Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

So what do you do when God reveals something to you? Do you shrug your shoulders? Do you scratch your head? Do you laugh out loud? And how do you handle it when this God-revelation is bigger than a fleeting thought, or a growling stomach, or an uncontrollable muscle spasm? And what happens when this divine-disclosure takes place in the midst of a family meal, or in a movie theater, or during that really important football game? What do you do then?

For me, it’s easy to imagine what I might do if I were alone: fall on my knees, open wide my arms, look up. It’s a bit harder to picture what I would do in a crowd. Pretend as if nothing at all had happened? Check to see if others are reacting? Ask the person next to me … discretely of course … if they felt, or heard or saw something? An easier question for me to answer is how I would feel….terrified, most likely, just like the shepherds that we heard about tonight.

Terror, confusion, disorientation often accompany unexpected happenings. Think about the description of crowd reactions when there is major explosion, or an earthquake, or a terrorist attack.

As social animals, we bunch together at such times…a “safety in numbers” type of thing, or we run as fast as we can away from the experience. What is interesting to me in tonight’s Gospel story is that although the shepherds were terrified, they stayed together, heard the Good News, and then went “with haste” to check out the angels’ story. In spite of the strange message and the even stranger messengers, the shepherds took in the information, believed enough of it that they wanted to go investigate, and then seemingly left the sheep and goats to fend for themselves as they went off to town to find this newborn baby. Is that what you would do in response to such a revelation?

For the past four weeks of Advent, we have been preparing ourselves for this night of wonder and joy. On this silent and holy night, we remember that God became flesh, that the creator became the created, that love itself came down from heaven. No one can deny the centrality of the Christmas celebration to our faith. But without Jesus’ death and resurrection, his ascension and promised coming again, Christmas makes little sense in and of itself. That’s why our Advent preparations pointed us beyond the baby in the manger, beyond the shepherds on the hillside, beyond the angel choirs singing “Glory to God in the highest.” Tonight with the shepherds, we have heard the glad tidings of Jesus’ birth. And as we celebrate again the significance of this event, we do so with an eye to the future. We look at that great arc of salvation history and tread along our pilgrim journey year after year…through Advent to Christmas…through Lent to Easter…always hoping for the fulfillment of God’s promises.

As we heard in the reading from the prophet Isaiah this evening, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; …His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace.”

This is the message of hope that we have at Christmas: hope in the midst of terrorist attacks, hope in the midst of political turmoil, hope in the midst of all of life’s uncertainties. Since the beginning of time, the world has been groaning in birth pangs, laboring to complete God’s great mission, pushing hard to bring about heaven on earth. Every day we do come nearer to the fullness of creation, being brought out of error into truth, out of sin into righteousness, out of death into life. Every day we can hear the excited voices of those who have encountered the poor and the sick, the homeless and the dying and found God in their midst. Every day we are invited to join the triumph of the skies and witness to the fact that this tiny baby has brought peace on earth and mercy mild. Through him, God and sinners have been reconciled.

And so we wait in joyful confidence for the second coming of our God. And until Jesus does reappear, we are called to carry on with God’s mission ….straightening the way, leveling the barriers, filling in the empty spaces. We do stumble and fall at times, but we are granted grace to repair the damage created by our self-centeredness. We are blessed with opportunities to remove those obstacles that block us from loving others as much as God loves them. We are provided all of the help we need to fill in the pot-holes created by our greed.

Tonight, as we celebrate Jesus’ birth, let us not forget that those terrified shepherds not only raced to Bethlehem to see Him whose birth the angels sang, but they also returned to their flocks, “glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen…” So, when God reveals something to you….and be assured that God will do so…be like the shepherds. Listen closely. Get excited. Run towards the good news with hope. And then, in the words of that African-American spiritual, Go! Tell it on the mountain, over the hills, everywhere, that Jesus Christ is born for us, and for our salvation!