

I have some friends who do a lot of fiction writing. They tell me that they are told the mark of a good fiction story is whether or not it is believable. If people won't be able to believe it, it won't sell. An improbable story will never make it off an editor's desk.

If you were a writer, trying to get the story we just read published, you wouldn't make it very far. You would get laughed out of the publishing house. A woman, an unmarried young woman, finds herself pregnant, except not by her husband. That man decides to marry her anyway. They go to fill out a census, and they can't even find a room at the inn. And so she gives birth out in the stable, surrounded by animals and with no comfort. Now, that much you might be able to sell. Maybe.

But then add the next layer. The one where shepherds in a field see angels come to them. Angels that tell them that the Savior has been born. Angels that tell them to go not to a castle, or the Temple, or some incredible place, but to a manger. And they go and see the child, and they believe it. And they tell everyone.

Who would ever buy that story?

We are a skeptical people. Myself included. If you tell me a story I'm always looking for catch. Always looking for the thing that gives it all away. Always trying to find out why it sounds too good to be true. And this story, is totally improbable. And yet, at some deep level I know it's true. And maybe that's the scariest part.

We are told that when the angels came to the shepherds in the fields, they were terrified. Other translations say, "they were so afraid." And that's not surprising. Because when someone comes with news that is going to blow your whole world open in new and incredible ways, that is terrifying. Even, if it's good news.

It's the pregnancy test that comes back positive after years of trying. It's the admissions letter from the college you wanted to go to. It's that dream job with the offer finally in hand. It's learning to deeply love someone and let them in. It's all of these things rolled into one. It's knowing that things can change and things can be incredible. And it's knowing that sometimes nothing is scarier than knowing something amazing is about to happen. And when the story was this unlikely, when the facts were this improbable, that's even scarier.

A few weeks ago the United Church of Christ, the denomination of this congregation, put out a video that was a Christmas greeting. On the screen the words, "Don't let them lie to you" flashed. An odd beginning for a Christmas greeting, for sure. But then came these words: there is room in the inn for you.

And that's scary too. But it doesn't have to be. I talk about my friends a lot and tell you all that most of them are not church goers. It's not that they are against it. It's not that they don't want to find community. It's not that they do not want to know Christ. It's that somewhere along the line someone told them that there was no room at the inn. Or maybe, there was no room at the inn for the likes of them. And so, they believed the lie, and they went out into the fields.

Maybe you have felt that way too. Maybe you have felt like there was no room for you in the inn. Maybe you have felt like the kingdom of God was too exclusive for the likes of you. Maybe you have believed that Christ came for others but not for you.

And that's the lie. Because there is room in Christ's inn. There is room for all of us there. There are enough rooms for as many as who want to come and stay warm and fed.

But Christ's love doesn't end there. Think about where God sent to the shepherds that night. God didn't send them to the inn. God didn't send them to the Temple in Jerusalem. God didn't send them to any of the likely places. God sent them out to the guys in the field with the sheep. The cold, hungry, lonely shepherds. God went after them first. Because God knew they needed Christ's love the most.

And maybe that's the most improbable story. Love shared with those who need it the most.

I heard a story today of two men who live in Chelsea in New York City. Somehow, their address was given out as the address for Santa Claus. They're not sure how or why, but somehow the post office started delivering dozens of letters addressed not to the North Pole, but to 22nd Street.

They were baffled. How did they get so misdirected? Was it a prank? Was it that someone had listed the wrong address somewhere? Was it that they were supposed to go to another NYC address before making their way to Santa? They don't know.

They could have taken the letters to the post office. They could have declined them from the carrier or written "return to sender". But instead, they decided this year to help Santa out. And so, they took the nearly 450 letters and decided to answer them themselves. With the help of their friends, as of a few days ago, they had so far gotten people to commit to answering the wishes of 250 of the children who had written and to send them the Christmas presents that they wanted Santa to bring.

It's an improbable story. And it's a story about love, and what happens when you feel it. It's a story about the love that is breaking into our world at Christmas. Because this holiday, at its core, is about not being able to ignore God's love anymore. It's about God loving us so much that God became like us to show us.

These stories of good samaritans that we hear this time of the year, they are not the most incredible story of all. But they sure point to it. They sure tell us that love is real. And they speak together in a chorus that is so strong, that we can't ignore it. Because God's love, God's breaking into our world, is better than all the improbable yet true stories that we hear. They are like the angels who come to us in the field telling us that something incredible has happened. They are the small lights that point to the light that comes tonight.

For the last four weeks we have lit the candles on the Advent wreath. Hope, Peace, Joy and Love. And tonight, we light the Christ candle. The candle that signifies that Christ is here with us now. That it is Christmas.

In a little while I will light a small candle from that Christ candle, and then I will pass that light to someone in the first row. Then they will pass it to the next person, and so on and so on until this church is filled with light. And then we will go out into the darkness, with Christ's light to guide us. Christ's light to show us the way. And Christ's light to share with the world.

After the shepherds came and saw Jesus in the manger, they left and told everyone about what they had seen. They spread the light that they had received to everyone they came across. They made sure that it did not go out, but grew in brightness and power. They brought the light into the world.

And as we leave here tonight, that's our job too. As you cross the threshold of this inn that you came to tonight, know that you are always welcome here. But know that Christ is outside of these walls too. Go out to meet him. Go out to spread the light

you have received here with others. Go out to proclaim what God has just done. Go out, and show it. Tell it on the mountain down the street. Show it to the ones in the fields. Tell it to your family and friends and everyone else, that they are loved and that they never have to be afraid anymore. Everything has changed, and God is here with us.

As you leave tonight, may Christ's light, the light given for you, shine your way home. May it light all the dark places. May it comfort you in your hardest times. And may it shine brightest as you share your love with others. Amen.