

We are gathered this night from near and far, in the company of loved ones and community, and in the beauty and warmth of this sanctuary. We have come to herald the moment God came to dwell among us, to hear once again the compelling story that inspires us, and gives us hope.

I love a great story, and as I reflected on tonight's gospel, that features the angel, the shepherds and Mary, I thought:: What is it that makes a story great, so that it holds our attention and we remember it.

A great story has an interesting setting, a solid plot, interesting characters who face some sort of challenge or conflict, or who are catalysts who push others forward, and some sort of resolution for the characters that resonates with the listener. And I'd add to this, having a superhero at the center of the story helps — because we all love a superhero.

Now, what if we imagined tonight's gospel as a Marvel movie? It might go something like this:

It was just another night in the field, and they were going about their usual business, those Shepherds. Tending their sheep in the darkness of the night, trying to stay warm, doing what lowly, dedicated shepherds do, when suddenly, Bam! There were:

**Angels!** (Halo)

**Lights!** (Flashlight)

**Deafening noise!** (Fred to hit the keys of the organ!)

## **Holy Goodness, Batman! Holy Goodness, God! What's happening?**

From literally “out of this world” there appeared before them a heavenly being unlike any they had seen or imagined. Enter the Angel:

**Hey!**

**Don't be afraid!**

**It's all good!**

(Visions of Ironman may have just danced in your heads.)

**Have I got good news for you!**

**Joy!**

**But not just for You, Joy! for everyone, everywhere!**

**And, before you can ask, let me tell you!**

**Today, right there, over in Bethlehem, something major is going down. Well, something has come down...you know, from heaven. It's Big! He's Big! Well, actually he's kinda small, but don't let that distract you!**

**What I'm trying to tell you is that the savior is born!**

**It's Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, why, it's the Lord!!**

**What? You don't believe me? You want proof?**

**Well, go and check it out for yourselves! Look for a babe, wrapped in cloth, lying in a trough in a barn — surrounded by animals, but cherished by his mother and father.**

**He may seem ordinary, but this is no ordinary child — THIS is the light of the world!**

Then, with all the explosive grandeur found in today's computer generated special effects, the angel beckons the shepherds to *marvel* in its astounding news, as the heavenly beings suddenly and joyfully burst out in song:

**Glory to God in the highest heaven! and on earth peace, good will toward men!"**

Now the shepherds, stunned and minds blown, ponder their next move. There is no way they all can just leave their flocks, but someone has to go, to see if what they heard could really be true. Because, well, if it is (in the words of the musical, Hamilton) **"the world would never be the same."**

And so, they set off and found the child, and tell his mother of the angelic encounter that brought them there, something Mary had some personal experience with. She gives it all a lot of thought, and there in the dark stillness of the barn, she catches a glimpse of God's light in her child, a glimpse of God's hope.

We know that Israel remembered and cherished its history through the telling of the stories of its prophets and heroes, like Moses who brought God's people out of bondage into freedom; Isaiah who gave them hope, and David, who took on Goliath and set the stage for Israel's future. It is unlikely that they thought of these folks in the context of the 21st century superheroes that have become a staple of our culture, thanks to Marvel and DC.

But what if we saw Jesus in that light, as our superhero. We love superheroes, because they possess incredible powers, fight epic battles, defend humanity, and stand for justice. They inspire us and show us that it is possible to overcome even the most daunting of challenges and obstacles; remind us that good prevails over evil; and assure us that hope is not unfounded, but is in fact the thing worth holding on to, the thing that in the end will make all the difference.

How awesome is it, that we find right here in the gospel of Luke, the story of the ultimate superhero — of Jesus — Godself in human form, who came to earth not only to dwell among us but to set the world right, who proclaimed and modeled love, grace and justice as the remedies for evil, corruption and abuses of power.

Each year we gather to revisit the greatest superhero story of all time, to hear it told one again. Because in it we find hope; we find that the impossible is made possible. We hold with awe that God came into our world, not as an old king in a palace grand, but as a shivering, dependent child in a barn, who embraced the human condition in all its fullness and its vulnerability. It is this human vulnerability that is embraced, cradled and transforms into the deepest and most mysterious of strengths — vulnerability is Jesus' superpower, the one most unlike the power of the powerful.

The angels remind us that God came not for some, but for all. And that what shines light and hope into the world is not the resolving of our or the world's problems, or the ending of all conflict, although these would help. What light and hope into the world is

our belief that God can be and is with us in a way that transforms our uncertainty, our pain, and our fear into lasting hope and joy.

Dean Stephen Cherry of King's College in Cambridge summed it up beautifully when he wrote:

*This is why the angels sing, why the shepherd's come, why the weary gather to rejoice — because each of us desires and needs light to shine upon us and to show forth our way out of the darkness."*

We all need a superhero, and in Jesus, we have the One who shows up, who guides and protect us, and who reminds us that even in the most severe of circumstances, like those into which he was born, and those of our own contemporary time, that God is with us, and will ever be. Amen.