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December 24, 2011

“Shepherds: Willing”
Luke 2:8-18

In the weeks that have lead up to this wondrous Christmas Eve, the world has been telling us what tomorrow is all about. That under the mistletoe, every Christmas ‘kiss begins with Kay’... jewelers, that is. That only if you have the latest G-5/i-phone or C3PO/ droid will you be truly happy. Only if you buy your honey a Mercedes will she... or he... know that you truly love them. That to really show your Christmas spirit, your house has to be lit up like “Christmas with the Kranks.” That your Yuletide celebration isn’t complete unless the dinner centerpiece comes from Honey B Ham. For over a month now our heads have been filled to overflowing about what the true meaning of Christmas is... the ‘*marketing* meaning’ (Madison Avenue style) that is.

As I look around here this evening, I think “Wow. This is Christmas.” These are the *true* sights, sounds, and smells of the season. A beautiful worship space filled with the vibrant reds and greens of poinsettias. The flickering light of candles. Angelic voices lifting up the ‘joyous strains’ of classic songs about ‘coming faithfully’ to a ‘little town of Bethlehem’. A handsome bunch of worshippers who understand that ‘any noise is joyful’ in this ‘last month of the year’ if it is proclaiming “Gloria in excelsis Deo”... Glory to God in the highest! It is through these various sensory delights that we recall those individuals so vital to our celebration of Christmas: Angels, Wise Men, Joseph, Mary... and the ‘little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay.’

What I want to focus on tonight, however, is none of these more ‘sacred’ symbols of the Holy Nativity. This evening I would ask you to consider our Advent journey to the manger through the eyes of the **shepherds**. Ones who, of ALL the ‘eye-witnesses’ to the life of Jesus Christ we’ve seen thus far, would be considered (borrowing fr. words of Scripture) “***the least of these, my brethren.***”

It seems to me that most often we don’t really think too much about who these shepherds were. Methinks that more times than not we think of them as just one more figure to add to the other ‘spectators’ gathered around the baby Jesus in the crèche on our mantle or

chest. In reality, though, these guys would add a whole different ‘sight, sound, and smell’ to our sterile, antiseptic images of that ‘holy night in Bethlehem.’

How many of you know anything about tending sheep? Can’t say that I do. In the course of researching this vocation, I was reminded of just how difficult a job it was. This was not a job for the ‘blond-haired, fair-skinned, rosy-cheeked’ young men that we so often see depicted as those 1st Century sheep-herders. It was HARD WORK!

Shepherds lived **apart from society**, being largely **nomadic**. It was mainly a job for **solitary** males without children, and **new shepherds** therefore needed to be **recruited** externally. They were most often younger sons of farming **peasants** who had **no inheritance** of land or great possessions. In some societies, however, a family might have one of its own **family members** to shepherd its flock; these would be fully integrated into society. In Jesus’ time, however, it was a vocation **looked down upon** by much of the culture. Shepherds were considered **unreliable** and **not allowed to give testimony** in the court system.

Shepherding developed only in certain areas. Because more fertile lowlands were more valuable to raise crops than sheep, normally the raising of sheep was confined to **rugged**, mountainous areas. It was therefore important to be able **to move** from place to place to find adequate grazing land. And besides keeping their flocks **together**, shepherds had to be able to **defend** their charges, as those hilly areas were more vulnerable to **attack** from predators, like wolves. So, a shepherd could be characterized as one who was **independent, mobile**, usually did **not** have a **lot** of **resources**, **not** highly-**educated** nor **respected**, worked in **difficult** circumstances, and had to be able to **herd** and **defend** their flock.

AND SO, to this hard-working, lowly-regarded blue-collar group of essentially homeless wanderers appears this glowing messenger, later joined by a lot more of his friends, with an incredible birth announcement. That in the town of David (Bethlehem) a **“Savior”** had been born; this ‘Savior’ was no mere child: he is **“the Messiah”**... the “Anointed One”. The Holy One. The Lord. As in ‘the Lord **God.**’ And to give them a sign that all of this wasn’t some sort of hoax, or dream, the holy messenger told them to look for a child wrapped in cloths, and laying in the feed box in a barn.

