

The Shepherds Prepare

3rd in Advent Series Preparing the Way

from the pulpit of
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by
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Psalm 80:1-7

¹Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth ²before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! ³Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.⁴O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? ⁵You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. ⁶You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. ⁷Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” 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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I realize that I am jumping ahead in this Advent season by reading this very familiar section of Jesus' birth narrative, usually reserved for Christmas Eve. I felt called to it, actually, as I pondered the theme of this series – the biblical characters who help us prepare the way for the coming of God. The truth is the shepherds are so much a part of the story, and yet, they are hard to preach about, in any depth, on Christmas Eve.

People come on Christmas Eve for the candlelight and the singing of Silent Night, and preachers have to say some meaningful word of interpretation without getting in the way of the sheer beauty of the story. And frankly, there is nothing beautiful about the shepherds, but their theological significance is a wonder to behold. Our familiarity with these figures, on our Christmas cards and in our beloved manger scenes, can obscure the utterly radical choices of God's revelation at Christmas.

No character defines the profoundly inclusive nature of God's love for the human family quite like the shepherds. Heralded by the heavenly host of angels, they were lowest of the low, these first recipients of the good news of God's love for the world in Jesus Christ. The shepherds in our manger scenes may look pretty respectable, one carrying a baby lamb over his shoulders, another kneeling in humility, sometimes mistaken for Joseph, the betrothed of Mary.

We have a Manger Scene where we always have to ask when setting it out: "Is this Joseph or a Shepherd?" Brushed off and cleaned up, they look like ordinary folk out of some romantic, pastoral painting. But nothing could be further from the truth for the real life Mid-eastern shepherds of Jesus' time. In the economy of ancient Palestine, sheep provided milk, meat, fat, wool and skins, as well as animals for religious sacrifice.

Their economic value stood in direct proportion to their need for constant supervision. It was a 24/7 kind of job out in the fields, day and night. Shepherding was a livelihood that required diligence and endurance. The search for pasture and water could sometimes take the herdsmen far from home. It required they put up with simple food, harsh weather, primitive

lodging and the ever present danger of lions, bears, wolves and thieves. This was dirty, grueling work, and it could be boring too – as our expression of counting sheep to put us to sleep – is born of a shepherd’s experience.

Nomadic in nature, shepherds also had a reputation of being disreputable rogues, even crooks and thieves themselves. Presumed untruthful, since they often grazed their sheep on other people’s land, their testimony was forbidden in court, and they were not permitted to be either judges or witnesses. Some historians liken them to resident aliens, so inconsequential they were not considered important enough to be counted in the census. Did you ever notice – there is no mention that they had to travel home like Joseph and Mary to be counted. Not only that, and this may be the oddest thing about their Christmas role, they were not considered religious at all. Their work conditions prohibited their being able to keep the religious requirements of Jewish law; you would never find a shepherd in a synagogue at worship services.¹

You know, there were people in Jerusalem who had been waiting for centuries for the Messiah to come, but when God came – as a poet has written – *self-abandoned on the doorstep of time*,² God chose the tiny town of Bethlehem instead of the capital city of Jerusalem, and God chose shepherds instead of upright religious people to be the first recipients, outside the Holy Family, to hear about this amazing divine revelation. This story is intended to take us completely by surprise with the shepherds hearing about the birth of Jesus first, the absolutely most unlikely recipients of God’s in-breaking good news for the world; they were scoundrels, outsiders, dirty, rootless, and non-religious.

Were those angels to appear in the region of Philadelphia tonight, they would not likely be hovering over this beautiful sanctuary, in this fine neighborhood, but rather over the grittiest, poorest part of the city, or further out at some bleak, impoverished rural intersection. So how is it that these are the first recipients of the good news for all people, that unto us a child is born?

¹ Harper’s Bible Dictionary, P. 941.

² Annie Dillard, *Holy the Firm*, p. 47.

