



SERMONS THAT WORK

Feast of the Epiphany

Shepherds and Flocks

[RCL] Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7,10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Let me share with you a bit of parable: in spite of what the Christmas pageant might have us believe, and with great respect and love for pageant directors everywhere: shepherds aren't always with their flocks.

Once in a while, they get a day off too. A chance to go into town, get a pint at the pub or a hot meal perhaps. When they get there, they're dirty; they smell bad – like the animal dung that clings to their feet. Some say they were raised in a barn, and maybe they were. They're poor; they're uneducated; some might have a criminal record – most of them weren't born here, though the animals don't seem to mind.

But the good people of Bethlehem do. Shepherds just aren't the type of people decent folk would have anything nice to say to. So when they come to town, they're not anyone we invite into our homes, or make a room for in an inn. Instead, we might tell them they can go sleep in the barn, where we can ignore them, and keep them invisible.

I picture one such shepherd, late in the morning, as he prepares to return to his flocks, he's slowly gathering his few belongings in the stable where he spent the night,

To him, this stable's a special place. A palace, really, by his standards, where he can spend a night on a pile of hay, instead of the hard ground; a place with a bit of roof overhead, instead of the stars – or this time of year, rain. To him, this stable is a place of comfort, and even if the town folk won't speak to him, it's a place where he can occasionally hear a human voice instead of just sheep.

He's been coming here on his time off for almost two years now. Ever since that night, when this being had come and stood before him and his mates – they would swear it was an angel – telling them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah." The angel said to them, "Go, find this child, wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." So together they figured the sheep will be okay; they'd better check this out.

He's been coming to this stable ever since. It's where he can breathe a little easier: away from the sheep and the wolves that hunt them. Away from those people who won't meet his eye, or return his "good morning" when he walks down the street.

It's his place of peace, even if to the people of this tiny town, it's just a stable, and he's invisible to them.

That's why he is so surprised this morning. He hasn't seen them here before. As they park their camels, and give them a bit of water and feed, he looks at them with caution. They're from away. Their clothes have a layer of dust from their journey, but it's plain they are expensive. They're not wearing anything that signifies class or rank, but from the look of them he knows: they're of a station in life far above his own. Smart guys, he figures. Maybe they'll just go into the inn and leave him be. But then, they stop.

They speak to him. They see him.

One of them wearily asks, as if for the hundredth time: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? Your king in Jerusalem said we'd find him here."

This shepherd thinks to himself, "Well, not my king," though he wouldn't dare say that aloud. Still, when you spend your life tending flocks, you get a knack for reading a look, a sense of intuition. Looking into the eyes of the one asking him this question, his gut tells him this isn't a bad guy. He's just a traveler with a purpose.

But to be safe, he asks him, "Where you from?" And the stranger's only reply is, "East of here, we're far from home." Maybe this visitor is trying to be careful too. As if he, too, needs to be cautious in this foreign land, and hide something, or someone.

The shepherd considers leaving this conversation where it is, at this point he could easily be getting himself into trouble. But hey, the angel told him, "Do not be afraid." So, taking a leap of faith, he asks: "Do you mean that little kid we were told is the Messiah?" When they stop in their tracks, he figures, in for a penny, in for a pound. He goes on, "Yeah, I saw him. I was with my flock when we saw angels – it's true – angels! They told us to come here, so we did. We saw him. I remember. He was just a tiny thing, but the angels said he's the Messiah. That was a couple years ago, but I believe those angels were right; I do." It's more than he's ever said to the people in this town.

And the travelers just. Stare. At. Him. For what seems like forever, until one says, "Yes, that's him."

And another says, "The king in Jerusalem said he was born here, so we thought we'd better check here first. "We have come to pay him homage. We want to bring him gifts. Together these travelers say, "This is wonderful news."

And now it's the shepherd's turn to stare.

He can't remember ever saying anything anyone would consider wonderful news. Feeling now a bit safer, he goes on, "Well, he was born here, but he and his folks were only here for the counting, they've gone back home. They were from Nazareth. I'm headed back to my sheep. It's on the way, I can show you how to get there."

"That would be awfully good of you, shepherd," says the traveler. "We're following a star, but it'll be good to go with someone who has seen him. You do know where to find him, right?"

He probably does, but do we? That's the question before us today – where do we find Jesus? How do you suppose we would answer that magi's question?

This morning we move from the season of Christmas, the moment God takes on human flesh and form and lives among us – into the season of Epiphany. And while Christmas may be a hard act to follow, in a very real sense, everything about our faith is a celebration of Epiphany. Epiphany literally means "revealing;" it's about taking away the veil that covers something. Epiphany is about unveiling what Luke promises us: that "all flesh shall see the salvation of God"; and what Isaiah foretold, that: "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together."

Epiphany is our time to explore how Christ is revealed to us. Each of our Epiphany stories start with this one last trip through Bethlehem, but they hardly end there. For epiphanies continue through our own experiences of where we find Jesus.

Today, in the words of the theologian and educator Howard Thurman, we find there is more to life than we have previously imagined. Angels hide in every nook and cranny, magi masquerade as everyday people, and shepherds wear the garments of day laborers. The Good News of the Gospel is this: Christ is revealed to us by both shepherds and kings, by people of all stripes and walks of life. So that when we seek out Jesus, we find him not only with those around our dinner table, or with whom we sit next to in church, but also in the invisible ones who mow our lawns, who shovel our snow, who bag our groceries.

And oh, my sisters and brothers, when – not if – God gives us this kind of opportunity, then we can never again take anyone for granted. Regardless of whether they're rich or poor, whether they look like us and talk like us, whether they're Democrat or Republican, God gives us the chance to see Christ in everyone we meet.

And if this really is how God acts, what choice do we have but to consider every human being as a sign of holy love?

Now that's a game-changer: that's an Epiphany. Thanks be to God!

*This sermon was written by **the Rev. Deacon Geoffrey Smith**, Chief Operating Officer of the Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society. It was delivered at St. John's Episcopal Church in Essex, Connecticut.*