

We, the Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

December 11, 2016

As you've probably noticed by now,
there's a sweet little Nativity scene up here on the altar,
a Christmas Crèche, as they're known.
It was made in Poland,
and I'd love to tell you that it's my grandmother's crèche,
handed down over generations, which I now share with you --
but actually, no, David and I bought it last year up in New Haven,
at the Knights of Columbus Museum.
Every year up there they do a huge display of nativity scenes from all over the
world.
David fell in love with this one,
we bought it, and it's been sitting in the basement beneath our feet for 12
months,
waiting for Advent 2016.
So this week I set it up.
I pulled the pieces, one at a time, out of their bubble wrap,
and set them up here --
just as you see it --
one baby Jesus,
two doting parents,
three kings,
some barnyard animals, an angel.

But wait, there was something wrong.
I started digging through the piles of bubble wrap,
looking around for another box or something --
'cause obviously there was something major missing here.
Someone major missing here.

You have to understand, I've spent this whole past week going over the script for our Christmas pageant -- the big rehearsal is in three days.

I know my Christmas story.

And so do you.

And if you've ever watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, and really, who hasn't, then you remember Linus, with his beloved blanket wrapped round his head, stepping into the spotlight in the Christmas play and saying the words that Mike just read:

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Yeah! the **shepherds** --

an integral part of the Christmas story!

The quintessential Christmas pageant role, with the dish towel on the head, and the shepherd's crook.

This nativity scene was missing its *shepherds*.

What?

So yesterday, as it happened, David and I were back in New Haven.

And we went back at the Knights of Columbus museum.

And David said, very politely, to the staff,

Excuse me, last year we bought a nativity here.

And we've just discovered that the shepherds are missing.

Oh, said the nice lady, oh yes, a lot of nativities leave out the shepherds.

Whaaaaat?

So we started checking out their nativities display.

We checked all through the Christmas crèches from around the world.

Sure enough. The three kings were everywhere.

The shepherds -- totally optional.

Even our bulletin cover today -- it's all about the Kings.

Well, this bummed me out.

For reasons I'm about to share with you in this sermon,
to me the shepherds are the most important part of the Christmas story.
I mean, besides Jesus and Mary -- obviously.
I love the shepherds.

So, for today, I brought my own shepherd to be up here during my sermon.
[put shepherd at nativity]
He's a tad outsized, granted, but that's okay --
the shepherds for me have a pretty outsized role in this story.

I'll tell you what I mean.
I'll tell you why I love the shepherd part of this story,
and I'll tell you why I think that the shepherds' story is *our* story.

But first, let me tell you another story.
This story takes place on Monday, October 10, 1989.

In the fall of 1989, two things had happened:
I had just started my job here,
and the Rolling Stones had just embarked on their first concert tour in 8 years.
And on October 10, the Rolling Stones were going to be playing Shea Stadium.
And I had a ticket.

Okay, so, cool, I got to see the Rolling Stones on their big comeback tour.
Ah. Not so fast.

This Church's Board of Christian Education and Youth,
the Board which oversaw my job,
met on second Mondays.
October 10 was a second Monday.
What to do?

This is what you need to understand:

I had just graduated from seminary.

This was my first real job.

I lived in a constant state of high anxiety, convinced that it was only a matter of time before the good people of this church realized that they had made a hideous error in hiring me, a neophyte who had bluffed my way through the interviews, and actually knew next to nothing about running youth groups.

That's all true, by the way.

I stayed up late every night reading books on youth ministry, and poring over all the many files left by my very popular predecessor, all of which had succeeded only in reinforcing my conviction that I was never going to cut it.

My only hope, I felt, was to work my tail off;

put in crazy long hours,

be the most responsible and committed and dedicated church employee anyone had ever met,

and most crucial of all -- make NO MISTAKES.

So -- go to the Rolling Stones concert or go to my Church Board meeting?

To me, it was a no-brainer.

I gave away my concert ticket,

and at 7:30 that night I was sitting in the Church Library, at the Board meeting, being demonstrably professional, mature, and dependable.

The Chair of the Board called the meeting to order,

and then turned to me and said,

"is it true you blew off a Stones concert for this meeting?"

Why yes I did, I said, proudly, waiting to be thanked for my professionalism.

Instead: "What are you, *nuts*?" said the chair, and he started laughing.

"The least you could have done is given *me* your ticket, so at least *one* of us could be in the right place tonight."

It was, by all accounts, one of the best concerts of the tour.
But I missed it --I had chosen to be sensible, restrained,
not take any risks.

I actually think of that when I think about the shepherds.
Seriously.

