

Christmas Eve 2023

Luke 2:1-20

If you are young—a child, a youth, or maybe even young at heart—if you are young and here this evening you might be so excited you can hardly stand it. You might be wondering how you're going to sit through this whole service. Maybe you know that there are presents at home with your name on them—just waiting for you to unwrap them tomorrow morning—or maybe later tonight. How many of you are feeling like that?

Maybe some of you have unwrapped presents already—and had to leave those wonderful new gifts at home to come here. Anybody like that?

If you are an adult—and maybe even if you, too, are young at heart—you might be wondering how you're going to get through this service as well. Maybe you're tired from all the busyness and preparation of the past month. Maybe you're worrying about how the kids will behave as they start to squirm around. Maybe you're worrying about how *you'll* behave. And maybe you, too, have your eye on a package you can't wait to open. Oh, I won't even ask you to raise your hands if that's how you feel.

Christmas arrives and we are excited, or tired, or expectant. Our bodies want to jump up and down or slump into a chair.

And we find ourselves here, listening to an amazing story about God coming to us in a human body, God born just as we were born.

This year as I read through Luke's story of the birth of Jesus I kept thinking of the shepherds.

Why, if you were telling a story of God coming to human beings as one of us, if you are telling a story of brilliant light and angels, why would you include shepherds?

They're out of place. They are not part of the "glory of Christmas." Angels shine brightly overhead. Kings travel countless miles, high atop camels, from exotic lands with great treasures.

Shepherds walk on the earth. They travel a thousand miles but only wear away the grass between work and home. In pageants they are dressed in old bathrobes while everyone else seems to get halos and wings and satin and velvet.

Why the shepherds?

On the surface they seem diligent, hard working, "salt of the earth" kind of people. Up all night, keeping watch.

But shepherds were more likely to be the kind of people you think are stealing the office supplies at work. If there were shepherds in your class at school, they would probably try

to cheat on a test. At the time when Jesus was born, most people thought shepherds weren't to be trusted.

So, why are those shepherds in the story?

Well, the shepherds remind us of the connections that we have with other people, and of the connections we have with—well, with shepherds. Maybe the reason that not everyone wants to be a shepherd in the Christmas pageant is because they are so much *like us*; that is, they do things they shouldn't do, and leave undone things they should do.

And yet, as the choir and the carol reminded us, the first Noël was to certain poor shepherds. They were minding their business, minding their flocks, when all of a sudden, those messengers of God—angels—are talking to *shepherds* of all people, and telling *them*, of all people, about a Savior. If you were an angel, or God, and had any sense, surely you'd pick a more credible group than this.

Who could believe salvation—the wholeness and healing of God—is for these people? That they are God's people? For they are just like us. And we know about us and how dubious the idea of salvation—wholeness in life, health in relationships—seems most of the time.

Unless, of course—

Unless, as Annie Dillard suggests, Jesus' birth in a barnyard, with shepherds as birthday guests means what it could, possibly mean: that it is all right to be human. That God knows we are human, and we do wrong things, all of us, that we are excited or tired or expectant and that we—of all people—are God's people anyway, and the sheep of God's pasture.

Unless those dirty and drab well-wishers who left their flocks grazing God knows where were just as flawed as we are—and flawed in the same kind of ways that we are.

If they were just like us, then the words of good news addressed to them, the words of a Savior who is Christ the Lord are addressed to us as well, in full and merciful knowledge of who we are and what we need.*

So, we watch and listen as those shepherds go running to the manger, blurting out some story about angels and good news to new parents who, really, must have had enough on their minds already. The usual unreliable witnesses, chosen to announce great joy to all people.

And then...they return to their fields and flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them. They fade back into the Judean countryside.

And we never hear from them again.

Except that, well, look around—shepherds to the left of you, shepherds to the right, ordinary, flawed human beings who yet know something of the love and grace of God, and

something of human love and grace that God makes possible; weary people who are also God's people.

Many would say that life goes on in its usual, predictable dreariness.

But the shepherds remind us of something different:

You can't be certain that things will continue as they always have.

One minute you're at work minding your own business. The next minute angels are there singing good news.

We expect life to go on as usual. But it doesn't. The glory of God breaks in. The glory of God comes to flesh and blood human beings as a flesh and blood human being.

And nothing is ever the same again.

We are never the same again.

Thanks be to God—we are never the same again.

*See Annie Dillard, "The Gospel According to St. Luke," in *Incarnation*, Alfred Corn, ed., pg. 36.