

“Shepherds in a Hurry”

It is Christmas Eve. We church folks know the story of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. The “play” is repeated every year. Do you see yourself in this story? Can you relate to the power and authority held by the emperor Augustus? Maybe you have made corporate decisions that affect the masses. Perhaps you focus on Joseph, identifying with his courage and faithfulness. Perhaps upon hearing the reading tonight, you identified with Mary, uncomfortably pregnant while riding a donkey, uncertain of the near and distant future.

Or maybe you identify with the shepherds. The shepherds offer yet another perspective on life as they enter the nativity scene. Shepherds were ordinary people who did the basic labor of taking care of the sheep. Sheep were a mainstay of livelihood, providing people of the Bible with food and milk, wool for clothing, coverings for tents that provided shelter, a medium of exchange, and a proper offering in the sacrifice system of the day.

Shepherds were the essential workers of their time. The COVID-19 pandemic continues to teach us the value of essential workers. The work of the shepherds could not be done from home. They needed to be with the sheep under their watchful care. The people who clean the public bathrooms, stock the shelves, mop the floors, and drive the trucks carrying groceries or medical supplies or

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vaccines, join the nurses, doctors and medical staff in working all hours. They must work in shifts.

People who work the night shift will tell you that nighttime/early morning hours are unique. They know that when they look at the stars of the night of the night sky, most everyone else in the community is sleeping, but they are laboring hard to make production or beat the clock on a deadline. Like the distribution center of the mill that runs all day and night, the shepherds' work was 24/7.

As suddenly as a web pop-up ad, the angels appeared to the night shift shepherds. The angels appeared with good news, beckoning them to Bethlehem. Naturally, the shepherds were afraid. The angels reassured them and quickly they went to Bethlehem. Today, in our hearts and minds, we are invited to find our place in the manger. The birth of Jesus is a major touchstone in God's salvation story. Our formation as disciples of Christ happens as we connect our story to God's salvation story.

As discussed by Rev. Debra Griffis-Woodberry, a fellow United Methodist minister in South Carolina, in a poem titled "Christmas Come," Ann Weems includes the line, "Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons." ("Kneeling in Bethlehem," by Ann Weems, p.61). I invite you to look for the presence of God in each person you encounter now and throughout the coming

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year. What will you experience from God? How will the presence of God change your perception of each person? How will you offer praise for God or show love? And how will this perspective shape you? Maybe in another year you will have answers to these questions.

The scripture says that the shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem to find Jesus. They felt the urgency to go immediately. The pull of good news of Jesus was strong. Upon seeing for themselves the miracle, they went and told everyone what had been revealed to them.

Today's world is characterized by tension between groups of people, uncertainty of a peaceful future, lack of acceptance and even hatred of others. These conditions are shouts for the church to feel urgency in its message. Quickly, Christ's followers need to offer ways of reconciliation and hope to a broken world.

Tonight, we light our candles and sing "Silent Night, Holy Night." Let us think about what it means to be a light unto the world. Rev. Heidi Haverkamp, an Episcopal priest, and author of *Holy Solitude*, shares her memory of how she fell in love with the tradition of setting candles in the windows of her home. The sun went down before 5 pm at this time of year and as her family drove along the narrow winding roads through eastern Ohio, the dark hills were lit up by a

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surprising number of such candles. She never forgot that feeling of welcome and glowing hope at such a dark time of year, in a place she didn't know.

Legend traces the tradition back to Mary and Joseph searching for a place to stay, as well as to the star that leads the Magi on a long journey through a strange country. There is anecdotal evidence that people are putting their Christmas decorations up earlier this year. I know I wanted ours up right after Thanksgiving. They are a bulwark against the gloom, whether it's the shorter days, the chaos of the news, or the loneliness of ongoing social distancing. This year, decorations feel like an act of resistance.

Gloom is not foreign to the nativity story. Scripture tells us Jesus' birth was a time not only of joy and welcome but of fear, violence and catastrophe. We usually tend not to focus on those negative bits, dodging the presence of Augustus Caesar, with his ruthlessness and absolute power over the Roman Empire and its people. We brush by King Herod, his threats, the massacre of the Holy Innocents, and the flight to Egypt.

This year, however, all these grim and terrible plot turns get my attention. They sound less like the plot of a fairy tale and more like current and near-possible events. And somehow, for me, this is heartening, because I need even more to

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know that Jesus is with us, that these sorts of events are not shocking to God, as so much that which seemed unbreakable has broken apart in my country.

As we light our candles tonight, I think of our Christmas reading from Isaiah 9 (“The People. who walked in darkness have seen a great light”). Setting out a light this year, for me, is proclaiming the power and love of Christ, which I am trying so hard to continue to put my trust in. I want to feel hope. Not in the sense of having a good attitude but hope as holding fast to the deep-down belief that God’s love is stronger than evil, violence and death. So I, with you tonight, will light a candle instead of cursing the darkness, but that’s not all I’ll do. Window candles do not change policy, rebuild government, feed the hungry, or protect the vulnerable. But symbols and decorations have power nonetheless. They can be prophetic--- tokens of resistance, inspiration to keep on keeping on, and a shield against despair.

I went outside this past Monday night to see the conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn. It created a bright light in the darkness for the first time in 800 years. Some believe this conjunction occurred some 2000 years ago and created the Star of Bethlehem at the time Jesus was born, the star which guided the Magi to Bethlehem. Remember the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it. You are that light for the world. Like shepherds, go in a hurry. Absorb

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all that Bethlehem has to teach you. And then, like the shepherds, make known all that you have heard and seen concerning the Christ Child.

Credit is given to Rev. Debra Griffis-Woodberry for use of her sermon outline and excerpts of her sermon notes in the preparation of this sermon.