

Joining the Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

December 31, 2018 – The First Sunday after Christmas

If you were here Christmas Eve, you heard me exclaim that there is a certain beauty in the humility of the holy family and the Christ child being born in the stable and being wrapped snugly and laid in a manger. Well today, Luke's story of Christmas continues with the humility of the shepherds. Adam Hamilton, the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the country, likes to refer to them at "the night shift shepherds." I'm not sure I like that. I sense a certain degradation in Hamilton's use of the "night shift" adjective. I don't want to degrade people working night shifts. There are some very good and dedicated people doing some very important, and in some cases very technical work on night shifts. But putting that aside, Hamilton's point is well taken. Shepherds were the bottom rung of the first century social ladder. They, themselves, did not own any sheep and they had no particular skills. They were simply hired by the sheep owner at a minimal wage to watch, to make sure that no sheep strayed off; and more importantly that no wild animal made a supper out of one of the baby lambs. And the night shift shepherds were required to stay up all night in the Spring time; because it was in Spring time that the sheep had young lambs, an easy and tender catch for a wolf or large cat. Yes, Jesus was probably born in the Spring, but that's another subject.

Still, it was to the shepherds, the lowest of the lowly, that God chose to reveal the glory; and therein lies the beauty of the story. Indeed the humility continues. The scripture tells us that an angel, a messenger of the Lord, stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. Now I'll leave it to your imagination to figure out what this "glory of the Lord" looked like, or felt like. Was it a great light? Was it a sudden warmth? Was it a mighty rush of wind? We simply don't know; but we know it was enough to terrify these poor guys. And so we hear again those words: "Be not afraid." We first heard them when the angel appeared to Mary to tell her that she was to give birth by the Holy Spirit. We heard them again when the angel appeared to Joseph telling him not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife. And now we hear it again, "Don't be afraid. I'm bringing good news, great joy. Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. You'll find the baby snugly wrapped and lying in a manger."

And so, after all the singing heavenly beings had come and left, the shepherds said to each other, let us go, let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing for ourselves. I always wondered about that. Did the shepherds simply abandon their post? Did they leave someone behind? Did God take care of the sheep for them

while they were gone? We don't know, but it seems clear that seeing the child had priority; so they went with haste, and they found Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.

Can you imagine the conversation? Some humble shepherds, quietly enter the humble stable, and tell the holy family about a message from an angel; and more than that, about a whole host of angels singing of this great event. Mary and Joseph already know that this is a special child; but the drama continues to unfold minute by minute and day by day.

But then comes what I think is the most important part of our scripture: The shepherds made know what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. Friends, the night shift shepherds, the lowliest of the lowly, were the first Christian evangelists. The shepherds were the first to announce to the world the Good News that a Savior had been born, a Messiah, an anointed one. The news was too good to keep it to themselves. They had to tell somebody; they had to tell everybody. They had to tell the world. And so the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had seen and heard.

That's the call of Christmas. I've stated on numerous occasions that I believe that's the call of the church. The call of the church is to spread the Good News of God's Amazing love in word and in action. The United Methodist Church has a mission statement: "To make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world." Well I believe if we truly spread the Good News of God's Amazing love as personified in the life, death and resurrection of Christ, if we spread that Good News in our thoughts and in our actions, we will make disciples of Jesus Christ and the world will be transformed. I also believe that this church, North Olmsted United Methodist Church, has a part in that call.

Ever since we adopted "Our Faithful Journey" as a Long Range Plan for this church, Our Guiding Principles have been printed on the back of your Bulletin. I have these principles posted over my desk. Read them: We invest in youth; we provide opportunities to grow in faith, we welcome and nurture a diverse congregation; we foster lasting personal relationships; and we actively serve our neighbors in the North Olmsted community and the wider world. I can summarize all of those – we spread the Good News by what we say and more importantly by what we do.

I said it last week, and I'm going to say it again. Christmas is the best news in the world; because at Christmas God said, "I am coming to you, to be with you, to walk with you, to teach you, to heal you, to love you, to die for you, and to rise again for you with the promise to be with you always. What better news could there be than that.

The shepherds told what had been made known to them about the child and all that heard it were amazed. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising

God for all they had heard and seen. It's time to spread the Good News; and it's time to give God all the praise and all the glory.

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,

We thank you for the birth of a baby.

We thank you for your coming into the world.

We thank you for the Good News of your amazing love.

Lead us and guide us, so that like the shepherds of old,
we may spread the good news in all we say and in all we do,
as we give you all praise and glory.

Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor
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