

Come, All Ye Shepherds

Sermon by Walter G. Edmonds

Damascus United Methodist Church

Isaiah 52:7-10; Hebrews 1:1-4; St. John 1:1-14

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In very ancient times, that is, in the Old Testament millennium Hebrews held shepherds in high esteem. Descended from seminomadic herders, shepherds became patriarchs, kings and prophets. We have only to mention the names Jacob, David and Amos to make the point. You may remember Job, a rich man in his day, was said to own 14,000 sheep, and the Good Book indicates that 100 sheep were consumed a day in Solomon's Court, (so much for sheep burgers, you burger and fries lovers). But as the Israelites settled in Canaan and turned to farming, the attitudes toward shepherds began to change.

So when we think about the shepherds on the hills of Bethlehem, probably only five to seven miles from Jerusalem, we might consider that these men were of modest means. They probably owned a small flock or worked for someone else for a relatively low pay. Their sheep would have been raised for selling in the temple courts for Sabbath sacrifice, and probably those who ran the business bought the animals for a minimal price and sold them at a much increased fare in the temple market. The shepherd's life was harsh, and frankly lonely, for as you might even know now, animal husbandry was looked down upon by many, and the smells and the dirt of the animals left their mark on this somewhat outcast lot to the general population.

They were dressed in rude cloaks of homespun wool or sheepskins. They carried simple instruments to hold sway over their animals: one weapon, a goat's hair sling for hurling stones at attackers; another a 30-inch-long wooden club embedded with iron nails, for wolves, hyenas, jackals, lions, bears, and yes, human thieves. The sheep wandered over unfenced, rocky ground, nibbling at slim amounts of green forage during the day, the

shepherds right behind them with their water bag and collection of dates, olives, cheese and bread. At night and even sometimes during the day with the scorching heat, the shepherds curled up in crude huts made of poles and thatched roofs, the huts strategically placed to be look-out points for the flocks. At the end of the day the sheep would be lead by the shepherd to a camp, perhaps a cave or a stone-walled sheepfold. In warm months the shepherds often slept with their animal charges out in the fields. The basic tone of their life was unending responsibility and stalwart protection.

So, God's decision to bring the first announcement of the birth of the Son to these tired, lonely and third rated citizens of Israel was carefully calculated in my thinking. From the beginning God has wanted those who are weighted down by the struggles and necessities to just eking out an existence to be thrown open to their Creator's desire for their lives. From the beginning God has wanted every human being to be given the at-oneness with Him, so that he or she can be lifted into the almighty love that is at the foundation of life itself. Jesus is the heart of that love. The infant Jesus is the perfect gift of pure love from God, in this case, humbly, most humbly set in a cave stable where the best place of rest for this embodiment of God's perfect love, is the "presepio," the manger trough where animals would find nourishment. God's love which is meant for all comes to us laid in a presepio, so that no one is outside of the child's eyes and touch.

All of us at times will find ourselves as lowly shepherds, trying to eke a life in the midst of struggles, responsibilities, injustices, and what the world might call unfairness. All of us for at least a time will find ourselves on hills that remove us from the family, the community, the culture we've grown accustomed to, where we feel alone and overwhelmed with cares and dangers that are right before us. All of us at one time or another will know the hopelessness of the dark night when life seems overshadowed by the coming of death or the loss of what seems life has been all about.

And tonight, as two thousand years ago, the angel of God comes to all of us shepherds, and says the same perfect words, "Fear not, for behold I bring you great tidings of great joy. For to you is born this day in the town of Bethlehem, a Savior, who is the Christ, the anointed One, to set you free.

Now come, and go and see him in the manger, and worship Him with all your hearts.”

Come all ye shepherds and haste thee to his mother Mary, his father Joseph, and his dear sweet presence, lying in the manger. Amen.

(Much of the shepherd material came from *The Story of Jesus*, an editorial piece from the volume, found on page 75 called *Shepherds Keeping Watch*.)