

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of  
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**  
*Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 24, 2019 (Christmas Eve)*

Shepherds don't get a whole lot of respect in the Christmas pageant. No kid really wants to be a shepherd —because they all want to be kings! I mean, I guess it beats being a donkey, because at least you get to wield a stick. And it's fun to terrorize the sheep. So there's that. But you have to wear a dish towel on your head, there's no frankincense involved, and to add insult to injury, when you have a live baby Jesus, as we do every year, no one's even looking at you.

But the shepherds *do* play a crucial role in our Christmas story. And so, I told this year's crop of shepherds to take heart. Because maybe next year they'll get promoted to king. No, I didn't say that. But I did tell them that they're much more important than they might think. I'll get to that in a minute.

But as with many aspects of the Christmas story, we've sentimentalized and sanitized the shepherds. We all have shepherds in our nativity sets. We set them up next to the fluffy white sheep. We envision them wandering the countryside with their staves in hand, content in their pastoral duties. But shepherding was hard work! And basically no one was willing to do it except those on the very bottom rung of the social order. In a sense, shepherds were the immigrant dishwashers of their day. Working hard, getting little respect, barely even being seen, trying to support themselves and their families. Shepherds were the denigrated undesirables of society, vilified as liars and thieves, scapegoated when things went wrong. They were shepherds because literally nobody else wanted the job. It was lonely and smelly and thankless and low paying.

And the amazing thing is that the Messiah's birth is announced first to the shepherds. The angel of the Lord comes to these poor, marginalized outsiders; to the lowest of the low; to society's untouchables, and shares this incredible news. Those beautiful and well-known words are spoken directly to the shepherds out tending their flocks by night. "Fear not, for behold, I bring you tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

So from the very beginning of the story of Jesus, of God entering the world in human form, something radical emerges. These "tidings of great joy" are first shared not with kings and queens, but with shepherds. To the ultimate outsiders; to the poor and maligned; the least and the lost.

So this Christmas, we're left with two questions. First, what does this say about God? And second, what does this mean for us? Well, the fact that the Savior of the world came first to those on the margins of society, says that God is doing a new thing; that the entire order of things is being flipped on its head. That, in the words of an old prayer, "things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new." And that is both exciting and terrifying.

And what does this mean for us? Well, at one level, if we want to incorporate the Christmas story into our lives, church is the last place we should be. I mean, I like singing Silent Night by candlelight as much as the next guy. That feeling of peace and fullness and joy and mystery can and should be experienced and enjoyed. And being here on this night is a good and joyful thing. For many of us, it just doesn't feel like Christmas until we've sung all the familiar carols and seen the church decked out in all its splendor. And I am delighted you are here to celebrate Christmas with us at St. John's.

But then we need to take it outside. We can't afford to leave Christmas at church. *The world* can't afford for us to leave Christmas at church. Remember, Jesus wasn't born in some remote and sanitary birthing room. Jesus was born into real life, into the mud and muck of the stable. Into the midst of those who desperately needed to hear a message of hope.

So, to truly celebrate Christmas is to take the celebration beyond these walls. To go tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born. The Christmas altar compels us and propels us to bring peace and good tidings to a world that so desperately needs a word of hope and healing.

And we are all included in this. Because Jesus also comes to the parts of us that feel like outsiders; to the parts that feel broken and hopeless; to the parts that feel paralyzed by fear and doubt. Jesus comes first to those who need him. And we *all* need him. In different ways and at different times. But always and forever. And that's the miracle; that love came down at Christmas right into the very midst of our lives.

There's a short poem by the African-American theologian, educator, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman titled *The Work of Christmas*. I think it speaks eloquently of what it truly means that God came first to the shepherds. And why we can't leave Christmas at church.

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with their flocks, the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among the people, to make music in the heart.”

May you experience the joy and wonder of this night. May you receive the Christ child with open arms and open hearts. May you, in the words of Howard Thurman, “make music in the heart.” And may you have a very Merry Christmas.