



Christmas Day (II)

The Shepherds

[RCL] Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7)8-20

Dear people of God - Happy Christmas! After a long Advent, here we are - hearing the well-worn story of Jesus coming into the world. Hearing, again, the hope of the light which breaks into the least likely of places. And, no matter how many times we hear it - no matter how many Christmas services we attend - this is always news we need to hear. And it is always good.

This year, perhaps more than any other, we need to hear about the way the light comes in. We need to hear that darkness doesn't have the final word. We need to hear about this Son of God, this piece of Divinity who enters into the mess of a stable, just to remind us that we do not walk alone.

This year more than others has probably felt like an extended Advent - or even like Lent. As we've traveled through a pandemic, we have been profoundly together - and yet kept a physical distance. We have all been affected, and yet we know that our own disparities in race and class have been brought to the surface. We have been in something that probably feels more like a season of waiting, minding the dark, and reminding one another of God's goodness. This Christmas Day, we come out of that darkness - we come out of the waiting - and we celebrate.

Each year, it seems that there is a different part of the story that demands our attention. Perhaps this year, it is the shepherds. The shepherds are likely the most modest of all the characters in our story. In Christmas pageants, there are those who wish to be angels, and wise men, and of course Mary and Joseph. Even the innkeeper stands alone, given an important role of turning the family away. But this group, the shepherds and their animals, is often the least popular. Their grouping means no single one is more important than another. We don't know their names or their origins. It can be easy to assume they are passive in the story - told news by the angels and then left, consigned to be on the outside of the action.

This year, let us be drawn to these humble ones. We've just been through a national election - which, no matter what side of the political spectrum you fall on, or what your personal feelings may be, has been stressful. We've been through and are still living with a global pandemic - likely the first in our lifetimes. Our world has been noisy. It's been full of individual characters yelling to get attention. Our hearts yearn for humble ones like these shepherds - quietly minding their own business when the angels surround them.

Can you imagine it? This is the moment which shows us the absolute beauty of God - the paradox of a supreme being, of one who is known simply as, I AM, deciding to announce the birth of Godself into the world by going into the field and finding these shepherds.

The angels could have gone into the city. They could have gone to the town square, or to the houses of the rich and famous. I'm sure they could have announced to many more people, much more efficiently, that Jesus was born.

And yet, God sends word first to the humble. To those out in the field, probably smelling from a day - a week - a month - of tending their animals. God's word comes down into a field, announcing the light in the world to a small, inconspicuous group.

And, the announcement is anything but simple. It begins with one angel - singing the glory of the Lord and telling them not to be afraid. After the good news is announced, there is suddenly with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God in word and song. What an elaborate and unexpected announcement!

The next part of the story gets glossed over. Sometimes we focus on the way that God comes to those whom society deems least worthy, but rarely do we look at the response of the shepherds. They have been terrified in the field - suddenly surrounded by angels and a multitude of the heavenly host - and yet, despite their fear, they decide to go to Bethlehem, to see the baby the angels announced to them.

In our gospels, we aren't given the text of that conversation. We don't know if one of them wants to go and has to talk the others into it - or if they come to a consensus. Perhaps there is no need for conversation - all their hearts having been transformed in their interaction, and all ready, now, to go.

How do we respond, when we're given invitations from God? It would be unusual for any one of us to have experienced a multitude of the heavenly host announcing to us the birth of the Messiah - but we receive invitations all the time. Invitations to follow, to come, and see - invitations to step deeper into relationship with our neighbors, to practice blessing our enemies, to spend time with God. How do we respond to those invitations?

In the shepherds' response, going to Bethlehem and visiting Mary, the effect of the angel visit is multiplied. They tell all who will listen about the baby they have seen, and speak words that are, to Mary, so important that she treasures and ponders them in her heart.

The shepherds call to us. They remind us that the invitations God sends us are always to be multiplied, and increased, and shared. These unassuming men, sitting in the fields and minding their sheep, are suddenly surrounded by an angelic light. The birth of the Savior is announced to them, and their hearts are transformed.

This year, as we again visit the well-worn fabric of this story, I invite you to pay attention to the less showy thread. Allow the shepherds, these background characters, to teach you something new about who God is, and to whom God pays attention. Allow them to speak to you about transformation and increasing joy. This year, we remember - God sees these humble ones, and gives them a voice, a role in the story of light breaking through the darkness. And, if God sees and uses even the shepherds - then surely God sees you and me, too. Amen.

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