So what did they do? Convince each other that it *must* have been their imagination? Perhaps discussed how they had been working way too hard that night? Must have had one-too-many Hebrew beers. If what these strange-looking message-bearers is really true, the news will eventually get out from the town and we'll hear about it. Let's just stay out here in the field and try to sleep off this crazy vision we've had.

No, of course not. They were far **too excited**, too stoked, too curious about what they had been told to stay where they were. They had to go and see for themselves. So the shepherds **"hurried off"** to Bethlehem and found just what the angels had said... the holy child of God lying in a manger. 'The breath of heaven blown down to earth.'

And then what happened? Well, they could hardly 'catch their breath' as they went around sharing their experience. Luke says that **"when they saw this (child) they made known what had been told them about (him)**. The NIV says that they **"spread the word."** And that **"all who heard it were amazed."**

SOOO, what do all these 'shepherd people' have to do with you and me? What can they tell us about the 'true meaning of Christmas?' Well, as we think about what this time of year is all about, I hope that we can agree that it is NOT supposed to be about what brand of gifts we buy or meals that we prepare. NOT about what TV & billboards tell us 'make the season bright.' But you know, Christmas is not even about the colors of the flowers, the smell of the candles, or the sounds of the music. As beautiful and worshipful as this place is, the only 'sanctuary' that God really cares about is that sacred place of your soul. Not the visible, external trappings of celebrating Christmas... but rather, the invisible, internal celebration of Christ.

What matters most to our 'glorious God in heaven' is NOT the 'position of your shopping cart,' but the 'condition of your aching heart!'

God chose to reveal Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. And he chose to 'break this news' not through the religious elite of the time... not by way of the most learned, the most pious, the most popular. But by a small group of hard-working, humble folk who didn't have a lot of material wealth... what they did have a lot of was a **willing spirit**. A willingness to get out of their comfort zones to **go and see Jesus**. And once they saw him, to **go and tell others about Him**.

In terms of our walk with Christ, **You and I need to be those shepherds.** In some ways, we need to live **apart from society...** to be 'in the world, but not of the world.' That is, to have time alone with God, 'up on the mountain'. Even Jesus, the very Son of God, took time to be alone, in quiet conversation with His Abba Father... His 'Daddy.'

Also, we need to take time to be 'apart' with other 'shepherds,' learning more about this vocation as 'shepherds for Christ.' **"Iron sharpens iron."** (or, putting it more 'sheepishly,' 'staff sharpens staff'?) What are you doing to spend time with other 'shepherds'?

Yet as those shepherds, we also know that we must be willing to be **'nomadic'**, or wandering, to find those places where sheep can be nourished. To be found, to be taken care of, one must go out in search of the lost sheep. Those who are lost will not come to the shepherd... the shepherd must go to them.

Friends, there are a lot of 'lost sheep' out there...people with 'aching hearts' in search of a 'savior.' They yearn for that which will 'save' them from the depth of their pain and suffering. And when those Shepherds came to know that the news was true about such a Savior, they **couldn't wait** to tell others about this exciting news. Even though they knew that folks might look down upon them, they were **willing to risk** ridicule or condemnation because they **knew the power of what they had witnessed.** These were guys who were used to getting their hands dirty for some earthly sheep... how much harder would they be **willing** to work for **the Lamb of God?** These folks knew full well how vulnerable to attack sheep were without a shepherd... so they wanted to share with others the coming of the Good Shepherd, who would save them from destruction.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, this Christmas season, become a **shepherd.** **Get excited** about the prospect of seeing Jesus in your life. **Be willing** to risk... **Be willing** to get your hands dirty. Because you **know the power of what you have witnessed.** **Be willing "to spread the word."** ... **"And all who hear it will be amazed."**