the PLYMOUTH Pulpit

“The Shepherd’s Story”

Luke 2:8-20

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December 23, 2018

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:8-20

If you have not chosen this year's Christmas prank, the internet has lots of suggestions. You can wrap a party popper as a gift. Put a label on the bottom of the party popper that says the recipient has to twist the bottom to open the gift. The top will pop off and confetti will fly. How could your grandmother not love it?

A second suggestion takes work. Cover all of the food in the refrigerator in Christmas wrapping paper. This might be more trouble than its worth.

This third prank has been done a few times, but it is easy. Wrap a gift card in a really big box. It is better if you use bubble wrap.

This suggestion is simple. Instead of writing "from Santa" on a gift tag, write "from Satan." Maybe a gift to your special in-law.

This hilarious joke requires thought. Give batteries with a note that says, "Gift not included."

For the young person on your list, give a jar of beets with a picture of Dre taped to the lid—Beets by Dre.

If you are really ambitious, take your video camera and a clipboard to Dyker Heights. Knock on doors and tell residents that they need to put up more Christmas lights or the city will fine them.

How about this for a Christmas surprise? Calloused shepherds, homeless men living outside, making minimum wage, minding their own business are suddenly surrounded by angels singing and lights shining. It is not what they expected.

The shepherds in last Sunday's Plymouth Christmas pageant have mothers who painstakingly fixed their hair only to have it messed up by the turbans that we ordered from the Oriental Trading Company. The Plymouth shepherds waited patiently for the Cherub and Seraph choirs to finish *Away in a Manger*.

Sylvester Morgan, the angel Gabriel, suddenly appeared. Emma Owens, head shepherd, said, "The sky looks so bright. I've never seen so many stars." Helen Dunphy, angel #2, told the shepherds not to be afraid, and our shepherds were not frightened.

Emma said, "God promised us a new king and at last the Messiah has been born! Let's go to Bethlehem to greet the newborn king." The shepherds in the Bible were not nearly as calm as the shepherds in Hillis Hall.

The religious people in Jesus' day did not care for shepherds. The shepherds were not allowed in the temple. They

were not known for clean living. Respectable people thought of them as dishonest no accounts who grazed their disgusting animals on other people's land. They are not the people we would have chosen to tell this news.

The shepherds pull their woolen caps down over their ears. Their campfire is low, because no one wants to go for more wood. The cold wind makes the shepherds too miserable to think about how hungry they are. They pass around a bottle. They tell a few jokes they have told before—none of which can be repeated in church. They divvy up the shifts and try to sleep.

God turns to the angel and says, "Gabriel, people need to know what I'm up to. Go tell a few who'll tell the others."

It is near daybreak when, without any warning, God's angel is suddenly there. In some ways the appearance of an angel is not like something coming out of nowhere. It is something coming into focus that is always there. The air is alive with an angel whose voice sounds like a flute. The shepherds—who are used to fighting wolves and poachers—are terrified.

The angel tries to calm them, "Don't be afraid," but it is frightening. "I bring you good news of a great joy, not just for you, but for everybody."

The shepherds squint.

"Today your deliverer was born. You don't have to take my word for it. Go and see for yourself. Here's the sign that I'm telling the truth. You'll find the baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in, of all things, a manger."

What kind of sign is that? Not a star, like the wise men get, but a rag-wrapped boy in a feed box. The sign sounds like a joke—not what you would expect for the Messiah.

The backup choir cannot resist an encore. The sky splits open, and like a thousand falling stars, brilliant, dazzling light pours down. The shepherds have front row seats in God's concert hall. The angel choir fills the sky. Trumpets overwhelm the flutes as they sing, "Glory to God in the heavenly heights, peace to all with whom God is pleased."

The song ends as suddenly as it began. The sky closes, leaving a deep blue silence. The shepherds do not speak for a while, but then they run to see what has happened.

As they make their way, doubts start to creep in. Martin Luther assumed that there were two shepherds in the field. Imagine their conversation: "Wait a minute. Why would this happen to us? Are the two of us so important that heaven would sing for us and not the important people? Why wouldn't the angels go to Jerusalem? That's where the religious people are. Why would God pick shepherds? We're the last people to whom this should happen."

They wonder if it was a hallucination, a mirage, or bad whiskey. They ask a few people along the road: "You didn't see a heavenly host up in the sky about fifteen minutes ago, did you? Never mind."

They hurry through the snow down the hill. They think they might have heard a baby cry. These poor, dirty, unbathed shepherds stagger through the stable door and see the baby lying in the kind of manger in which they feed their sheep—maybe it is their manger. They know that what the angel said is true.

