

“The Shepherd’s Way”
3rd Sunday in Advent – Dec 15, 2019 – Luke 2:8, 15, 18-20

You may have noticed the large UPS truck(s) in our parking lot in the weeks before Christmas the last few years. They have been using the space as a distribution point and apparently this year the entire world is shipping packages. If you are in the building in the afternoons, there is an interesting ritual that happens each day around 3:30 or 4:00 p.m. A fleet of vehicles converge as if the gates went up at the Kentucky Derby – UPS, FedEx, Amazon delivery vehicles and personal vans and trucks and cars of every size and shape. They come up the ramp and park and scatter, picking up their packages and driving off filled to the brim. And it all happens in the wink of an eye – just like Santa and his elves! *“And suddenly there was with the angel, a multitude of the heavenly host,”* just like watching the sanctuary fill up in the last 5 minutes before worship! It is a sight to behold.

Today we light the third Advent candle: The Shepherds Candle. So far in Advent, we have lighted a candle each week to move forward the highlights that tell the Christmas story: The 1st Candle for Prophecy, or promise, from God to God’s people, the 2nd Candle for Bethlehem, the little town God chose to favor. Last week, Pastor Anteneh spoke about the town of Bethlehem, from Micah 5:2:

*“But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, one of the little clans of Judah,
from YOU will come forth FOR ME one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.”*

This is how the Prophecy (a promise from God told to the people,) and God’s choice of the little town of Bethlehem dance together. The prophets foretold where the Messiah would be born – but Bethlehem was a surprising choice! Today, we also will meet some of the main characters in the Divine Drama.

A long time ago, when I was living in New York City, I once got to work with Michael Shurtleff. Michael Shurtleff had written THE BOOK on auditioning, and he aptly titled it, *Audition*. It is still the standard for auditions and casting throughout the theatre world. In it he named 12 Guideposts to getting cast in a role: #1 is Relationships. First, your character must *Find the Love*. Where is it? Where is it missing? Where is it breaking down? Where is it breaking in? If you can determine these things for your character, you will have grasped the essence of the role. The other guidepost I thought was wonderful is #8 (basically) Seize This Day – because this is the day (in a play) that everything changes for everybody, or why would we even begin to want to tell this story?

So today we have the motivation of a prophecy that comes because God has ***found the love*** plus the setting, where all the changing will take place, Bethlehem. We can move on at this point and begin to meet the Shepherds, the Angels, and a Babe being born through an extraordinarily ordinary couple.

Have you ever noticed how God continues to NOT “cast” folks from the endless pool of the best, brightest, most talented actors? Let’s take a quick scan of the Bible’s main roles: Abraham, a nomad from nowhere chosen to father a nation; Moses, a stutterer, called to speak those same people out of slavery; David, the last of 8 brothers (from 8 possibilities,) handpicked to slay giants and become King; Joseph, a woodworker in a land with precious little timber, who’d become Jesus’ Dad on earth, and Mary, nobody from nowhere town called Nazareth, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit to become the Mother of Our Lord.

And then there are these Shepherds. I confess I have perpetuated their image as shiftless, unfit witnesses, but that was a cultural role - it is rare for Scripture to see them that way. Indeed, they were the poorest of the poor, while sheep were the foundation of the economy providing wool, milk, hide, meat and sacrificial offerings

But scan your knowledge of them from the Bible: they stayed, always; they protected their flock from danger and elements; they gathered, they fed, they cared for their sheep, often knowing them each by name. (And by the way, if they were living in the fields with their sheep it was between Spring and Autumn – just sayin’).

I continue to be in awe at God's casting of those who would bring the two most tremendous pieces of news to humanity: *women* at an empty tomb to proclaim, "He is Risen!" and *shepherds* to share an angelic announcement:

*They made known what had been told them about the child;
and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*

It doesn't say the people were amazed that it was shepherds who were the messengers, it says that they were amazed at the message. (As it should be.) Only God could love the juxtaposition that Martin Luther called, "at the same time saint and sinner." (Nobody's perfect.) Only God could see his beloved creations in what society throws away. Only God could love the poorest of the poor, those on the edges; the faithful who happened to be born female; the homeless, the alien, the sojourner, the seeker; the self-righteous, the sinner, the judged and the judges.

Loving as God loves is a role we might seek to audition for, but deep down we know, it's a role we are not able to play. Yet, even the shepherds had lowly lives that God had lifted up for centuries, and they seem to have received a special role in God's story: Abraham was a shepherd. (Genesis) Moses was a shepherd. (Exodus.) David was a shepherd (1 Samuel 17.) They were pillars of the Old Testament - all shepherds, and all three *esteemed* among Jews of Jesus' day. Even God is pictured often as a shepherd, and one of the most famous and best-known verses in the whole Bible remains to be, "The Lord is my shepherd." (Psalm 23:1).

Just as God chooses surprising folks throughout the Bible, God continues to choose and use each of us. Life is not an audition, but God casts every generation, calling us to live our most faithful life:

Abraham got his heart's desire: heirs to God's kingdom
Moses initiated justice for a people; led them to promised land
David melded religion and politics as King & High Priest
Shepherds in the fields were hosts to multitudes of angels
And Mary had a baby.

Jesus, the Good Shepherd, passed that role to his leaders and followers, who are called and chosen to *shepherd God's flock among you*. (1 Peter). That would be me. That would be you. That would be us. Amen.

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