hope Advent devotional that many of you are reading I wrote a little welcome note where I shared that my favorite part of Christmas is this amazing mystery called the Incarnation—which is just a fancy way of saying that God become human. Through Jesus’ incarnational, embodied presence, the world could know God’s love. And now, for those of us who follow Jesus, **do you know what God’s plan is? It’s us!** The Church. We’re Jesus’ body on earth—in all its broken beauty—and we get to share the story of God’s healing love.

A few years ago, I read a prayer that has been such a gift to me. When I’m headed into a meeting, or a conversation, or just going about my day, I pray *“God, help me participate in what You are doing.”* I don’t have to force anything. I don’t have to try create something for God. I just get to pay attention and say ‘yes’ to the opportunities of participating in God’s love at work.

I want you to consider how you might participate in that incarnational kind of love this week. **How might you, like the shepherds, share in this thing that God has done, that God is still doing? How might you participate in God’s love?**

Closing:

O Holy Night describes a moment when God shows up with a holy disruption and a holy invitation. **We are always being invited more deeply into God’s story.** Sometimes—oftentimes—that invitation begins with terror, but time and time again, the scriptures remind us that **God’s love is bigger than our fears.**

What would it look like to let Jesus speak to those fears that hold us back? To surrender even more wholeheartedly to the faithful love of God? And then to jump in! To participate in God’s love on-mission in this weary world. I believe with my whole heart that wonder awaits us. I believe with my whole heart that it’s worth it.

Communion:

When God’s story involved Jesus giving his life, Jesus was met with fear. The scriptures tell us that He was in agony over the cost of this surrender. And yet, for the joy set before Him, He chose it. He paves the way for us to choose it, too. He shows us, with no uncertainty, that there is real, good, true LIFE on the other side.

Are you in fear today? Are you wrestling with surrender? Are you being invited to participate more fully in God's story of love? Bring that to the table today. Take the bread and the cup as a practice of faith, as a practice of hope. He knows the way.

Benediction:

I'm not sure what life looks like for you today, but I do know that God is present with you—in your fears, in your struggle for surrender, in your courage to participate in God's love. May you experience some holy disruptions today and respond with wonder. May you know God's life and God's love.