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The Christmas story is full of detail and wonder. Often it gets more than just a little confusing. There are of course two accounts of the birth of Jesus in scripture – one in Luke and in Matthew. And they don't agree with each other very much. That can be a little confusing.

Then we've got hymns and Christmas carols. Often they contain beautiful and moving poetry. And sometimes they have extra details and images that become attached to the story. So attached that people will often ask where in the Bible they can find the names of the three wise men. Just for the record – their names are not in the Bible. The Bible doesn't even tell show many wise men there were. So that can be a little confusing.

We've got bleak mid-winters, angels that somehow don't frighten us – when they should - crowded inns, angels singing, cattle lowing, shepherds abiding, snowmen melting, reindeer flying, maids a-milkin', lords leaping, bureaucrats counting the census, three good wise men from the East, two loving parents, one bad king in Jerusalem, and a baby, wrapped in swaddling clothes. It can all get just a little bit confusing.

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But tonight we only have one story, the story that Luke left for us. The story that Luke left for us is enough. It is more than enough – and taken in-and-of-itself, its really not very confusing.

The story that we receive tonight affirms and renews the promise that God made to our ancestors long ago. That promise made at Creation, guaranteed to Noah, affirmed with Abraham, and established with David. The promise that Daniel and Isaiah dreamed about. The promise that Jeremiah and the other prophets proclaimed. A promise that is not confusing, but, really, very, very simple.

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Luke first tells us of this promise in Mary's eloquent hymn of praise when she and her cousin Elizabeth meet. *God will help Israel. God remembers the promise made to Abraham and his descendants, forever.*

We hear the promise again when the shepherds encounter those frightful angels. You can bet that when the shepherds saw that first angel they were 'sore afraid'. Terrified out of the wits, I would imagine. We need to slide over to Matthew's

version for just a moment, in order to get an important contrast between the two stories. Matthew has wise men from the East first understanding that God was doing a new thing. They journey to Jerusalem and go straight to the top, where they meet old Herod sitting on his throne.

Luke doesn't go there. Luke doesn't takes us to the top. Instead Luke's story tells us that news of this new work by God was given first to a group who were among the lowest of the low. At that time in Israel, shepherds were presumed so untrustworthy that their testimony was inadmissible in a trial. Their occupation and their lifestyle resulted in what amounted to a perpetual state of ritual uncleanness. And these were the people to whom Luke tells us God sent an angel to announce the birth of the Messiah.

In the choice of shepherds over some other group – like the temple authorities, or the scribes, or the Pharisees – Luke shows his hand for the trajectory of his entire gospel. Sunday by Sunday, as we make progress through Luke's gospel this year, we'll be looking at the story of God's preference for the powerless, the disposed, and those deemed by society to be ritually unclean. As Luke's gospel unfolds this year, we'll meet tax collectors, prostitutes, Samaritans, and Roman centurions. Each of them an individual despised by their society, and each one of them loved Jesus, seen for the child of God, created in God's image that they were. With the selection of the shepherds as the ones to first hear the news of the birth of Jesus, Mary's Magnificat becomes almost a prophecy: *God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly*

.But the shepherds weren't just passive listeners. No! They voted with their feet. They became active participants in faith by going to where the angel of the Lord told them they would encounter the Messiah. When the shepherds arrived in Bethlehem and at the manger, they continued their role as active participants in faith by telling Mary and Joseph everything that they had heard from the angels; and by glorifying and praising God. ***Everything that they had heard from the angels.***

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The very simple, not-very-confusing, promise of God. *on earth peace and good will to all people* That's the promise of God. The desire of God in creation: *on earth peace and good will to all people* The guarantee of God to Noah: *on earth peace and good will to all people.* The covenant of God with Abraham: *on earth*

*peace and good will to all people* The foundation upon which David's eternal throne is established: *on earth peace and good will to all people*. The dream of God shared with the prophets: *on earth peace and good will to all people*.

The promise finally realized in a dirty manger, in tiny back-water Bethlehem, witnessed by no-account shepherds, born to an un-wed mother: *on earth peace and good will to all people*.

God's promise is be faithful. God promise is to not forget us. God promise is to not abandon us. God promise is to be with us. If you think that God is not faithful, then come to Bethlehem tonight. If you think that God has forgotten you, then come to Bethlehem tonight. If you think that God has abandoned you, then come to Bethlehem tonight. If you think that God has left you all alone, then come to Bethlehem tonight. The Christmas story is full of detail and wonder. And really, it's not all that confusing after all. It's really very, very simple.

*Come to Bethlehem and see  
Him whose birth the angels sing;  
Come, adore on bended knee  
Christ, the Lord, the newborn King.*