



From the Community Pulpit

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“SHEPHERDS:

Waking Up to a Precious Gift”

Text: Luke 2:8-12, 15-20

Sermon by Dr. Robert Lee Hill

Offertory Invitation -- Rev. Kevin Snow

Communion Meditation -- Rev. Melissa St. Clair

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Luke 2:8-12, 15-20—8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Offertory Invitation – Rev. Kevin Snow

Board games often create the perfect atmosphere for time spent with friends and family. Most games revolve around good, clean, humorous, competitive fun...except for one. As Dane Cook notes, no one is ever happy after a game of Monopoly. The game begins innocently enough. Players select a favorite piece...many prefer the car...others feel better about the thimble. Players get to pass GO and collect \$200...perhaps someone lands on Community Chest and wins second place in a beauty contest, collecting \$15. However, as the game progresses, friendly competition is replaced with deceit, self-interest, and judgment. The banker is quickly accused of collecting one too many twenties...one person trades another person a Monopoly in a questionable deal, and before you know it, they have houses lining Boardwalk and Park Place...resources are accumulated and exploited instead of shared and nurtured. I wish that they would've placed a church on the streets of Monopoly. A place where people could go when they're in need...a place where community could be formed and preserved...a place where hope would replace dismay, and people were recognized more for who they were instead of what their bank accounts reflected. Today, we collect an offering to provide just this type of place to a community in need...a place of rest for those who are depleted...a place of hope for those who have given up...a place of hospitality for those who feel unwelcome everywhere else.

Communion Meditation – Rev. Melissa St. Clair

Watching *“A Charlie Brown Christmas”* while I write Christmas cards is one of my favorite holiday traditions. In this short Peanuts movie, Charlie Brown finds himself depressed at Christmas time, searching for the true meaning of the holiday amidst the glitz and commercialism of the modern era.

Charlie Brown picks out a little Christmas tree and almost immediately all its needles start to fall off, sprinkling to the ground. Frustrated, he turns to Linus. “I guess you were right, Linus. I shouldn't have picked this little tree. Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about.” He shouts in desperation: “Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?”

Linus comes to the rescue. “Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” A spotlight shines on Linus as he recites the scripture passage we read this morning (Luke 2:8-20). He concludes by saying, “That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.”

Linus got it right. Indeed, this Christmas season is about the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. It is about the Savior, born in the city of David. It is about the one at whose table we gather each time we meet—Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God, the one whose birth over two thousand years ago brought shepherds from their fields and the one whose love and mercy invites each one of us to this table still today.

Sermon by Robert Lee Hill

Today we begin a new sermon series – "*Meet Me at the Manger!*" – as we consider the cast of characters who were part of the first Christmas experience. The narratives that relate the Christmas story are not uniform nor in agreement. Next Sunday, we'll explore the Magi's journey under the star of peace. Next, on *Christmas Music Sunday*, a Jazz ensemble and the Chancel Choir will thrill our souls with musical renditions of the sacred story, as we also hear a communion meditation focusing on the angels and their gift of greetings to all "favored ones." On the Sunday before Christmas we'll see how Mary was a vessel of love and Joseph had an equally important role as a vessel of grace. Then on Christmas Eve we'll all be at the manger, and there we'll greet "The Mysterious Stranger in the Straw" On the Sunday after Christmas, Rev. Kevin Snow will help us understand how Herod, the only one never to make it to the manger scene, related to Jesus' birth and the disruption which that birth caused for the imperial forces and beyond.

Our first message in the series focuses on the shepherds, based on Luke's account of their participation in the Nativity drama. Let us see the kinds of lives that shepherds led at the time Jesus was born and the parallels between their existence and our own contemporary experiences.

The theme of God's presence – as we find it in the shepherd's journey to behold the promise in the manger – is so obvious in Luke's nativity account. But we are rushing a bit too quickly and theologically into Luke's ultimate meaning. Let's consider the shepherds first.

Nearly 75 years ago Scribners publishing house issued a book about Christmas entitled simply *Christmas: A Book of Stories Old and New*.¹ The stories selected from a broad range of cultural sources were edited by Alice Daulglish and illustrated by Hildegard Woodward. In the important section called "*The First Christmas*,"² Ms. Woodward depicts three figures looking upward toward a brilliant star. At first glance one would think that this is the stereotypical view of the three magi "following yonder star." But closer inspection reveals that the figures are actually shepherds keeping their flocks by night, as one clearly discerns from all the sheep situated all around the shepherds. And this is as it should be, and exactly

as Luke's gospel has it: the first Christmas definitely had shepherds as central players in the drama surrounding Jesus' birth.

