

December 24, 2022
The Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve
Luke 2:8-20
Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Norwood, MA
Pastor Amanda L. Warner

Go and Tell

I did something this week that gave me a whole new respect for shepherds. Obviously, I memorized the Christmas Eve gospel from Luke for tonight's service. I also am doing it from memory at the Zoom service, but that wouldn't mean much to the people at the Zoom service, if I just sat in my chair and recited it. They would probably just assume that I was reading it.

Back in November I invited anyone who was interested to come to a meeting to discuss how we could share the Advent and Christmas seasons at our Zoom service in meaningful ways. One of the people who came to that meeting suggested that it would be nice if we could do something around Christmas with "Susan's sheep."

Susan Robertson is a member of our congregation who also happens to be the Executive Director of Gore Place, which is a 50-acre estate and farm located in Waltham. If you've never been there, you should check it out. It's really an amazing thing to see this estate in the middle of a city.

If you ever go, one of the things that you'll find at Gore place is a flock of Leicester Longwool sheep. At prayer group Susan has shared a lot about the sheep at Gore place and the person at our Advent and Christmas planning meeting thought that it would be nice if we could incorporate the sheep into our Christmas Eve Zoom worship. That's what gave me the idea of re-memorizing the Christmas Eve gospel. I thought that for the Zoom service, I

would ask Susan if I could record the gospel, in the fields, surrounded by Gore Place's sheep. She said yes, so that's what I did.

On Wednesday I went to Gore Place, with Rebecca Sol and her video equipment, and met up with Susan and Gore Place's farmer, Scott, to record the Christmas Gospel. And that's how I got a whole new respect for shepherds.

You see, I am not a shepherd. I am not someone known to the sheep at Gore Place. And they knew it.

While the farmer was standing there and while I was on the "spectator" side of the fence, the sheep were fine, they even seemed a little bit interested and curious about what I was doing there. But the minute the farmer let me into their pasture and Rebecca and I crossed the fence line, the sheep took off. They were out of there.

Have you ever seen a flock of sheep run? After Wednesday, I have. They took off to the tree line and crossed to the other side of it, almost vanishing. The farmer, went and coaxed some of them back into the picture, but even his attempt to bribe them with hay did not persuade them to get any closer to me. I was a stranger, perhaps a threat and, hay or not, they were going to keep their distance.

Going into this experience, I was a little bit worried that, while I was reciting the Christmas gospel, I was going to get bumped by a sheep. About thirty seconds in, I knew that I did not need to worry about that.

So, what did I learn about shepherds through this experience? I learned that they really have a relationship with the animals that they tend and care for. A sheep won't go to or with just anyone. A shepherd has to build up trust with the animals, patiently proving that he or she is someone worthy of being

followed, someone who brings care, and not harm, someone who has the best interest of the sheep at heart.

The other reason that I developed a whole new appreciation for shepherds and for the shepherds in the Christmas story is because of the state of my shoes after my trip to the farm.

I guess I should have known better. I am a child of the suburbs, not the fields and farms, which I why I didn't wear at least sneakers, if not sturdy hiking boots when I headed out into the pasture. Instead, I wore my every day, wear about town, "fashion boots".

I might never get to wear them again. Because pastures are muddy. And sheep poop a lot. Wherever they want. I'll let your imaginations about the state of my boots take it from there.

You know I pondered whether I could talk about sheep poop in a sermon, in a Christmas Eve sermon no less, when we're all dressed up in our nice clothes, when everything is decorated so beautifully when everything is bright and shiny and lovely and perhaps, we want the sermon to be too.

But the shepherds weren't wearing their best on the first Christmas. They were living in the fields, up at night taking care of their sheep. And shepherding is dirty and smelly work. I knew that in theory before last Wednesday. Since last Wednesday I know it by experience.

I have a whole new respect for shepherds and a deeper and more awestruck sense of wonder for the fact that it was to shepherds, to faithful, trustworthy shepherds to whom the angel of the Lord came.

God did not choose well to do people, God did not choose dressed up and respectable people, people tucked away, cozy and warm in the homes and inns of Bethlehem to be the first to hear the good news of Christmas.

God chose up all night, living in the fields, surrounded by sheep and their droppings shepherds to be the first to hear the news, the good news of great joy, the news that God was with them, the news that their savior had been born, the news that in a child, who had been born in a stable and who was lying in an animal trough, they would find their Messiah, their Lord.

