

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church  
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson  
Christmas Eve 2016 Year A

In the beginning was a God who, out of love, initiated an intimate and life-giving relationship with God's people, who set within their hearts a yearning for goodness, and who promised to be with them to the end of the ages.

It took many of God's people to allow the story of our salvation to unfold and to continue to work within our lives and world.

It took those of God's people who readily said "yes" to God's call to follow (like Mary and Joseph and the shepherds in our story); it took those of God's people who sat on the sidelines and watched for a while, allowing their inner faith to be like the tightly-held petals of a beautiful scarlet rose, gradually, carefully, timidly opening until the rose bursts forth in fragrance and beauty (like Martha and Thomas) ; and those of God's people who questioned and challenged the bearer of the truth (like Peter, or the Pharisees), and finally those of God's people who pushed away the truth, rejected the love, and sought to destroy its source (like Judas and Pontius Pilate).

It took many of God's people to allow the story of our salvation to unfold and to continue to work in our lives and world.

The first of God's people to be greeted by this good news were shepherds in the fields outside of Bethlehem. We often think the symbolism of the shepherd's first hearing the glorious news as a revelation that the good news came to the outcast first, that Jesus was born so that those outside could be brought inside the circle of love, and that there would be no boundaries that the saving embrace of Jesus could not erase. I believe that to be true, and I would like us to examine more deeply the symbol of the shepherds, for I believe there is something more there to uncover, that allows and instructs us to be one of God's people that participates in the unfolding of our salvation story in our lives and our world.

For it is true that shepherds were outcasts, considered impure by the religious community, and described as "ruffians", unworthy to testify in court due to their reputation of being thieves and criminals, and yet, I imagine their isolation was even deeper than that. For when you have been pushed away, told you are unworthy often enough and by enough people, when your only companions have been equally distraught, when pain from a broken heart has radiated

throughout your body and soul so much so that you feel it in your very being, when you have spent enough time in the fields, shunned by decent and religious people, when you've felt disappointed by God, or overwhelmed by grief, I believe the shepherds in the field, people we know, or people we have become, can stop caring about getting into the circle, and can give up on religion or God. Some of you may know this place of spiritual wilderness that the shepherds experienced. Most of us do at some point in our journey.

And my sense is that, if you've given up on God at any point in your life, you might imagine how you would feel when God arrives in blazing glory. Probably terrified, as were the shepherds. But their reality shifts when they reach the stable in Bethlehem. For, in Jesus, God comes in a way that is far from frightening to them. Jesus comes in the form of a baby, who holds the same vulnerability and helplessness the shepherds did. He was one like them, one who would know despair and isolation, one who would experience rejection and ridicule, and one who would cry out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" and yet, he was God incarnate.

The baby in the manger means more to us than reaching the outsiders, although that is a core role of the church. It means that Jesus is born for all of God's people, including those who have been outside so long that they've given up on God, those so down in despair, so blue at this time when everyone else is celebrating, those who look in the mirror and wonder who this is who they have become, for it seems to be the worst of themselves. The baby in the manger is the good news we must believe in, as we are sitting in the pews, celebrating and living the good news in Christ. We must believe God is sending angels out into the fields, wherever they may be, hospitals, recovery units, prisons, homeless shelters, refugee camps, cancer units, or into our hearts.

The shepherds, these desperate, isolated, and spiritually empty souls, upon hearing the angel's proclamation, dashed into Bethlehem. They went with haste: skipping, charging ahead, dancing with glee, for that place of yearning for God, for reconciliation, for hope and goodness, in their souls burst into flame within their hearts.

I think the yearning for God is placed within us so deeply, it never truly goes away. And the angels in their glory ignited it and said, "come and see for yourself", for this baby is for you.

The shepherds dashed into Bethlehem to experience the Christ child for themselves and then went out, driven by joy, singing along the way, to everyone they saw. Experiencing Jesus changed them. They would go back to their ordinary lives, but their lives were now extraordinary, for they had a different heart through which to see the world: a savior has entered the human story.

When I was in the shepherd's field in Bethlehem this fall, there was a magnificent church. Its roof contained small circular skylights, about 1' in diameter, through which the rays of the sunlight would pour, giving the impression of light emanating from the heavenly hosts. But what immediately caught my eye was the altar: there were four bronze statues of shepherds holding up the altar. I was captivated by them. I stared at them, reflected upon them, closed my eyes and imagined the sculptor fashioning them, trying to discover God's voice and purpose in these remarkable art pieces. Each one held a different pose; each one carried a unique expression, each one evoked a distinct emotion, and yet together, they were holding up the altar, the place where Jesus' love is broken open and revealed to the world.

One statue was kneeling, forearms extended and held together, with a sheep lying flat on his chest, its head leaning against the man's throat, shepherded and protected by his body. This stance said to me that, in order to hold up the altar of the world so Jesus' love might be broken open and revealed in the world, we need to hold those who rely on us for protection and safety tightly to our hearts. Being a Christian means being intimately and directly involved with those around us who are distraught, disenfranchised, or in despair and in need of our shepherding.

Another statue was looking upward, eyes wide, mouth revealing a sense of fear or trepidation. One can almost see a reflection of the expression of Mary, in the famous Pieta statue. Mary had been told that a sword would pierce her soul and it did. This shepherd's expression speaks the truth that, to hold up the altar of the world to allow Jesus' love to be broken open and revealed in our world, we must walk into and gather up the suffering of the world, and allow God to make it holy, allow God to redeem it through Christ's love.

The statue I came upon as I walked around the altar had its head bowed so low, with the shepherd's forehead nearly touching his knees, with arms extended above, as though reaching toward the heavens. This was a posture of deep humility, of a complete surrender to the God; the shepherd found before him in the manger Humility, devotion, surrender. These attributes are what we need to hold up the altar of the world to allow Jesus' love to be broken open and revealed in our world.

The last statue I encountered was of a strong, muscular build. Power was perceived, conviction detected, and a solidness of thought portrayed. This shepherd had a kind, almost gentle face, one I wanted to touch. There was strength with gentleness in this person's stature. This was last clue I unearthed for what is needed to hold up the altar of the world and to allow Jesus' love to be broken open and revealed in our world: strength set within gentleness, something Jesus portrayed throughout his life.

It took a loving God and many of God's people to allow God's story of our salvation to unfold. The shepherds hold a key to understanding how we continue that story. We are to look out into the fields and to see what God is doing and meet God there. And we are, through our devotion, humility, awe, suffering, strength, and gentleness, to hold up the altar of the world, where Jesus' love will be broken open and revealed in our world. As I invite you to the altar on this holiest of nights, may you, like the shepherds, come with haste to experience the living Christ; may you take a part of Jesus' love with you out into the world, and may you proclaim the good news to everyone, so that we all may live into the new creation, of which Jesus is the first-born.

It took God and many of God's people to allow our salvation story to unfold and continue to work in our lives and in our world. Tonight, let us find our place within that salvation story. Some of us will readily say "yes" to the invitation to "Come and see for ourselves"; others will hesitate, still others will challenge with probing questions, while others will reject the love freely offered to them. It is the warmth of feeling of this night, the peace in your hearts as we sing *Silent Night*, the gentleness found in the soft candle glow, the abundance of our welcome tomorrow at our community meal, that you are invited into and that you invite others into, which is yours this day and always, as part of God's unfolding story of redeeming love.

Amen.