Here are these guys, out in the fields above Bethlehem one night.

And they are doing their job, and they are doing it responsibly.

Because in fact it's a job *with* a lot of responsibility.

You gotta watch the sheep. You gotta guard the sheep.

And for most of these shepherds back then,

it wasn't actually their own sheep they were watching --

they were employees of the big landholders, they were hired hands, they had to
answer to someone.

You lost one sheep and you were in some serious trouble,

likely out of a job, so much for putting food on the table for your family.

So here are those dedicated workers, very practical folks, standing out on a
hillside keeping an eye on the sheep.

And suddenly all heaven breaks loose.

An angel appeared to them, the story says,
and the glory of the Lord shone all around them,
and it scared the heck out of them.

Well, *yeah*. The glory of the Lord was a big deal.

And the angel says, "here's the deal:

the Messiah, the one you've all been waiting for,
well, he's just been born in Bethlehem,
right now he's in a stable.

We're not kidding, trust us on this one.

Why you don't you go take a look?"

To me, what the shepherds do next is the pivotal moment in the whole Christmas story.

Remember, these are sensible people.

And nothing they have just seen or heard made any sense.

An angel? with a wacky story about a baby in a horse stall?

Whaaaaaat?

What made sense was to shake it off,
stay put right where they were.

What made sense was to do their job, fulfill their responsibilities, and keep their livelihoods intact.

And, you know, maybe for a moment that's what they did.

Maybe just for a moment they just stayed right there,

figuring their eyes must have deceived them,

figuring they'd passed the ol' wine skin one too many times.

But then one of them --

and this is it, this is THE moment in the whole story --

one of them says --

you know, the heck with it, let's go to Shea Stadium.

Or rather -- let's go to Bethlehem.

Let's go and see what the angel was talking about.

And they do the thing that makes no sense --

they leave their sheep to fend for themselves,

and they run to Bethlehem,

in a burst of joy, in a frenzy of hope, in a leap of faith.

See, I've always loved the shepherds for that.

They really deserve to be in the nativity scenes for what they did,

for the wild abandon of that moment, for their willingness to risk it all,

for the crazy hope-filled faithfulness with which they went running down the hillside to see if it could be true,
to hope against hope that it really might all be true.
"Let's go!" they say. "Let's go and see!"

And what they did find?

They found a baby held close by a young woman who knew
that the world had just changed.

They found love born in a stable,
God born in a child of the manger.

They found light.

They found hope.

They found miracle.

When I say that I think **we** are the shepherds,
when I say we are the Christmas shepherds,
It's because the choice they made, well, that's the choice we all ultimately have
to make, too, all of us.

Are we going to stick it out sensibly on the hillside, in the dark?

Or are we going to say "what the heck,

I'm going to go check out what's happening in Bethlehem.

See what this Christ thing is all about."

Which is to say, are we going to let ourselves believe?

Are we going to stick with just the reality we see around us,

or are we going to allow the possibility that all around us is the glory of the Lord?

Are we going to say that we're here on our own,

or are we going to allow ourselves to see that Love lives among us?

Are we going to live only with what is,

or live toward what is yet to be?

The choice the angel offered to the shepherds is the choice offered to us.

The journey to Bethlehem is the journey we're *all* invited to make.

The journey from what is predictable and sane and sensible
to a place of wonder.

The journey from a dark hillside
to a place of light and love.

The journey from *I'm by myself out here*
to *whoa, there is a God who walks this world with me.*

That was the shepherd's journey of faith.
That can be our journey of faith.

So, go, go to Bethlehem.

Like the shepherds: go to Bethlehem.

Which is to say:

Leave whatever doubts are holding you back on that hillside, and go.

Grab hold of the miraculous impossible, the joyfully incredible.

Believe that the God of all creation dared, in love, to be born in the fragility of a
infant.

Believe that the child became a Savior who has never left us.

Believe that you are known and cherished.

Believe that forgiveness is real, that mercy never ends.

Choose to go to Bethlehem.

Why?

I'll let one of our teenagers tell you why.

Three days ago, at SPF, our high school youth group,
with over 100 kids packed into the Barn,
our topic for the night was faith.

And I threw out a question to get the ball rolling,

I just said - is it important? what do you think?

is it important to believe?

And as heads nodded around the room,

in the corner one of our young people leaned forward and said simply, firmly,
it's where hope comes from.

To believe this -- that's what gives hope.

That's right. That's why.

Choose to follow the angels, because
to believe this -- that's what gives hope.

Go to the manger, because there all possibility is born.

Let yourself believe.

With the shepherds, let yourself believe.

Run -- *run* -- to Bethlehem.

Amen.