

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you O God, my strength and my joy...Amen.

I am a member of the cloud appreciation society... And yes, that is a real thing...

I love clouds and the many different shapes they take, differing in altitude, color, name, and longevity...

I don't think I could pick a favorite cloud, and there are plenty of ones that I still have yet to see... But I remember a few summers ago, my husband and I were camping up north when a bad thunderstorm came through...

And when thunderstorms come through, there is always a potential to see mammatus clouds after the storms passes...

Mammatus are a unique cloud formation that I had been longing to see, ever since I learned about them.

They almost look like bulging cotton balls of different shapes and sizes coming out from underneath the cloud...

So, after the storm passed, I immediately looked up at the sky, and it was filled with mammatus clouds! And it just so happened that the sun was also setting, turning the clouds the most magnificent colors of pinks, purples, and oranges... Making it a breathtaking sight, and more beautiful than I could have ever imagined.

The sheer beauty and wonder of creation has always amazed me...

Because nothing is ever the same, it is always new or different in some way...

Plants grow, water flows, and clouds are constantly changing shape...

There is always something new on the horizon, with every sunrise, and every new day...

And today is a special new day, the first day of the New Year, and the start of 2023.

And today's gospel reading is all about new birth, the birth of Christ, and what that means for those who hear this wonderful news.

For example, the Shepherds... after hearing this glorious news they left to find this baby, and they went with haste even though it was a place unknown and during the night...

Because they knew without a doubt that this was something that needed to be witnessed and it was of great urgency...

And the shepherds even went a step further than finding the baby... Because they didn't just go see Jesus and go home... Instead on their journey and after they told everyone about this good news.

And all whom they told were amazed...

Now that is an inspiring story to start off the new year...

Especially since a new year tends to bring about New Year resolutions, motivated thinking, and endless possibilities...

So, what if, we apply our gospel reading to this new year's way of thinking?

And specifically, ask what would it look like if we tried to capture some of the courage, energy, and joy that the shepherds had on that night so many years ago...

And let the shepherds guide us into this new year.

Which for us Lutherans... can be a hard challenge to step into too... And let me tell you, I am right there with all of you...

I usually don't walk up to people and tell them how much Jesus or God loves them....

I usually smile or nod as I walk by.... and depending on the situation, I may offer a hello or strike up a short non-religious conversation...

Of course, human interaction with strangers all comes down to ones' individual comfort level and what we think is appropriate...

But if we just tell ourselves that, this makes me uncomfortable, and never allow ourselves to experience a new formation, we might just be stifling the creative work of God trying to work in us.

Because the shepherds bring to light such an inspiring invitation... To go with haste, and to share the good news with all those you meet.

And if this seems like too much of a stretch for you to dive right into... Maybe start by taking some baby steps first...

By sharing kindness, grace, and joy with people you don't know...

And since God cares for all of creation, we can even take this another step further, so you can share kindness, grace, joy, and love with all of creation.

And since you were created with purpose, there is a way that is unique only to you to share this good news...

So, this year, I invite you to meditate on, how are you called to share God's love in joyful ways that are true to who you are?

Afterall, we are all Christians... And as Christians we are called to love our neighbors... which of course always has a deeper meaning than your physical neighbor...

As "neighbors" in the Christian sense does not only mean all people, but all of God's creation.

So, if you are not the most comfortable talking to strangers and sharing God's love and joy with them... Maybe there is another way for you to share this...

For example, there are countless stewardship opportunities... From right here at St. John, through volunteering by signing up on the time and talent, to donating to the different fundraisers we do...

To environmental stewardship, humanitarian efforts, and volunteering in the community.

There are countless ways to share God's love and joy with others, just like the shepherds did...

Because to God, it doesn't matter how you go about it, but the attitude you have while you are doing it.... Mainly being open to the Spirit and expressing God's love however you can...

And even though it is the start of the new year, you don't need to feel all of that pressure to do all of the things, because God does not want that for you...

God wants you to remember that it is also enough to bear witness to God's love...

Because that in itself is a sacred act.

That is what the shepherds did first... They stopped, they took it all in, and they witnessed the incredibly mystery of the incarnation...

So, this New Year you are invited to live into the shepherd's courage, however that might look for you...

To bear witness to God's beauty around you and to share God's love and joy in ways that speak to your heart.

Which can take on any shape... Shapes that are countless and ever changing, like cloud formations...

Shapes that are always being created new, inviting you into newness of life, energy, and hope.

Because God is always in your midst, finding new ways to inspire you, to cultivate joy in you, and to offer you the space to just look up, taking in the abundant beauty of our Creator's love... Amen.