It's appropriate that word about Jesus' birth should come to the shepherds. Surely Luke knew and he wants us to recall that Bethlehem is the called the city of David, and David was himself a shepherd.³

In the stories about David's origins in the book of I Samuel, David is identified as a shepherd.

David is tending sheep when the order from Saul comes down that the king desires David to play some soothing music for him.

The story of David slaying the giant Goliath begins among the fields where David is tending his sheep.

So the shepherds play an important role in the Christmas drama, echoing Luke's understanding of what is happening in the birth of Jesus.

As Geza Vermes points out, "Luke's low-key birth narrative depicts a simple ... rural event."⁴ Luke's account of the shepherds' activities related to the birth of the Savior of the world is not the sweet romanticized image we've been led to believe.⁵ In the days of Jesus' birth shepherds had a hard life and a bad rap among folks.⁶

- They almost always lived outdoors with only a camel-hair cloak and a head veil to guard them against the weather elements.
- They ate only what they could carry – bread, cheese, olives, figs, dates, raisins.
- Their sole focus was the sheep: protecting them by day; rescuing them when they got lost or stuck in a dried out gully; binding up their wounds, watching out for them at the "sheep-gate" as they sought to keep predators away and the sheep safe.

They not only had a hard life but a disreputable one as well. They were considered "nomadic low-lives," and worse. And they were often regarded with suspicion, distrust and dislike.⁷

And besides, they weren't very religious. Shoot, they didn't wouldn't have known a cleanliness law it came up and bit them! They knew no in-depth knowledge of the intricacies of ceremonial life. And they had slim ideas about the rules, regulations, and meticulous observances required of good Hebrew folks to call themselves

righteous and good.⁸ In short, they were rather lacking in religious flair.

Shepherds even today are similarly cut down to a debased level, even in the collected wisdom of theological textbooks. If you try to discover what *The Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible* has to say about shepherds, lo and behold, in all 3,954 pages, volumes of that text you, find no definitions or descriptions only a scant reference: "See SHEEP!"⁹

A. God comes to and through the lowly.

In the first decades of the 13th century a strange and eccentric man created a way of life and a name for his ways in the world. His name was Francis and before too long, he would even create a movement that follow after him and his spiritual disciplines. Today, seven centuries later, we use the description "Franciscan" for those who pattern their lives after his.

It was Francis who created the very first "Living Nativity" scene (or Christmas Creche, as they sometimes are called). And it was Francis who would lower himself to the degree that other succeeding generations of evangelists (including Billy Graham) would follow his example: by preaching to the animals in the field and birds in the air. If there ever was a "shepherd" perspective on what it means to be a priest, Francis had it. In one his early rules for his religious order he insisted, "[the brothers] must rejoice when live among people considered of little value and looked down upon, among the poor and powerless, the sick and the lepers, and the beggars by the wayside."¹⁰

And as the old adage goes, "God must really love poor people since he made so many of them!" Yes, God comes to and through the lowly - to Mary and Joseph, peasants both of them, and then to those lower still, the shepherds.¹¹

B. God comes to the whole family of humanity and not merely the privileged few

That the incarnation of God's very essence is coming to and through the lowly means also that God's way is a "bottom-up" operation and that God comes to the whole human family and not merely to a privileged few.

Because God makes the first public announcement of Jesus' birth to peasants we know something about whom God wants to bless. Remember that while Matthew's gospel has Jesus

preaching "Blessed are the poor in spirit...." (5:3), Luke's gospel records Jesus as saying "Blessed are you who are poor...." (6:20)¹²

According to scholar Richard Rohr, "Shepherds were people outside the system.... associated with bandits, conformists, boorish and dirty folks."¹³ And please note with me that while legend has bestowed the Magi with special names ("Gaspar," "Melchior," and "Balthasar"), the shepherds don't even have "Larry," "Curly", or "Mo"!! They're simply anonymous shepherds.

C. The Divine reassurance is the same across the entire span of human life and human history: Do Not Fear

Now this is a word that we all could welcome down into the deep recesses of our souls these days!

- Wall Street wheeler-dealers - Do not fear!
- Retirees - Do not fear!
- Parents sending three children through college - Do not fear!
- Missouri alums - Do not fear!
- Fans of losing professional football franchises - Do not fear!
- Those who believe they've been marginalized, stigmatized, compromised, or demonized - Do not fear!
- Those who've been devastated by hurricane in Jamaica and Haiti and Cuba - Do not fear!

