

The Shepherd's story is your story  
Sermon Preached at St. Peter & St. Paul, Marietta, GA  
by The Rev. Tom Pumphrey, December 24, 2018  
Christmas Eve

*Luke 2:1-14(15-20) In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*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 he favors!"*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us 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.*

Merry Christmas! Tonight, all the waiting and preparation of Advent gives way to the celebration of Christmas, the Feast of the birth of Jesus Christ, the Son of God coming into the world! Tonight, we join with the shepherds who hear the angel's message, who seek out Jesus and find him, who return rejoicing in God's power in their lives.

Earlier today at the 3PM service, Children played out the roles of the characters in tonight's Gospel reading. There were Animals and Shepherds, Angels, Mary and Joseph, and even the stars of heaven who glorified God! Each played a role in telling the story of God coming to us. And each played a role in telling the story of our response to God.

The shepherds, in the midst of their ordinary lives, suddenly see God revealed by Angels. They are amazed—they hear the good news from the angels, but they don't completely understand. Yet they know that something wonderful is happening. So they seek out Jesus, and they leave their flocks to go find him. They find Jesus, welcomed by animals into their home. When they discover Jesus, they are still amazed, and share their experience with Mary and Joseph. Mary ponders all these words, thinking through what God is doing in her and through her. Then, when the shepherds see that God is doing something fantastic in the world, they return to their homes, glorifying and praising God for all that God is doing.

They discovered that God is doing something wonderful. They discovered that the God of the universe is stepping into human history to reveal himself, to save his people, to give us new life. They discovered that the God of the universe cares about them, even lowly shepherds.

The story of the shepherds is not unlike the stories of many people I've come to know in this church. Let me weave together a story that pulls together the story of many people who have joined St. Peter & St. Paul in recent years and indeed like the story of many who joined years ago and are still coming.

A young man and his wife were settling into their home in East Cobb with their kids. It occurred to them that they might want to visit a church, to give their kids some religious background. So they came to worship one Christmas. Something in the music or the warmth of the faces, or a phrase in the prayers caught their attention. When they heard the Christmas story, they thought about God in their lives and wondered whether they and their kids might find something they had been missing.

In all the busy-ness of career building, in all the scramble to provide the best for their kids, in all the rush of life, they had become disconnected with things more permanent and grounded, things of meaning, things that last. And here, in the solemn joy of the sacraments, in the peace of the prayers, they felt the presence of God reaching out to them.

Like the shepherds, they noticed God's power at work in their lives, and they decided they wanted to know more. Like the shepherds, they became more and more curious. They came back and listened more to the Good News of how God is not just a distant power, that God is alive and present and active and that God cares about them personally. Like the shepherds, they didn't completely know what was happening, but they knew that God was doing something—something worth following.

Like Mary, they pondered all these words in their hearts. They thought and talked about what they heard. Their kids started asking questions—good questions that they didn't have answers to—questions that they themselves wanted to pursue. Then other people in the church began to seek them out, to welcome them and to build friendships together. Like the shepherds, they were curious and wanted to know more. Over meals, they heard their new friends speak about what God was doing in their lives and how they were learning and growing, discovering more of God's grace.

Like the animals in the stable in Bethlehem, the young man and his wife welcomed Jesus into their home. They started to pray, at first in awkward voices, seeking cautiously to know God in their own lives. Like the shepherds, they sought to learn more. They came to a Bible study, they cooked dinner for a homeless family and listened to their story of God's power in their lives. Then, as they felt God's presence and discovered answers to prayers, they returned to their lives like the shepherds, rejoicing in what God was doing—sharing the good news of God at work in their lives. The story of the shepherds was their story.

Of course, life wasn't perfect for them. The man lost his job. The woman fought cancer. Their son struggled in school, their daughter struggled with anxiety and depression. It was not the typical picture of a perfect East Cobb life, but as they discovered, it was a very normal and typical East Cobb life. And yet, as they faced their challenges, they knew that things had changed. The career, as important as it was, became less crucial in their life as they saw God

support them. They encouraged and supported their kids and found friends who helped them through their challenges. Cancer survivors walked every step of the way through the woman's treatment, strengthened by God's presence alive and active in their life. Like those ordinary shepherds, they still faced challenges, but they faced them with the presence and power of God, changing their circumstances, changing them, and giving them a joy and a peace that passes understanding.

Their story is so much like the story of a man whose discovered God at work when his wife died, when God reached out to him with new life. Or the story of the teenager trying to make sense of life, who came here and found friends different from the typical high school social life. He found friends he could trust, friends who showed him how to trust in God. Or the story of the young woman getting her feet under herself as an adult. She came here curious about God, was embraced by this community, and learned more and more about the source of all that love.

Perhaps you are new tonight. Perhaps you have been coming here for years. Either way, perhaps you can catch glimpses of your own story in their story. Theirs is the story of the shepherds discovering Jesus on that first Christmas night. Theirs is the story of the animals welcoming Jesus into their home. Theirs is the story of Mary pondering all these words. Theirs is the story of the shepherds praising God for coming into their lives.

Maybe you are in this story too? Like the shepherds, you can hear the message of the Good News of Jesus. Like the shepherds, you can follow that curiosity to seek Jesus and find Jesus. Like the animals, you can welcome Jesus into your home. Like Mary, you can ponder all that you've heard and seen. And as you discover more and more of God at work in your life, you can return, like the shepherds, glorifying and praising God for all that he is doing in your life.

The Good News of Christmas is that God has come to us in Jesus. In Jesus, God steps into human history to reveal himself, to show us who he is. In Jesus, God forgives us, removes all that stands between us and entraps us, heals all that is broken in our lives, and embraces us, so that we can embrace him. Through Jesus, God continues to come to us in his Holy Spirit.

Like the people who witnessed the first Christmas, we can receive this life-changing Good News in our lives. How will you be like the shepherds—how will you listen for God's good news? How will you search to learn more of what God is doing in your life? How will you welcome Jesus into your home? How will you ponder what you've heard? And, when you have seen and felt the power and presence of God alive and at work in your life, how will you return and glorify and praise God for all that God is doing?

May God reach out to you, draw you in closer, fill you with new life, and send you home rejoicing!

Merry Christmas!