And now, when I picture the manger scene, there are a whole lot more sheep there. Because I simply cannot imagine that those shepherds would have left even one of their sheep behind when they went to see the baby, to discover the reality of what the angels had told them. They had a duty of care and I'm sure that where they went their sheep went with them.

I wonder if the people of Bethlehem were happy to see them coming, to hear them coming, even to smell them coming.

We, of course, have no idea how close the shepherds were to the town proper of Bethlehem. We only know that they were "in that region". They could have been very close by, right on the outskirts of the city. They could have been farther afield. It might have still been dark, still before dawn when the shepherds and their sheep got to Bethlehem. It might have been early morning or even late morning.

They might have woken people up as they travelled through Bethlehem to find the child or they might have interfered with the morning rush hour, men moving to their work, women going to get water or beginning their day's shopping or chores, people being registered, Roman authorities doing the registering.

Bethlehem was crowded. The shepherds and their sheep were either a nuisance because of all the noise they made before decent people would even

be awake or because of the way that they snarled the foot traffic with their smelly and pooping sheep and their own dirty bodies.

I mean, people must have thought, sure, their work is important, but they're supposed to stay out of the city.

So, this is the biggest reason that I have a whole new appreciation, not just for shepherds in general, but for these shepherds, for the shepherds of the Christmas story.

They went, in spite of the hassle it might have been, they went to see the newborn savior, they saw, and then they told.

The shepherds were probably considered to be a nuisance, in general, they probably weren't the most socially accepted people, they were far most used to the company of the sheep and each other than they were to strangers, to the crowds of the city, and yet, after they heard, they went, and after they saw, they told. They didn't care what anyone would think of them, they didn't let people's funny looks, people's frustration with them and their inconvenient sheep, they didn't let their social status silence their voices.

The text tells us that "When they saw this, the shepherds made known what had been told them about this child..."

You know it's funny, because I've read the Christmas story from the gospel of Luke to myself and out loud probably a hundred times, but I heard it differently when I was memorizing it. I heard something that I don't think that I've ever noticed before. The phrase "told them" comes up in this gospel reading three times in the last three sentences of this reading.

"[The shepherds] made known what had been told them about this child."
(Luke 2:17b)

“And all who heard it were amazed about what the shepherds told them.”
(Luke 2:18)

And finally, “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:20)

There is an emphasis on the telling of this story, on the telling of the good news of Jesus birth.

The angel told the shepherds. The shepherds told the people of Bethlehem, the shepherds even told each other, emphasized to each other, reminded each other, what they had heard, what they had seen.

The gospel writer, Luke, told someone named Theophilus, who comes up in the very beginning of the gospel of Luke, where it says,

Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed (Luke 1:1-4).

And, by telling Theophilus this story, Luke told us. And someone a lot closer in time than Luke told us as well.

Who told you? Was it a parent, a grandparent, a Sunday School teacher, who had you act it out when you were a kid in a Christmas pageant? Was it a pastor, a friend, an aunt, an uncle, a spouse? Was it Linus from a Charlie Brown Christmas special?

This is a story to be told. And my appreciation for the shepherds, beyond my new appreciation for the intricacies and challenges of their job, lies in this: They might not have been the most socially impressive people. People might have rolled their eyes at them or held their noses or told them to get their dirty selves and their dirty sheep out of the city, but they told the story anyway. They were so overwhelmed by the shining light, by the glory of heaven that they had seen, by the song of angels that they had heard, and by the simple truth of what the angel had told them, that no one's opinion of them could stop them from sharing the news that they had to share, the good news of great joy, for all the people.

And thanks to those shepherds and to Luke and to the millions who have come after them, so many unknown and unnamed to us, and some our own beloved ones, we get to know, we get to hear the story too.

We get to know that God's good news of great joy is for us too. That no matter who we are, no matter where we are in our lives, no matter our struggles, our failings, our worries, our distractions, Christ the savior was born for us, is born this day in our hearts for us, God is with us.

This is our good news to hear and it is our good news to tell; even when that telling takes us out of our comfort zone, even when people might look down on us for telling it, even when people might think that it isn't true.

Because it is good news of great joy for all the people. And today, tomorrow, next week, next year, people need to hear some good news. Amen.