

The Ministry of the Shepherds
St. Philip's
Christmas Day 2017
P. Potter

I speak to you this morning in the name of God,
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Amen

I. Introduction

Today we celebrate the incarnation of God in human form – the Word made flesh. The incarnation is a fulfillment of prophecy, the fulfillment of God's covenant with humanity, a further expression of God's steadfast love for all people. The Word that was in the beginning, came down and dwelt among us. As we've sometimes noted, John's narrative plays with the words of Greek and Hebrew so as to convey the notion that just as God dwelled in the tent that housed the ark of the covenant carried by the Israelites through the wilderness to the promised land, so too has God chosen to dwell, to 'tent' among us. And I think that metaphor of 'tenting among us' is particularly apt when we consider the way many of our homeless neighbors live ---

and the shepherds too, who heard the call and went to the manger at that first Christmas so long ago.

II. The Ministry of the Shepherds

As we wonder about the shepherds, spoken of in the Gospel of Luke, we can find a model of ministry for our own lives. As the Gospel of Luke tells us, these shepherds were living in the fields, dwelling in tents or just on the ground looking after their flocks. If you've ever had the chance to drive across the mid-East, you'll be familiar with the harshness of the landscape and the image of a lonely shepherd out in that vastness looking after a herd of sheep will come easily to mind. So those shepherds were out there in the fields (not really fields as we might think of them, more like a dried wasteland with meager shoots of grass and weeds appearing every now and again). But they were out there, those shepherds. They were visited by angels and then went to Bethlehem to see 'this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made know to us.' But other than rounding out the attendance at the stable, those shepherds seemed to have little purpose other than offering a representation of common

folk witnessing the birth of the Christ. Most of the time, frankly, many of us read through these words and think of the carol, “Angels We Have Heard on High,” and give little further thought to the matter.

But let us pause for a moment and think about those shepherds – for while they certainly were common folk, they offer us a model of faith and ministry. Recall that the shepherds were ‘living in the fields,’ outside the bounds of popular society, less beholden perhaps to the norms and values of established convention. And we know throughout Scripture (and history) how often God speaks to those who are outside the establishment. God speaks to those who will listen. And perhaps that listening requires us and then invites us to dwell outside the conventions of our world (in the world, but not of the world as many faith traditions would have it). And as we step away from the conventions of the world, perhaps we become like the shepherds - more open to encounter with the Divine. So we too are encouraged to live apart, in the fields, away from the tumult of our towns, our countries, our societies – in spirit at least if not physically.

After the visitation from the angels, those shepherds went down to Bethlehem to check things out. Now recall that, contrary to the Christmas card imagery, Bethlehem at the time was not just a sleepy little out-of-the-way village. As a suburb of Jerusalem and the city of David, it was full to capacity (no room at the inn) with folks going to register in compliance with Roman orders. No room for Mary and Joseph and likely little patience for those unkempt, and – pardon me, but have you ever slept with a herd of sheep – rather malodorous shepherds. But they braved the perils of the town anyway. And, unlike those town dwellers and travellers who could lock up their possessions in their houses and treasure chests the shepherds left all their possessions on the hillsides. Driven by their encounter with the Divine, those shepherds left their material possessions and risked their physical security to find the Christ child. And we are invited to do likewise – to leave it all behind as we take of the risk of faith.

And then? Having witnessed the miracle in the manger, those shepherds proclaimed what they had seen and heard and all who heard were amazed. Let us picture this in our minds – a crew of folks from what might charitably be termed the margins of society, not our kind of people you might say, went about proclaiming the glory of the incarnation, and all who heard were all amazed. The ability of those shepherds to amaze people with the tale of Christ’s birth surely was not the product of their social status, or their learned erudition, but came from the authority given them to proclaim the good news of God with us, the good news of *Emmanuel*. And all who heard were amazed. In a beautiful elliptical narrative loop, it all comes back to hearing – whether it be hearing the call of the angels or hearing the proclamation of grace from the most unlikely of sources, let us all have ears to hear.

III. Shepherds Among Us

As we think of our own lives, let us take a lesson from those lowly shepherds, let us consider how to be in the world but not of it – of how to be sufficiently distanced from the conventions of the world that we can hear the small still

voice of God, speaking to us every day. Taking a lesson from those brave shepherds, let us consider how to take the risk of faith, leaving aside concerns for our possessions and our personal security in order to follow the guidance of the Divine. And, taking a lesson from those outspoken shepherds, let us also proclaim the good news of the Gospel not worrying about our status (remember the prophet Amos, who was a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees?), our articulateness (remember how Moses resisted God's call by saying he couldn't speak well?). Let us be receptive, brave, and bold in our encounters with the Divine. And all who hear will be amazed.

I can't help but think of the many ministries here at St. Philip's over the years. Ministries of outreach and inreach, from the Outreach Committee to the Jones Girls, from the Choir and Sanctuary Guild to the Greeters and hospitality team, from Pastoral Care to Neighbourhood Ministry, and many more examples of and inspiration for ministry. People who have heard to call to ministry and responded, who braved the cold and the dark to act on their faith and

bring comfort to the needy, and who spoke out in meetings with the powers that be and in the community at large to call attention to the need to serve our homeless neighbors, or refugee neighbours, our hungry and lonely neighbours, our needy neighbours. Receptive, brave, and bold – hallmarks of ministry. And look where that has taken us all – more to learn certainly, much to do definitely - but still we can look back and see how our receptiveness to the Divine, courage to take the risks of faith, and boldness in proclaiming the Kingdom of Heaven have brought through the our parish ministries real and tangible achievements – a host of miracles many would say.

So, taking a lesson from those shepherds, let us be receptive enough to hear the words of God, let us be brave enough to take the risk of faith, and let us be bold enough to proclaim the Gospel to all the world. Let us be able to take inspiration from the humblest quarters of our society, let us be strengthened by the example of those who have risked everything to experience the Divine encounter, and let us be emboldened by the knowledge that the authority of our

proclamation comes not from us but from what we pronounce – the Kingdom of God has indeed come near. Merry Christmas.

Let us pray:

Holy One, as we celebrate your incarnation in human form, we ask for the grace and strength to live out your truth in our lives, so that we may hear your Word, have courage to respond to it, and be bold in proclaiming it. We pray in the name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen