



SAINT LUKE'S

"SHEPHERDS FIRST"

CHRISTMAS EVE

ISAIAH 9:2-7

PSALM 96

TITUS 2:11-14

LUKE 2:1-20

A SERMON BY THE REV. CAROLINE STACEY

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We live in changing and frightening times. Some of us here tonight may have particular reason to be afraid: minorities, women, folks earning minimum wage, immigrants, LGBT people. People of other faiths around our nation are also fearful. We gather as a diverse group, and yet surely all of us are troubled about the divisions in our country, the rise of alt-right extremism here and abroad, and the degree to which hate speech has become acceptable. A recent survey found that 90% of trans people already experience discrimination or harassment at work (*Injustice at Every Turn: National Transgender Discrimination Survey*). Tonight we hear of God's pure love for all of humanity, of hope and joy that is greater than anything that divides us. The very first thing Luke does is to locate Jesus's birth within a dire and oppressive political context for Jesus' own people. Luke wants us to know that there is no oppression, fear or darkness in any age so overwhelming that God cannot enter in and transform it. So imagine for a moment that you have never heard the Christmas story before. Imagine you are hearing about Jesus birth for the very first time and that you are hearing it from Luke. What does Luke tell us about God?

As adults we might stumble near the start ~ at the angels. Angels?! This simply means that there are some kind of messengers from God. (Angel is literally translated "messenger"). Perhaps the messengers take human form, or perhaps a sense of God's presence overshadows the shepherds, so that they come to know something deeper than they can explain. The way we might "know" when we have met the person we will one day marry, or that we will be a teacher, or a parent, or an artist.

I do wonder about *other* shepherds on hillsides around Bethlehem. I wonder: Did other shepherds experience that Divine message – and yet couldn't quite muster enough hope and trust to go to the stable? Perhaps God keeps asking until God hears a Yes. Perhaps all are invited, but few say Yes. Then it becomes a question about *us*, how ready and willing we are. However God gets through to them, *these* shepherds take on trust that something very special is happening now in Bethlehem. And so they go.

What the shepherds find is that their Savior is poor. God chooses the lowly places and regular folks of the world. When we are children, Christmas Pageants present a seamless story that is a composite of the gospels. We are taught: shepherds arrive first and then the kings, guided by the star and bringing expensive gifts and a camel or two and servants. But the kings come from Matthew and they set out much later. Luke says Jesus' first and only visitors that night are shepherds. We don't even know their names. In Christmas Pageants of my childhood they were shepherds # 1 #2 and #3! They have no retinue, no servants, no expensive gifts. They smell of sheep and sweat. Some scholars describe the shepherds' visit as anticlimactic. For me, the opposite is true – that fact that God chooses shepherds is part of the good news. We may have heard that shepherds were disreputable, which is not true. (For instance, in Hebrew tradition, Moses and King David were shepherds when young). What adult shepherds are is “insignificant”: poor, uneducated, itinerant workers who spend months away from home tending flocks on remote hillsides, marginally housed. We can imagine how some local townspeople might view shepherds.

But tonight, the shepherds are as kings. They are first and only. Without shame or fear they walk into the stable in their work clothes as the first people to see the Savior of the world.

There are no crowds that first Christmas. Except for at the inn. The inn is crowded but there is no room for Jesus in that crowd. Luke is telling us that we cannot count on majority opinion or twitter feed to discern where God is at work in the world. We have to do our own listening and watching and praying. Luke also says: "*all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*". Shepherds are not the most credible evangelists God could have chosen. Yet they are the first. Every one of us is a spiritual descendant of a shepherd whose name we don't know.

Jesus is born in this way so that none of us can mistake the gospel for yet another human game of power and manipulation. First, Jesus comes to the shepherds. Luke will keep showing us that Jesus has a special closeness to the poor and suffering and marginalized, to the "shepherds" in every age. Jesus is born especially tonight for all those facing Christmas lonely and in despair. Jesus comes especially for those who lost loved ones at the Berlin market this week; especially to the people of Aleppo; especially to say Black Lives Matter; especially to strengthen and empower minorities; to work for racial justice; and safety for immigrants; and stand with LGBT people. We can always find Jesus among those in special need. The truth is, we are all in need. Every one of us has fears and we all need hope. God invites us to bring everything on our hearts and minds to the stable tonight. Like the shepherds, we can come exactly as we are. There is more than enough

hope, plenty of love, to go around.

Jesus' birth tells us that we matter to God. *How* Jesus is born tells us that God welcomes us as we are. As Jesus' life and death and resurrection unfold, we see our future in his. Human beings are made for love, not hate; hope, not despair; unity not division; integrity not trickery; joy not fear; life not death. It may seem that Jesus' birth is not nearly enough to help bring peace and justice and unity and healing. But as we follow Jesus, something miraculous happens. We become part of the Light that shines in the darkness and will never be overcome.

AMEN

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