



9:30 am Christmas Day Homily

Merry Christmas! and what a blessing to be offered Good news of Great joy -
Unto us is given, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. A savior born of a woman, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. We have a savior!

This morning we gather to worship and wonder and celebrate the astonishing fact of Jesus' birth, his modest arrival, and the remarkable and familiar people who are central to our understanding and our practiced faith.

This morning I want to invite your attention to our under appreciated Shepherds. They were the first folks who received the gob-smacking news of Jesus' birth. Giving the Shepherds the good news of great joy first is a surprising, if not slightly scandalous fact.

Shepherds, in ancient times were among the most suspect of our scriptural siblings. For the most part, they were poor, often hired laborers and they lived out of doors with animals. They kept their flocks on the edges of villages and towns. Once upon a time, shepherds were so marginalized that they, like tax collectors and gamblers were precluded from giving testimony in court, because their statements, by definition were thought to be untrustworthy.

Yet, this is the group to which the angel of the Lord chose to appear directly - not through a mediator, not to high holy authorities who then turned around and explained it to the Shepherds, but to them directly - this rag tag group of hired subsistence laborers, whose jobs were critically important for the ancient economy, but whose social standing was suspect and lack of religious practices made them outcasts.

And the blessing and gift that we gather to unwrap and celebrate this morning is that these shepherds listened to the angels and went out to confirm the good news of great joy.

They went to Bethlehem and had to ask around, knock on doors, and stop people in the streets. Imagine how those conversations went – even the pared back versions - “we are looking for a baby lying in a manger”

Did the Shepherds’ search take hours or days? We have no idea, but this morning, we give thanks for their perseverance. We celebrate Christmas because the shepherds continued on, until they reached that same barn, with cattle, sheep and Mary and Joseph and the little baby Jesus. What a relief and great joy that must have been.

The Shepherds told everyone what the angels said, which confirmed what both Mary and Joseph had been told months before. A community gathered to understand an extraordinary event – and to better understand it by sharing. Until the shepherds arrived, young Mary was probably exhausted if not bewildered by the very ordinary birth of an extraordinary baby – our savior.

Among our Christmas gifts is this gem in Luke’s gospel, when Mary heard what the shepherds said, she treasured their words and pondered them in her heart.

This Christmas I give thanks for the Shepherds for telling the world and us the extraordinarily good news that we have a savior. He is born. Emmanuel – God with us, right now and always. And nothing can separate us from this savior.

Isn’t that great news for each of us this morning? We have a savior to save us from our fears, from evil in the world and from our lesser angels. Jesus, our savior saves us from bad decisions, social and political distractions, diagnosis or addictions with which we struggle. Yet, Jesus’ birth does not mean that those pains, losses, fears or heartbreaks are erased. The good news of great joy is Emmanuel, God is with us is our companion on the way.

God arrived in the world as it is, divided, exhausted, full of people in poverty and plenty, a broken world in need of a savior. And this savior is with us in the heartache of loving people we cannot protect and grieving things we alone cannot fix.

The fact of Christ's birth does not mean that we are numb to suffering, but rather that our savior stands shoulder to shoulder with us and walks through it with us. Our savior teaches us how to live faithfully in this world as it is. The embodied love and the light of Christ changes EVERYTHING.

May this Christmas be for each of us a time of spiritual replenishment and wonder. We owe a debt of spiritual and faith filled gratitude to the shepherds, and perhaps this is the Christmas we feel called to follow their excellent examples.

May we not stay stuck in our own metaphorical fields, speaking only with our friends whose experiences and lives mirror our own. Let us strike out and meet others – seeing where the face of God is most obvious to behold, and making ourselves available for our neighbors who may make the light of Christ slightly more challenging to discern.

Perhaps the invitation of this holy season is that we practice being Shepherds in a world that needs them – Not shepherds of sheep—but shepherds of kindness. Shepherds making kindness loud. Shepherds of welcome. Shepherds of hope. May we become the Shepherds of noticing when someone feels left out or stepping in to help someone who is lost or struggling. May we take on the call to be a shepherd who bravely shows up, even when we don't have all the answers.

Shepherds don't fix everything but they stay close. They keep watch, they tend their charges. And if on this holy night, you are unclear about how you might go about accessing and engaging your inner Shepherd – we have a wonderful model to follow. Good news of Great Joy, Jesus, our savior is born!

Amen+