This is how we know what the gist of Christmas is really about. Henri Nouwen put it this way: "Somehow I realized that ... good feelings, ... nice presents, big dinners, ... and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying 'yes' to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying 'yes' to a hope based on God's initiative.... Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work and not mine. Things will never look just right or feel just right.... But it is into this broken world that a child is born who is called the Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, Savior."¹⁴

The shepherds, in their simple shepherding, were humble enough to move beyond their own fear and their own elation and say "yes to a hope based on God's initiative." That's why they run to Bethlehem to see the sign they've been promised. Stuart Briscoe has correctly noted: "A shepherd has

nothing to lose in recognizing his need of grace; the proud must first overcome their pretentiousness and the pull of their possessions."¹⁵

D. There are always great, surprising gifts awaiting those who are shepherding life along.

Because the shepherds were humble enough, they were able to wake up to surprising gifts in their lives, and they never were the same again.

What were those surprising gifts? It's impossible to say for sure, but we can make some educated and imaginative (!) guesses.

- You have to think they went back to shepherding with a different spring in their step. Maybe they even pondered what the boy in the stable would become. Maybe some of them, if they were young enough, heard about how he grew up and took off his carpenter apron and then one day took up preaching, even referring to himself as the "Good Shepherd." Perhaps they even wondered if he knew that it was the shepherds who were the first public witnesses of the good news that Jesus himself would eventually preach.
- You also have to think that, regardless of their intellectual clarity or denseness, they went back to their shepherding with a greater inclination to gaze upwards at the heavens. Looking for another visitation of the heavenly host? Perhaps. Or maybe they were simply looking up at the vast canopy of the sky and seeing what scientists calculate as the 62 quintillion, 500 quadrillion stars that have been spewed across the universe. That's enough stars, you know, for each of us to have 10,416,000 stars for each one of earth's inhabitants today!¹⁶
- You'd like to think, wouldn't you, that they began to live a little more alertly, with a quickened heartbeat and a fresh engagement with their every day lives and a keened sense of God's surprising presence made available to them and to everyone else in the world. Barbara Brown Taylor has it right when she says: "The only condition for joy is the presence of God. Joy happens when God is present and people know it, which means that it can erupt in a depressed economy, in the middle of a war, in an intensive care waiting room."¹⁷

What were the surprising gifts to which the dumbfounded shepherds awoke?

God's presence, to be sure, in the form of a little baby who would bless humanity from the bottom up, starting with the shepherds.

That they didn't really have to fear for their lives, because their lives were held in the palm of the hand of the One who made all life, who was and is and will be the real security system, the real spiritual security system, which nothing can ever disrupt, interrupt, or bankrupt.

That all those miraculous stars above their heads, above our heads, too numerous ever to count, except by a physicist's measuring calculus, all those stars can lead us to ...

to wondering instead of wandering, ...

to love instead of lifelessness, ...

to the freedom of merciful joy instead of acrid bitterness because of a lack of justice, ...

to the fullness of the soul instead of over-eating our way to satisfaction, ...

to the grace of each new day instead the futility of "waiting for Godot," ...

to the future projects and dreams and journeys that make our hearts sing like the first day of creation instead of languishing in regret over what might have been.

May it be so for all of those who are shepherding their lives and the lives of others along the human journey, whether or not they know anything about sheep. AMEN.

NOTES

- 1 Alice Daugliesh, ed., Hildegard Woodward, illus., *Christmas: A Book of Stories Old and New* (New York, Scribners, 1934)
- 2 Ibid., p. 85.
- 3 Richard A. Jensen, *Preaching Luke's Gospel* (Lima, Ohio: CSS Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 30-31)
- 4 Geza Vermes, *The Nativity: History and Legend* (New York: Doubleday, 2007) p. 92
- 5 Richard Rohr, *The Good News According to Luke* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 1997), p. 84
- 6 Kaari Wrd, ed., *Jesus and His Times* (Pleasantville, New York: Reader's Digest, 1987), p. 23
- 7 Stuart and Jill Briscoe, *Meet Him at the Manger* (Wheaton, Illinois, 1996), pp. 99-100
- 8 William Barclay, *Luke* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), p. 23
- 9 *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, Vol. IV* (New York, Abingdon, 1962), p. 325
- 10 John V. Kruse, compiler, *Advent and Christmas: Wisdom from St. Francis of Assisi* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori, 2008), p. 88)
- 11 Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas: What The Bible Really Teaches About Jesus's Birth* (New York: HarperOne, 2007), p. 48
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Rohr, p. 84
- 14 Henri Nouwen, *The Road to Daybreak*, quoted in Judith A. Bauer, Compiler, *Advent and Christmas: Wisdom from Henri J. M. Nouwen* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori, 2004), p. 50
- 15 Briscoe, *Meet Him at the Manger*, p. 100
- 16 Thanks to Forrest Church for first guiding me to this overwhelming fact.
- 17 Barbara Brown Taylor, "Surprised by Joy," *The Living Pulpit*, October-December 1996, Volume 5, No. 4, p. 16.