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## The Song of The Angels

Before we were married, my wife often talked about Christmas, and how we would develop all sorts of family traditions for this season, which would be special for our family. It didn't work out that way! We didn't realize that Christmas would be one of the busiest times of the year for me. We should have, but we didn't. I found church activities took up so much of my time leading up to Christmas day, that just finding family time together was often a problem, and developing those traditions we had looked forward to, got lost in the hectic activity.

But it just takes a thing to happen twice, to make it a tradition, and there were all sorts of events that I made into my own traditions – things that happened each year in those busy Christmas activities, that I began to look forward to. And for me, probably the most cherished of all those Christmas activities that I turned into a tradition, was when I headed for home at the end of the late night Christmas Eve service – especially at the end of an 11:00 service.

I was the last one to leave the church, and I turned the lights off, and headed out into the empty, silent parking lot. I drove along Alexis Park Drive, past the Catholic Church down the street, and I could see the priest at the altar as he conducted the midnight mass. Then I

would drive over to 27<sup>th</sup> street, and past the Anglican church. I couldn't see inside, but I could see all the cars parked along the street, and I knew they would be at worship inside. I went further, past St. James' Catholic church which was quiet and dark, because they had gathered for a service, earlier in the evening at the Rec. Centre. And then I would head out into the Coldstream, and home.

The thing about it was that the streets were empty, or nearly empty. The only activity was those church services. But everything else was quiet. I might meet one or two cars on my homeward journey, but by and large, I had the streets to myself. It was still – not the usual activity on those streets, and it felt to me like the world had quieted and was waiting, holding its breath to hear the angels once more. It felt like the first Christmas was happening all over again, and that the song of the angels would announce peace in the world once more, and it would happen for a few minutes or days. And then all would return to normal, and it would be as if the whole thing was a dream – that it never happened. Until the next Christmas.

That's how Christmas Eve morphed into Christmas Day, each year, for me. It was a lovely, romantic thought, and I looked forward to that still night each year. But then I retired, and I wasn't out

on the street, late on Christmas Eve. And so the tradition ended. And so it should have. Because the tradition wasn't really about Christmas – not the Christmas that Luke announced.

Really, Christmas doesn't happen once a year, and then is put away with the decorations until it happens again next year. Christmas isn't about being cocooned in a cozy car on my way to a cozy house and waiting family. Christmas isn't about peace and good will being practiced for a few days, once a year.

If we go back to the story, those aren't the things we see.

It was the custom of those times, that when a baby was born, the local musicians gathered at the house to greet the child with simple music. But when Jesus was born there was no house. There was no room for him anywhere, but in a manger, out behind the inn. And none of the local inhabitants even knew there was a birth there, unless it happened as Pam's story suggested. But never mind. The angels were there to sing, and the sky was filled with their glory. There was music to greet the birth of this child.

So, where would the angels sing tonight? Surely not in my cozy car as I wend my way homeward.

I think it is to the parents of babies born tonight in eastern Ghouta, the enclave just outside of Damascus in Syria, that the angels might sing. There will be no one else there to sing at their births. That enclave of east Ghouta, has been under siege by the Syrian government for four years. In an area with 400,000 inhabitants, the U.N. says that 1,200

children are severely malnourished. And all the while, all the supplies that will feed them and bring them back to health, are only 10 kilometers away in Damascus, on the other side of the siege lines. If tonight, the angels were to sing that the siege is over and food is on the way, heaven would sing of God's love, and earth would join in the rejoicing.

It is the parents of the Rohingya refugee babies, born tonight in Bangladesh, who need to hear the angels sing. Since August more than half a million Rohingyans have fled persecution in Myanmar, and found refuge in squalid camps in Bangladesh. UNICEF says that 340,000 of them are children, and their plight is desperate. There is no doubt, that there will be babies born in those camps tonight.. Born to what future? If the heavenly host announced that their persecution is ended, and they were free to return to their homes in Myanmar, then surely the whole world would ring out with their rejoicing.

If we go back to the story, who was the heavenly host singing to? The angels were announcing the birth of the baby to shepherds, guarding their flocks on the hillsides outside of Bethlehem. These were no ordinary shepherds. Every morning and evening, unblemished lambs were sacrificed in the temple in Jerusalem, and these shepherds cared for and raised these lambs. But they themselves couldn't go into the temple. Living out on the hills, they weren't able to observe all the ritual obligations, needed to prepare them to enter the temple. So their sheep were acceptable to the Jewish leaders, but they weren't. But, though they could not go to the temple,

they were called to the stable, to see the baby born there, and it was the angels themselves, who invited the shepherds to come.

So, who would the angels invite to the manger this night? Surely the refugees, from camps all around the world. They would know about the significance of an event like this – the birth of a saviour that announced that their time of waiting and hoping was over. The homeless, in shelters here in Vernon, or spending a cold wintery night on the street. They would be glad to join the procession that made its way to the manger, if it promised them an end to their misery, and a better way forward. They would rejoice at the news of the angels.

And us. You and I. We have heard the songs of the angels, and we are welcome to join those who crowd around the manger. But we will have to get out of our cars. There's no parking lot at the manger. We will have to mingle with all those others, who are attracted by the Good News of the angels.

So, here is a new tradition. When you leave here tonight, if it's very quiet, listen for the song of the angels. This is the night when they are likely to come. And they will invite us to join them at the manger. But, if you go, be prepared that the quiet of the night is soon going to draw to an end. And be prepared, also, that you won't be able to go home. At least, not as you intended to. Because the world as we know it has changed, and we are invited to change with it. Merry Christmas!

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