

There Were Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

December 3, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

What child is this? This question is our theme for this Advent and Christmas season. In addition to the messages, we will be using short video clips from the Skit Guys. Today we are looking at the events surrounding the birth from the perspective of the shepherds. In the Sunday's ahead, we will attempt to look at these events through the eyes of the Wise Men, Mary, and Joseph.

Now I realize this is Advent. In Advent the emphasis is supposed to be more on preparation for the birth...not talking about the actual birth. Okay. So what? The birth of Jesus is an important event. How is that for an understatement? God came to be with us. God left eternity and squeezed himself into our world in the form of a baby. We're gonna talk about that.

Okay...I first want to say a word about people finding their way...whatever that means. Like I have been in places where I have been out of my normal, everyday element. The BWCAW for example. Laurie and I were camping there this one time. A small group came to where we were camping. Two canoes. Four people. They asked if I could direct them to Knife Lake. I was a bit surprised at the request. So I asked them if I could see their map. I would point it out to them. They said they didn't have a map. I thought they were kidding. Nope. No map. I asked them how they had even gotten as far as they had. They were just paddling along and asking directions as they went. This is a true story

I'll tell you what I didn't do. I didn't give them my map. I pointed the way to a portage and told them to take that portage and they would have to find someone at the next lake to tell them what portage to take next. I did tell them they

were three portages from where they wanted to be.

So when in unfamiliar territory—territory that is not our home—we need some kind of direction in order to find our way. No big profound reveal there.

For followers of Jesus, this world is not our home. This is one of the things we have been hitting on lately in our Wednesday evening Bible study. The Apostle Paul talked about our temporary residence here. In Philippians he said our citizenship is in heaven. In Hebrews we have learned that we are like strangers here. Our true home and citizenship is in heaven. Jesus has prepared a place for us. This is unfamiliar territory...enemy territory, so to speak. So we need to find our way through this place.

Back to the shepherds. Shepherding is one of the first occupations mentioned in the Bible. The fourth chapter of Genesis informs us that Abel was a keeper of sheep. King David, in his early years, tended his father's sheep. By the way the place he looked after sheep was Bethlehem. Bethlehem...the city of David...where Joseph had to go register for that tax...where Jesus was born.

It would appear that the announcement of Jesus' birth came first to Shepherds. Shepherds were not very high on the social scale. They were not very clean. They smelled bad. They took care of sheep. They led sheep to food because sheep could not find food on their own. Shepherds protected sheep because sheep were not equipped with the best of defense mechanisms. No big teeth or sharp claws. They couldn't run very fast.

These shepherds were watching their flocks. It was night. Maybe they drifted in that hazy area between being asleep and fully awake.

They soon became quite awake. First one angel and then a host of angels appeared. They ran to see the baby. They then told all who would listen what had been told them. Fully alert and awake.

What did they see when they saw Jesus? I am not sure they quite knew all this at the time, but they saw the Good Shepherd. Some thirty plus years later Jesus would say, "I am the good shepherd." To that Jesus would add, "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep."

You see, one of the roles of the shepherd was that of protector. Remember, sheep were pretty defenseless. A shepherd who was really good at his job and who really cared for his sheep would stand between the sheep and danger. Jesus said that he would be going so far as to lay down his life to protect us from the enemy and sin.

Okay. So sheep needed protecting. Sheep needed someone to lead them to food. The shepherd did that for the sheep. Jesus does that for us. David wrote the very familiar twenty-third Psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd, therefore I have everything I need...he leads me to greener pastures...he protects me with rod and staff...." And all that.

But there is one more thing. Sheep had a way of getting lost. They wandered off. The shepherd had to keep them all together...keep them all moving together in the right direction. Jesus told more than one story about a shepherd going to look for lost sheep.

Jesus said he came to seek and to save the lost. We didn't find Jesus. Jesus came to find us.

Here's the deal. It is written in the fifty-third chapter of Isaiah, "We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way...." We're lost. No need to be macho about this and believe we can find our own way. We are lost. And Jesus, the Good Shepherd, came to show us the way home.

Now personalize this with me. Do this. If I was the only one—the only sheep—who was lost,

Jesus still would have come to find me and bring me back. Why do I believe this? Well, for one, I believe Jesus loves me. But, also, when Jesus told those stories about lost sheep, it was always one lost sheep. Jesus did not say there was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep, and they all got lost. No. There was a shepherd who had a hundred sheep and one got lost and the shepherd left the others to go look for that lost one and found it and threw a party. Jesus once asked the question, "Which of you who have a lot of sheep, if one got lost, would not go off and look for that one?" It was a rhetorical question.

What child is this? What did the shepherds see? They saw the Good Shepherd who came looking for them. As we look at the baby this year, make it personal. He came for you. That child came to guide you through this world which is not your home...this unfamiliar and unfriendly territory. He came to show you the way home. He came looking just for you.

Look. Be awake. Follow him.

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