Suddenly!

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My opening text this evening is about those shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. After Mary and Joseph themselves, I suppose these shepherds to be the first people on God’s good earth to learn about the Christ child. As I read the passage aloud I invite you to notice that energetic word, “suddenly.” The passage goes this way:

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2, 13-14, KJV)

Our King James translation speaks of “men”: “… and on earth peace and goodwill toward men.” Its meaning is old. It means humanity. What those angels are singing about is peace, goodwill toward us human beings. The way our Lutheran Book of Worship phrases it in the Gloria is also lovely:

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.

Peace is a sweet thing. In a world in which there is so much fussing and fighting among people and troubles within the hearts of people, this heavenly greeting of peace is about as wonderful as it can get. “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill toward men,” toward you and me.

I have asked you to notice that word “suddenly” because I am so charmed by the idea of a world that had grown old and haggard and disappointing should all at once get some good news—should all at once learn that things are better than they had seemed, indeed that unto us a Savior is born! This unexpected movement from mediocre and discouraging ways to heaven’s wonderful announcement “peace, goodwill to you all,” this sudden movement is a joyful thing. I would like to linger a while and devote this sermon to the sudden and good ways of our God with us.

Think of those shepherds abiding in the field by night, keeping watch over their flock. We live in a city in which there is quite a lot of light even in the nighttime. In fact if we have to walk even a single block in the nighttime without benefit of store lights or city lampposts, then many of us become
uneasy. We do not much like that darkness. But think of those ancient shepherds. They had never heard tell of such things as city lampposts. They were accustomed to darkness in the nighttime. I bet their eyes were keen to keep watch over their sheep by way of moonlight and starlight, but even that is hard to do on a cloudy night. Those ancient shepherds simply had to live with a lot of darkness, continually hoping to not go tripping over things in the dark, hoping to not lose track of even a single sheep. But on this night – this holy Christmas Eve – suddenly they are permitted to experience a radiance they have never before known. It does not matter that it is nighttime. There is a splendid radiance surrounding them. The Bible reports that they were frightened by this radiance:

9And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. (Luke 2:9, KJV)

But in being frightened, they were “sore afraid” at something they would soon grasp to be very good. One moment, life went on as normal. The next, they knew themselves to live in a world in which a Saviour had born unto them, and unto you and me.

Stepping back and looking at the Bible as a whole, I can think of three great sudden events in the Bible — one for each of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity. Each of these sudden events is wonderful, as if our good God should suddenly roll up his sleeves and say to himself, “It is time to make things better! It is time to make things much better!” First, I will mention the sudden deeds of God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. But this is Christmas Eve, and so I will want to hasten back and end with that great “suddenly” concerning God the Son:

13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.” (Luke 2, 13-14, KJV)

So, to my first divine sudden event. It is contained in those awesome words in Genesis 1:

1In the beginning God created the Heaven and the earth.
2And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep... (Genesis 1:1-2, KJV)
Bible scholars say that this original formlessness of reality was not a peaceful thing. The saying that the earth was “without form, and void” expresses a kind of confusion and restlessness and fitfulness in things. In God himself, in the love and the conversation among God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, in them there was eternal peace and love. But outside them, things were without form and void. It was like a godless wilderness, like the wild, wild West where cowboys went around shooting up everything in sight. It was a formlessness that ached, like being called in a terrible nightmare. There was no order to it. If there had been a scientist stuck in that formlessness, there would not even have been enough natural laws for the poor scientist to study. It was just nothing. It was godless wilderness.

But then, suddenly, God let out those mighty words:

Let there be light... (Genesis 1:3, KJV)

This is my first “suddenly.” God commands that there should be light, and what happens?

...and there was light. (Genesis 1:3, KJV)

This is the beginning of order in our world. This is the beginning of our chance, of the chance for humanity to live. And so I think of this as the first of the happy suddenlys of life. God the Father creates an ordered world. Suddenly darkness and confusion are replaced by light and order.

Let me move on to a sudden and wonderful deed of the Holy Spirit. We read of this in Acts Chapter 2. It is the Pentecost story. It begins this way:

1And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. 2And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. 3And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. 4And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. (Acts 2:1-4, KJV)

This is the second of my sudden and happy events of our God. Suddenly the Holy Spirit comes upon people, comes upon people like you and me. Suddenly it becomes possible for human beings to become on fire for the Lord. Suddenly God the Holy Spirit makes himself available on earth so that our hearts can be stirred up and so that we need not sit around like a bump on a

1 Claus Westermann, as I recall it, in his commentary on Genesis.
log, but can dare something great in life—even dare to become Christlike. The sudden sweeping of the Holy Spirit into the lives and hearts of people expresses the will of our Maker that you and I can strive and succeed at becoming better people, even people who are like Jesus. And that is something wonderful on earth.

So those are two of the happy and sudden divine events that I have in mind: the sudden event of creation and the sudden event of the Holy Spirit becoming available to everyone—not just to a prophet here and there, but to each of us who is willing.

But, again, this is Christmas Eve and so let us conclude by rejoicing over the sudden birth of our Savior, Jesus Christ. Sin messed up our world. You know that sin has the power to do that, to bring suffering and to leave things in disarray. Like mixed-up shards of glass in a damaged kaleidoscope, everything was out of focus until this night when the earth at least receives her King. Now things become better. Now Jesus is born, and suddenly the angels can sing their Gloria:

Glory to God in the highest, and peace to his people on earth.

This sudden good deed of Christmas Eve is akin to that moment when you look into the eyes of that one who has captured your heart and she says to you, I love you! Suddenly the world has changed. Suddenly the world is better. Again, the good deed of Christmas Eve is akin to that moment when you look into the arms of the nurse and you realize that this newborn child is your child. Suddenly the world is changed and it is better. Multiply that a million times, a billion times, and you get the sudden good news for all of humanity—the good news first spoken by that Christmas angel who invites us to lose all fear:

10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

“Fear not,” I join the angel in preaching. Fear not, but launch yourself into deeds of goodness and kindness this coming year, and indeed for the rest of your lives. Cast yourself headlong into goodness, for when all is said and done and the dust is settled, unto you is born a Saviour, even Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.