The baby is just waking up. His mother, lying on a blanket on the straw, picks up her child. The shepherds start rummaging through their pockets for a baby gift—a woolen scarf, a ball, something. They tell Mary and Joseph about the angels. They cannot post on Facebook or Instagram, but they tell other people, who act amazed, but then seem to forget about it.

On the day after Christmas, a man in the barbershop asks, "Any news?"

"No, not really. A woman from Nazareth had a baby in a barn—not exactly front page."

The shepherds got to see it. They were there. It happened to them. They did not have to be told about it. They did not have to read about it. They did not have to figure it out. They did not have to prepare. They did not have to work for it. They

did not do anything. It just happened to them. God gave it to them.

There is not a word in the Bible about anyone doing anything to deserve Christmas. Christmas is a gift that shows up unexpectedly. But that does not keep us from acting as if Christmas is dependent on our efforts.

Have you had this conversation this week?

"Are you ready for Christmas?"

"No, I have so much left to do. I don't think I'm going to make it."

We plan and prepare. Some of us are brave enough to go to Target. Some of us pay extra for two-day shipping. Some of us are on a thirty-day free trial with Amazon Prime.

We listen to Manheim Steamroller when other people are around. We listen to Mariah Carey when we are by ourselves. We set out the nativity. We hang ornaments. A few try to recreate the smell of our childhood kitchen.

If we are not thinking, Christmas begins to feel like something with which to deal: "We'll get everything done and then we can enjoy the holidays."

We do not talk about our hope that we will feel like children again. We want to hear bells. We want it to snow. We want everything to be wonderful. We are trying to create a feeling. We want to make Christmas happen.

Our earnest, misguided attempts to force Christmas to come do not work. Some of us are ready for our children to go back to school. Some of us have visitors on the way we wish were not coming. We have moments when we wish we could skip the whole thing. Who needs the extra work? Why are we the ones doing all the work? Where can I get one of those buttons that says, "Humbug"?

By the time Christmas Day gets here we feel like a racecar that has run out of gas. Christmas feels like just another day, another twenty-four hours. Sick people are still sick. Lonely people are still lonely. Tired people are still tired. We end up

sitting on the hillside tending our sheep, as though it is an ordinary day.

We cannot make Christmas happen. We cannot buy what we can only be given. We cannot earn what comes as free as the snow falls from the sky. We cannot forget that Christmas is a gift that we do not give, but can only be given.

Our mistake is thinking we are in charge. If we let go of the idea that we are in control, then we can be surprised again. God will astonish us with a moment when you open a gift and it is peculiar, and you pretend it is what you want, but you cannot imagine how the giver could ever picture you wearing antlers that light up. You start to laugh and cannot stop.

A moment when you see your brother and sister at peace—and know that it must be divine intervention.

A moment when a child gives you a handmade Christmas card with a big glittery silver star on the front—and for reasons you cannot explain—your eyes mist up.

A moment when your mother hugs your daughter, and you are overcome with gratitude for the people you have been given.

A moment when you think of someone who was with you last year, but is not this year. And along with the sadness you have gotten used to feeling at their absence, you are surprised to feel gratitude for the time you had with them.

A moment when you can almost hear the songs of angels, and cannot figure out why it would happen to you. How did God decide to love us? We cannot make Christmas meaningful, but we can take the spotlight off the extras and look at the star.

Thomas Hardy's poem, *The Oxen,* begins with the legend that on Christmas Eve at twelve o'clock animals kneel in their stalls in memory of the birth in the stable in Bethlehem. The poem closes:

"If someone said on Christmas Eve,
'Come, see the oxen kneel in the lonely (barn)
by yonder comb our childhood used to know,'
I should go with him in the gloom,

hoping it might be so."

We hope it is so. We open ourselves to the possibility that God is here. Waiting for a surprise sounds like a contradiction, but that is how Christmas happens. We give up our expectations of what we think should happen and open our hearts to God's joy.

We push aside our cynicism and let God help us believe again. We listen to the songs God is always singing. We join the chorus singing the carols, not because everyone else is singing, but because something stirs within us. We give and receive gifts, not because it is expected, but for the joy of it. We look at the manger and feel what the shepherds felt seeing earth lifted to heaven and heaven stooping to earth.

We remember that God comes in babies who are easily ignored, hungry people we seldom feed, and lonely people we barely hear. On that first Christmas night, the shepherds knew that God was with them. It is not enough for us to remember their story. It needs to be our story.

When we feel love, do not hesitate. Give in to love. Remember that God is with us. Wonder like the shepherds that we should be the recipients of God's love. Christmas happens when we receive the gift of Christ as love, born in our hearts.

Sermon © Rev. Brett Younger

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