

**THE ANGEL'S VOICE**  
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Second Sunday in Advent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Mark 1:1-8**

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you ["messenger" is another word for "angel"], who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance [or "transformation"] for the forgiveness of sins. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but that One will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."*

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This past Tuesday evening I spent some time with a woman whose daughter had taken her life by hanging. It was a virtual visit, not an actual visit. I heard that woman's story by way of a documentary entitled "For the Bible Tells Me So," a film first shown last year at the Sundance Film Festival where it was a Grand Jury Award nominee.

We know that song. *Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.* Yes, we know the song. But you know and I know that many people don't hear "love" from the Bible. They hear hatred and condemnation.

Hatred and condemnation are what that woman's daughter heard most of her life. It took years but eventually she overcame paralyzing fear and shame and "came out" to her mother by way of a letter. Her mother responded with a blistering letter expressing condemnation of her daughter's homosexuality—sentiments and convictions well honed by her lifetime in a certain kind of church of which, sadly, there are many. That single letter sealed her daughter's fate.

Perhaps you know that homosexual men and women are many times more likely to commit suicide than straights. Religion and the religious are, in part, to blame. It's sad but true: many churches have perpetuated a culture of bigotry and violence against homosexuals. We might say that particular mother used the Bible to bludgeon her daughter to death. For the Bible tells me so.

As you might guess that death plunged that mother into darkness. Grief and guilt tormented her body and soul and pushed her into hell. That mother was bent low by what she came to feel as a grievous, unforgivable sin against her beloved daughter. But, as it turned out, that tragic ending was a new beginning for that mother, eventually.

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This is not a sermon about homosexuality. This is sermon about forgiveness. It's about our betrayal of love, of not doing the right thing at the right time—or just thinking we haven't—and the toll that takes on our souls. This sermon is for all of you doubled over

in pain and hoping against hope for some relief and comfort, hoping and pleading that your crooked heart and bent soul might be straitened enough to allow you to breathe and walk again.

*Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. (Isaiah 40)*

In this world of tears, there are relief and comfort; but we must have ears to hear and hearts to believe. *Listen, O people, in the silent chapel of your heart; and the Beloved will speak of peace to you. (Nan Merrill, Psalm 85)*

That mother and the other parents in the film would at last find comfort coming to relieve their broken and bent souls. Still, there were many mountains and valleys to cross over and through. But they had help—lots of help, seen and unseen.

In this world of tears there are voices like South African Anglican Bishop Tutu who remarks in the film about long-held prejudices. He says: *I can't imagine God ever saying: I can't love you because you are black. Too bad you aren't white. I can't love you because you are a woman. Too bad you aren't a man. I can't love you because you are gay. Too bad you aren't straight.*

In this world and in your own mind, there are many voices to be heard. Which will you believe and take to heart?

Perhaps you have read or heard of *The Shack*, by William Young, a nationwide best seller. It tells the story of a father devastated by the loss of his little girl. He is inconsolable and bound for a life of abject misery when he heard a voice calling him to return to the wilderness, an unexpected voice from an unexpected place. There he found comfort—not quickly or easily—but comfort nonetheless in a mind-boggling, heart-stirring encounter with the triune God. In the wilderness of his despair that father heard a voice calling him to a kind of baptism, to an immersion into the spirit, the spirit forgiveness, self-forgiveness, transformation, and new birth. *Listen, O people, in the silent chapel of your heart; and the Beloved will speak of peace to you.* A tragic ending became a new beginning for that father.

*The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.*

The “beginning” of the good news. Get it. The gospel as told in the Bible is just the *beginning* of the good news. It goes on and on and on.

We live in a world of tears. None of us escapes the torments of guilt and grief. Today's lesson is an invitation to listen; to listen, listen, listen for the angel's voice bidding us to accept forgiveness, transformation and new birth. For Christ, you see, doesn't merely come *to us*; Christ is born *in us* as we prepare the way.

*Advent is a time to enter the dark where your fear is afraid to go. Ask your soul: what do you long for? Be still and wait for the answer. Take much time, and listen gently. Your soul will only whisper. Your desires tangle down through the dark like roots into the heart of God. Your deep longings are the voice of the Beloved longing for the New Creation. [Pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes]*