

Pastor Alan Blankenfeld Sermon for January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023. – Name of Jesus

Well, good morning.

My name is Pastor Alan Blankenfeld. I'm the Rural Ministry liaison for the South Dakota Synod, and I decided to do something a little different today.

Instead of just having a typical sermon recorded, I decided that you and I would do a little fireside chat, for it is a cold and wintry morning out, this morning the day I'm recording this.

And so, welcome as listen to the text this morning, and as we spend a little time we visiting about it.

So, our Gospel reading is from Luke's Gospel, the second chapter beginning with verse 15:

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Here ends our reading.

Grace to you in peace from God our Father, and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Oh, man. I love this story, and you heard the beginning of this text a few days ago, probably Christmas Eve, or maybe even Christmas morning, the story of the shepherds.

So, the angel comes to the shepherds, and of course they're terrified. Who wouldn't be terrified? If an angel came to you and I today, I believe we would be terrified as well. But they didn't let that fear stop them. They were filled with joy. They were filled with excitement, and immediately they went and they found Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus, and they told them everything, and they return praising and glorifying God.

If we could only be like those shepherds today. You know, so many times we have the opportunity to share the name of Jesus and his story with others, and we hesitate to do that.

Let's talk a little bit about this day: January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2023. Can you believe it? Here we are in a new year. I'm not sure what happened to 2022, and now we're in 2023.

So many of us go into the new year with making New Year's resolutions. I stopped doing that years ago, because I discovered I couldn't keep them anyway. Instead, each New Year's Day, I think about the future. I think about what this New year may hold for us. We don't know; it's all unknown – and sometimes it's scary for us.

I have the privilege of the rural ministry liaison to go into congregations across the South Dakota Synod who are in transition, who don't have a pastor to serve them right now, or, if they do, it is a pulpit supply. And while we give thanks for all pastors who are willing to do that, to share their time and talents with various congregations, the congregations long to have a pastor there; someone they can turn to, someone that they know is there walking with them.

It's a privilege and an honor for me to step into that community into those congregations, and to sense and feel their fear, their anxiety. But yet in all of that something incredible takes place, and that is the word of Jesus Christ continues to go out. Whether it's a supply pastor coming in on a weekly basis, or whether it's a lay person stepping up, feeling called to do something. Part of my job is to find these people and to help them to move forward and to receive some lay education, in hope that some of them will go on to be pastors one day. And, right now some are on that journey. It's an amazing thing for me to be a part of, and so I thank you for that opportunity.

But one of the things I wanted to share today is that idea of going into an unknown future; going into a future that at times is filled with fear and anxiety, just like the shepherd's experience that night, because we don't know what lies ahead. But what we do know is Jesus is with us.

I shared this imagery with a children's sermon a while back, and I couldn't express to you the amazement in those kids' eyes as their eyes grew bigger and bigger as I said, "When you look at the sun or you look at the moon, have you ever thought that it's the same sun and moon that Jesus looked at?"

You see, he lived on this earth. He walked on it. Granted, it was on the other side of the of the planet from where we are, but Jesus sweat under the same sun that we do. He looked up and saw the sun and the moon and the stars, knowing full well that he had a hand in its creation. And yet, we look at the same ones.

For me, it brings that time lapse, that 2,000 years difference in time a lot closer. Sure, the sun, the moon, the earth, are all changing. And the stars, they're constantly in a state of change – as are we.

Now, we don't like change. We usually push back that change. But sometimes change can be good. Change can take us into new places and new experiences where we find joy, and we find a sense of completeness in what we do.

So, as we enter into 2023, I want you to remember this. We may not understand what's happening. We may look at the news or listen to the radio, and we may question all the chaos going on in our lives. But one thing is consistent, and that is Jesus' love for you and his promises to you. For we are all children of God. Through our baptism we were named; we are His beloved children – treasure that and ponder that in your hearts.

So now, as we go into this new year, whether it's you yourself personally, your family, your congregation, there will be struggles. There will be issues. There'll be times of fear and times of joy, and in all of those, know that Jesus is with you. Trust in him, turn to him, and know that as you journey together with Christ, with your Church, with the South Dakota Synod, that message of Jesus continues to be proclaimed.

So perhaps we are doing just as the shepherds did, as we continue to proclaim Jesus' love and the forgiveness that we all have through Him.

Let us pray.

Dear Heavenly Father, as we begin this New Year, we ask that you walk with us. Help us in times of fear and anxiety, to know that we are not alone. Help us to turn

to you and trust in your promises. And Father, help us to be like those very first shepherds – to be filled with excitement and joy so that we, too, are willing to step outside of our comfort zones and share the good news of Jesus with those we come into contact with. Whether it be by sharing our story, or perhaps it's by them, seeing how we live out our lives, that they know that something is different. Help us, Father.

We ask that you be with the South Dakota Synod, with Bishop Hagmaier, her staff, all the ELCA congregations and the members of those congregations as we do journey together. We ask for your guidance and we ask for your blessing. In Jesus name we pray, Amen.

And now, may the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.