



**CHRISTMAS EVE
DECEMBER 24, 2020
LUKE 2: 1-14
“UNDER THE SURFACE”**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

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.”

SERMON

Last Christmas, we had it going on.

Our Christmas concert, “a Christmas to remember,” packed the pews as the handbells of ring Pittsburgh, our clc choir, our clc kids, and our band, SoulSpirit, lifted the roof with joyous songs of Christmas. Two Christmas eve services with Obadiah, the crazed shepherd, making an appearance at the family service and our traditional candlelight service ushering in the birth of Jesus with sermon and song. By the way, this year Obadiah is in self-quarantine in a cave in Syria.

As far as outreach, we knew of one family who needed help and so we responded with lots of clothes and gifts.

What a difference a year makes.

We didn’t know it last Christmas eve, but the coronavirus already was alive and deadly in the “wet markets” of Wuhan, china.



On the surface, last Christmas cause for celebration. A successful concert, lovely worship services, a congregation on the rebound.

But under the surface, in a worldwide context, we were about to start what is now a year-long pandemic that, as I wrote this sermon, has claimed 1,684,288 lives....

This Christmas eve the pews are empty. We recorded the clc choir on Thursday, December 17th. We recorded the band and this sermon last Saturday.

Our Christmas concert was canceled this year. And looking at 2021, our country is hopeful because of the vaccines, but who knows what we will face before we begin to open up again....

Earlier I read the familiar words of the Christmas story. Over the last two thousand years, we have scrubbed the story clean so it sparkles like a hallmark movie.

Mary and Joseph dutifully traveled to Bethlehem to be counted in the census and, even though there is no room in the inn, they find what has to be the cleanest manger in the middle east where Jesus is born. Surrounded by compliant barnyard animals, pristine hay, and magi dressed in magnificent robes.

Then gorgeous angels appear to the most law-abiding and spotless shepherds known to humankind.

And that's pretty much how it's been for the forty years that I have preached on Christmas eve.

Forty years of lovely candlelight Christmas services with well-dressed folks in the pews.

And, every year these good folks helped one or two families. And that's a good thing.

But, under the surface....

I hope by now you understand that the bible was not written in King James English, but in Hebrew and Koine Greek with some Aramaic thrown in for good measure.

And so, if we stay with the English translation we stay on the surface and that doesn't serve us well.

In the Greek, Mary and Joseph do not come to an inn, but to the home of one of Joseph's relatives.

And, culturally, it wasn't a home like yours or mine with numerous rooms where we do different tasks in each separate space.

This home was one room where the family cooked, ate, slept, and interacted.

There was however, an external space where the animals were brought in at night so they wouldn't be stolen or wander off.

And this is where Joseph's family dumped her and Mary. They did not make room for them in the house.



It was a deliberate act of shaming. You're going to act like animals and get pregnant before being married? Then you can sleep with the animals.

There is no lovely, well-lit barn with a manger.

There are mangy animals and their droppings. There is a dried-up water-trough where the baby Jesus will be laid.

And the shepherds?

The worst of the worst. Considered to be thieves, liars, and cheats. Outcasts. Damned by the religious established because they lived and worked so far from the temple that they could not attend the temple services.

Under the surface, the Christmas story looks a lot different than it does on the surface.

"under the surface" reality has to be revealed to us. Revealed by the divine. Revealed by god in the flesh because, let's be honest, do we really want to know this stuff?

Don't we like to keep the holy story unspoiled.

Sweet baby Jesus.

No room at the Marriott.

God-fearing shepherds.

A lovely star. Three wise men. Cattle kneeling before the baby.

Isn't it best have a lovely Christmas eve service and then go home to our nice warm beds and get up and eat ourselves sick on Christmas day?

Pastor, why do have to ruin what we like on the surface by telling us the way it really was and is—under the surface.

Because if we know what is under the surface, we are faced with ethical choices that challenge us and force us to re-think what the world and god are really like.

And here, I don't let myself off the hook, either.

Before march of this year, my time was spent on the typical pastor roles: preaching, teaching, working with the council and ministry teams, tending to the flock. Meaning, I spent my time on in-house tasks.



But beginning in March, what was under the surface surrounding clc rose to the surface.

Oh, we are surrounded by people who don't have enough to eat?

Who'd a thunk it?

And so we found the money to hand out \$15,000 of grocery gift cards. Shaler school teachers, the rotary club, element church, generous individuals from the community gave us money.

That's a lot of gift cards! Wow, people must be hungry!

And so we started a food bank.

And we received support from the Shaler schools who held two food drives and teachers volunteered to deliver it and unload it. Northway Christian community church included us in their food bank order on two different occasions.

Individuals in the community began dropping off food supplies.

Volunteers popped up from the larger community.

We began distributing food four days a week.

And then 45 turkeys at thanksgiving. And 43 turkey dinner donated by eat n park.

And then we wondered if families needed help with providing gifts for their children this Christmas.

And instead of one child like last year, we found something like 45 children and residents of two group homes who were in need. And we raised money to buy them what their parents knew they needed, not cast off toys and clothes. A real Christmas! With Christmas stockings for each of them.

And, of course, there is Christmas dinner. So, 42 hams with all the fixings and more dinners from eat n park.

Donations from the Shriners. And from health quest medical in Gibsonia. And from my Jewish friends. And members of former congregations.

I hate asking for money, but I'm getting better at it. Because there are people in need. And there are truly generous people and organizations....

My eyes have been opened. A revelation.

What was always under the surface is now on the surface.



Every Christmas, the culture rises up and does a credible job of helping people. But then it all sinks back under the surface until next year.

But surprise, there are still hungry individuals and families when Christmas is over.

And, of course, if we pay attention, we are now faced with sustaining this ministry year-round....

The “under the surface” Christmas story is about god taking the risk to plant himself right smack in the middle of the mess we call our world.

In the middle of a family who is shaming his mother, in the middle of the animal kingdom, in the middle of a pack of smelly shepherds.

And this Christmas eve, in the middle of the hungry, the hurting, the lonely, the addicted, the marginalized.

Just last week, a young mother of three overdosed and died about a block from the church....

My hope for Christmas 2021 is that we have a wonderful Christmas concert with ring Pittsburgh, clc kids, our clc choir, and our band, SoulSpirit.

And two glorious Christmas eve services.

And that we double the number of Christmas dinners we deliver. And we assist twice as many families in giving a joyful Christmas to their children.

And that we have found more ways to be Christ in the community.

God planted himself under the surface in the world. Under the surface with the poor, the outcasts, the hungry, and lost.

Today, that’s where we find god still.

God be with you on and under the surface. I wish you a joyous Christmas.

SERMON SONG

Christmas Must Be Tonight (The Band)