

The Rev. Kristin Krantz
St. James', Mt. Airy
12/24/16

Christmas Eve – 8:30
Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Merry Christmas!

In all the holiday hubbub – cleaning house, buying gifts, several trips to the grocery – you might have missed the announcement that Merriam Webster selected *surreal* as its Word of the Year for 2016.¹

The definition of *surreal* is: “marked by the intense irrational reality of a dream.”

It’s a relatively new word in English, only dating back to the 1930s, from descriptions of the artistic movement of the early 1900s known as *surrealism*.

It’s a word that is used to express a reaction to something shocking or surprising, a meaning which is built into its parts: the “real” of *surreal* is preceded by the French preposition *sur*, which means “over” or “above.”

When we don’t believe, or don’t want to believe what is real, we need a word for what seems “above” or “beyond” reality. *Surreal* is such a word.

¹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/word-of-the-year-2016>

I can't help but imagine that if the word existed in the time into which Jesus was born, it is what the folk in our Gospel reading tonight would have used to describe their experience.

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The shepherds were just doing their job, a rather thankless one at that. It was night, which means something different then than it does now – something more.

Even out here in the country we get light pollution. It's darker than the city and the suburbs – but nothing like the all-encompassing, oppressive lack of light the shepherds experienced. It's possible some of them were huddled around a fire to keep warm. Within a perimeter of light they felt safe, beyond that however, every familiar bush and stone was a stranger. But in order to truly keep watch over their flocks, they would have been out in the field in the dark.

Can you imagine not just the presence of a messenger from God, but the sudden light that accompanied the angel that appeared to them? We are told they were terrified, and I imagine we would be too.

At a Bible study earlier this week we were talking about the awe and unknowing that must have been wrapped up in this experience, and a scene from the movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* popped into my head.

Do you know the one? It's close to the beginning and the main character is in his truck on a back road at night when suddenly he is entirely surrounded by blinding light. He is marked by the experience, and much like the shepherds, moved to action.

Because the shepherds *surreal* experience didn't end with their encounter with the angels that appeared and told them good news of great joy.

When they were once again left in the dark, they turned to each other as if in a dream and said, "*Let us go now to Bethlehem.*" And they went.

It must have been *surreal* to find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger – just as they had been told. But find them they did, and they make known what had happened to them to the amazement of all.

Except for Mary.

Mary, we are told, treasured the words and pondered them in her heart.

I wonder if this is because beyond the *surreal* experience of giving birth and holding your child for the first time, this night and their visit was a confirmation for her of not something beyond reality, but of the real presence of God made known in flesh and blood.

Her experience of the *surreal* began with the visit from the Angel Gabriel – and then continued, with her visit to her cousin Elizabeth, and then Joseph's dream.

When you put it all together like that *surreal* doesn't seem like a strong enough word.

Writer Madeleine L'Engle captured it well in her poem *After Annunciation*:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild!
Had Mary been filled with reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

And yet, she **believed**. She said **yes**. And because she did, we can too.

This is why we gather tonight, it's why we gather every year. To tell our astounding, awe-filled, *surreal* story. To be reminded that it isn't a story that happened once, millennia ago.

It is a never-ending story of which we are a part – and in which we have a part to play, as *surreal* as that may seem.

Because God's love is made **real**, here and now, in our time and in our lives, when we **believe** and say **yes** to God. When we incarnate that love. When we go out, like the shepherds, and make that known the love in the world.

My prayer for all of us this Christmas is that we do so this night and always.

*If in your heart you make a manger for his birth
Then God will once again become a child on earth²*

~ AMEN ~

² Ana Hernandez

