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From the Pulpit

Christmas Eve Meditation ~ Who Would Have Thought?

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ December 24, 2011

THE CHRISTMAS STORY

THE ANNUNCIATION

Luke 1:26-31

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

UNTO US IS BORN

Luke 2:1-7

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.

THE SHEPHERDS' WATCH

Luke 2:8-14

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!"

THE SHEPHERDS' JOURNEY

Luke 2:15-20

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.

So there's been some big news this month from the field of science in the search for signs of life. A few weeks ago there was an announcement by the Kepler Space Telescope program that just a mere 600 light years away from us there's a planet – now named Kepler 22b – that exists in what's called the Goldilocks zone of habitability meaning that its orbit around it's sun is at a distance similar to Earth's which *could* allow it to have life-sustaining characteristics.

And then shortly after that – in mid-December -- physicists at the Large Hadron Collider near Geneva announced they may be getting closer to discovering the elusive Higgs boson which the media has infamously dubbed "the God particle". In smashing 2 protons together the LHC is narrowing down the range for the mass of the still hypothetical particle to somewhere in the vicinity of 125 gigaelectronvolts (which is not to be confused with the 1.21 gigawatts needed to power the flux capacitor in a DeLorean time machine).

Signs of life. Some signs are as faint as a slight dimming of a star to the Kepler's photometer that suggests a slim hint of a habitable planet. Some signs are as elusive as a quickly decaying particle that *may not even exist*. And then some signs of life are as certain as the heartbeat on a fetal monitor or an early spring crocus pushing aside the last snow or the gleam of Christmas surprise in a young child's eyes.

Signs of life: that's what Christmas is all about – it's about the sign that comes to us in Christ to tell us that God is alive and with us. It's about our hope for a sign of life in our *own* souls to awaken and experience something bigger than the usual mediocrity of our days. A sign of life is what the Angels gave to the shepherds when they told them to go to Bethlehem and find the one born to bring light and hope to the world.

The Angel says, "*This* will be a sign to you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Of all the ways that one could finish the sentence, "this will be the sign to let you know that God has come to live among you", I think the *last* thing one would expect to hear *next* would be the words, "he will come as an *infant* wrapped in *peasant* rags and lying in a cow's *feeding trough!*" And yet... the Angels tell the shepherds to leave their sheep and follow the sign.

Now, although ministers may sometimes talk about their church as a flock, in truth we really don't know much about sheep. For instance, a pastor walks up to a New Zealand shepherd and says, "If I can tell you exactly how many sheep you have there, can I keep one?" The farmer glances at his large flock of sheep, chuckles, and says, "Sure." The pastor looks carefully at the sheep and then says, "347." The farmer is shocked and says, "How did you know that?" The man replies, "I'd rather not say. Can I have my animal?" "I guess so," says the shepherd. The pastor picks up an animal puts it under his arm and starts to walk away. "Wait!" yells the farmer. "If I can guess what you do for a living, will you give me back my animal?" The man thinks for a minute, and says, "Sure." The shepherd says, "You're a Presbyterian minister." The pastor is shocked and says, "How did you know *that?*" The farmer replies, "I'd rather not say. Now can I have my dog back?"

So, yeah I don't know much about sheep but in backpacking through the Bureau of Land management wilderness areas over the years I've noticed something about the herds and flocks that

are out grazing there. The shepherd is always out living with the sheep – camped out with them in a little covered wagon or tent. I mean Cowboys *sometimes* ride the range and wranglers... I don't know, wrangle things I guess... but shepherds live and stay out with the sheep all the time. And I'm told that's because sheep are about the dumbest livestock ever and so you always have to watch over them or they wander off and get cast on their back, or fall down a ravine, or end up the main course at a wolf buffet. To tell the truth, in biblical times being a shepherd was not a job many people wanted. But that had nothing to do with the intelligence of the sheep or the requirements of the job; people just thought of shepherds as undesirable outcasts.

So why did the Angels give the sign to *shepherds*? I mean these were not clean, polite, respectable people. Biblical scholar and historian Joachim Jeremias notes that shepherds were "*despised* in everyday life." The Mishnah, a collection of ancient rabbinical teachings, refers to shepherds in demeaning terms. One passage describes them as "incompetent"; another says no one should feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit. Shepherds were at the bottom of society's social structure; in fact a shepherd's testimony was not even acceptable as evidence in a court of law. A shepherd was considered a social pariah. So *why* did the angelic announcement of Christmas good news come first to shepherds?

Perhaps there are two reasons. The first is that God wanted us to know that no one will be excluded from the love and grace that comes to us in Jesus Christ. To come *first* to this group on the bottom of society's list is to say that God is available to all people. No matter what we may have done or failed to do; no matter how low we have sunk or how far from God we may feel; nothing we have missed or messed up – not our nagging doubts nor our hard hearts -- *nothing* can keep us from God's grace or exclude us from God's love. The good news of Christmas is for all of us. If you feel far from God today just know the distance is not on God's side. Tonight is a night to hear the good news that Jesus was born to bring *us* new birth and a fresh start!

The other reason for choosing the shepherds is because they are the perfect picture of what Christmas is all about. Shepherds out watching their flocks by night, out living with the sheep, are a powerful image of what God did in sending Jesus to live among us.

Our God is a God who camps out with us; who knows what it is to experience the storms of life, who has slept on the hard ground of grief, who has felt with us the sharp wind of tragedy. And in the midst of it all we are not forgotten or forsaken; God is right there with us. That in fact is the name given to the One whose birth we celebrate tonight: Immanuel, which means, God with us.

There was a young boy named Emil who went to a Sunday school where they were asked to memorize Psalm 23. After several weeks of practice they were ready to recite the Psalm in front of the congregation one Sunday morning. Emil was selected to go first and say the Psalm from memory all by himself. He was so nervous that his little mind went blank and he couldn't remember hardly any of the words. So Emil just stood up in front of the congregation and said, "The Lord is my shepherd... and that's all I need to know!"

He's right. To all God's lambs here tonight; for all God's old and woolly sheep gathered in this place -- and even to those of us who sometimes feel like God's rejected goats -- *this* is the good news of the gospel: "The Lord is our shepherd... and that's all we need to know!"

The angel announced the good news to the shepherds but then it was up to them to decide what they would do. Maybe some stayed behind because they were tired; maybe some felt they had to remain and watch the sheep; but for those who responded, it was a sign of life –a sign not just of Jesus' birth, but of theirs as well. May it be so for us as well on this Christmas Eve celebration. Glory to God in the highest!