In a paper shared among my preaching group, my friend Jon Walton once noted, “Much as we have romanticized these shepherds... what is most remarkable about them is that they are exceedingly unremarkable. If anything, they are people on the fringe, at the edge of society, not mainstreamers, folks held in derision by others. And then Jon asks: “I wonder what it is about being on the fringe that makes you *better able* to be touched by an angel, *better able* to hear the songs that the angels sing... Maybe it’s the feeling that you have nothing to lose that makes you listen, and wonder, and drop what you’re doing, and run as fast as you can to a stable where you encounter something holy.

Who would have thought? Wonder is surely what Luke had in mind when he tells the story of the shepherds.. Wonder at the news they hear, Wonder at the angels they see, Wonder at the stable where the child is found, and then the mother and father who have that new-parent deer-in-the-headlights look on their faces.”³

Friends, that is the shepherds’ gift to us; they urge us to stop and to wonder... to stop on one of these cold winter nights and do nothing more than gaze at the stars... to wonder about our tiny place in the universe... and a God who knows us by name and loves us beyond measure. As unlikely as we might consider ourselves to be included – the shepherds invite us to take our place at the manger of the Christ child. We may feel like we live on the fringe of another’s drama, but the shepherds show us how those on the outside are welcomed in, into the realm of God’s most amazingly good news.

We may feel we are not really deserving of a spotlight in this story, and yet the shepherds put us all in central casting for the scene in Bethlehem. In this crazy, violent, war-torn world, and divided country of clashing values and questionable motives, the shepherds prepare us to attend to the angel’s “Fear not,” to cast away our fears about the plight of our times and our stations in life, and to go look for the thing God has made known to us.

³ Jon Walton, unpublished paper for the Moveable Feast preaching seminar, 2008.

If your Christmas to-do list is still too long, and your Advent has become an exhausting swirl of shopping, and getting the children to practice, and cooking for countless others, and going this way and that way so that you don't even know what's next anymore, then you need to pay attention to the shepherds. We need to heed their invitation to wonder.

In his book on the birth narratives of Jesus, Biblical scholar Raymond Brown says of the shepherds: "They are the forerunners, not of the apostles, but of future believers who will glorify God for what they have heard, and will praise God for what they have seen." With the shepherds... "There has now begun a praise and glory of God on earth, echoing the praise and glory of God by the heavenly host."⁴

That is our calling at Christmas – to praise and glorify God and to make known what God has done – among the most unlikely, and the least deserving of the whole human family.

When my friend, Kim Clayton, was the pastor of a church in Asheville, she had a real, live shepherd who was a member of her congregation and tended a flock there in western North Carolina. Anthony worked early morning hours in the pasture before the sun came up, and sometimes he would email Kim his reflections on worship and work. One cold winter morning he wrote: "I cannot help but think about some connection to the fact that we, as humans, have been engaged in a partnership arrangement with sheep for better than ten thousand years. Last night, about 11:30, my dogs were barking with some vigor. I went out, and heard coyotes pretty close. I went up to the sheep lot, where the new moms and new lambs were all bedded down. When I spoke to them, they started to sound off, one by one, each with a different voice and coming down to the fence. There was no moon, but in the dark, even by the sound, I could recognize some of them individually."

I thought about that passage in John about how Jesus, the Good Shepherd, says 'he knows his own and they know me,' and how this scene

⁴ Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*, p. 429

would have been eight thousand years familiar to the people then. I thought about how we, as a people, have distanced ourselves from even the understanding of that ten-thousand-year partnership... until we need a sweater. And, even then – we buy it on-line and with no thought of relationship with the sheep,” much less the shepherd. Anthony concluded: “So, maybe it is the relationship with God, knowing that he *knows* each of us by name, that he is there when we do those fairly stupid things we humans are prone to do... over, and over, and over again.”⁵

No matter the stupid things we do; no matter the lack of our deserving; no matter how much we might feel the outsider about things divine – on the fringe of God’s love and attention. The shepherds help us know – we ourselves are among the ones to whom God sent baby Jesus. So in these last days of Advent, as we prepare to receive *this thing that has taken place* may the shepherds take us to new realms of praise and wonder.

AMEN.

⁵ Undated email from Anthony Cole to Kim Clayton, pastor of Grace Covenant Presbyterian, Asheville. Kim excerpted this note in “Kim’s Very Last Sheep Sermon,” 4/17/05.