

Christmas Eve • December 24, 2011

St. John's Lutheran Church, Alexandria, VA

Rev. Braun Campbell

Luke 2:1-20

"Shepherd"

It was just an ordinary day that led into an ordinary night. The shepherd woke with the dawn out there on the hillside, far away from the early noise of the villages. He had a good number of sheep in his charge, nearly 40, including those that belonged to his household. The rest of the flock came from other families in the village, yet he cared for them just as he did his own. That was his role. He enjoyed spending the time outdoors, even if being a shepherd wasn't the most prestigious position; while it wasn't glamorous or lucrative, he did the best he could. Gathering his flock, he led them out for their daily routine in the hilly pastures. He searched out paths for his sheep to make their way through the rocky, dangerous terrain of the countryside to get them to the fields of grass where they'd spend the day grazing. The field he'd visited that day had a well in it, so he was able to draw water to fill nearby troughs for his sheep. He'd always take care to stay in sight of the flock to comfort them, letting them know that he was watching over them. It's a good thing that he was, too. Later in the day, while leaning on his staff and playing a simple tune on his reed pipe, he saw dangerous eyes staring out at his flock: a mountain lion was on the prowl, hungry for fresh meat. Letting go of his pipe, he had grabbed his sling and a stone from the pouch that hung at his waist. Whistling through the air, the rock hit the big cat and sent it away limping. Seeing clouds coming in, the shepherd collected his sheep and brought them back to the sheepfold, where a few other shepherds had already begun to do the same. As he called his flock into the pen, the shepherd checked each of the sheep for injuries or insects as they passed through his legs to make sure they were well. This shepherd and his companions could spend several days like this out in the countryside before having to return to a village for supplies. As night fell, they gathered around the campfire, covering themselves with their cloaks, and made ready to rest and to watch over the gathered flocks, now numbering well over a hundred sheep. An ordinary day that led into an ordinary night – except that this would be no ordinary night.

In the dark of the night, something extraordinary happened. An angel of the Lord, God's messenger, appeared to the shepherds. This divine being brought the glory of the Lord, God's perceptible presence, into that night, striking fear into the hearts of all those who saw him. But with that glory came a message of grace. It's hard to imagine just what might have gone through the shepherd's mind as he heard the angel's message: the Messiah, the Christ, God's long-promised deliverer, had been born – and in little Bethlehem, of all places, an unlikely location and ordinary town that served as stopover for travelers, some six miles outside of Jerusalem. This was amazing news! But if one angel gave the shepherd pause, he would not have much of a chance to process it. An entire division of the army of heaven suddenly arrived to sing praise to God, announcing God's peace to those shepherds and to all people.

So what does the shepherd do in response to this extraordinary happening? He rallies his companions, hurrying over to Bethlehem to see the sign and the Savior that God has brought into the world. Lo and behold, they find exactly what the angel had described in the newborn child wrapped in swaddling cloths, just as they had been told. Do you think that the shepherd took the time to plan what he would say to the child's mother if and when he found her? How could he possibly share the impact of seeing a host of angels? Planned or no, he delivered the message, reporting what the angel had told him about this child. Imagine those shepherds taking leave of Mary and Joseph in the middle of the night, celebrating what God had revealed to them. People must have wondered what was going on as those men left the village to return to their flocks and to their previously ordinary lives. **The extraordinary had broken in to the ordinary**, and the world would never be the same.

Tonight is an extraordinary night. God is again here with His people, ordinary human beings just like you and me, proclaiming the birth of the Savior. So how is it that God would come to such unlikely and imperfect people as you and me? Like that shepherd on the night of Jesus' birth, each of us has been going about our ordinary lives. We have done nothing to be worthy of God's announcement of a Savior for all peoples in this baby who would one day give up his innocent life on a cross. Jesus is God's love for his people made flesh. He is the Messiah who would break the hold that the devil had over every man, woman, and child, freeing all who trust in him for salvation. He has come to bring you and me back into relationship with God. His glory is here tonight; you are in God's presence. And yet, **in Jesus, the extraordinary is breaking in to the ordinary,** even now.

In His incarnation, the Son of God did not come to us with all the pomp and circumstance that we might think required for a king. Instead, he came simply as a baby to poor parents in a small village where he lay as he was found by the shepherds: in a feeding trough, wrapped tightly in the cloth bands of a newborn. In a short while, we will celebrate the mystery that is Holy Communion, where God's Son comes to be with us tonight in flesh and blood and bread and wine. As we welcome him among us, we too will sing with the angels and archangels, "Glory to God in the highest!" for God is again breaking in with something extraordinary into our ordinary world. Here at the Lord's table, the perceptible presence of God comes to us and gathers us together as His flock. Tonight, the Savior whose birth was heralded by shepherds is now here to be our shepherd.

This Christmas, Jesus has come to break in to your ordinary life with God's extraordinary grace, to be your shepherd today and every day. He has come to lead you on the paths that will see you through the rocky and dangerous terrain of each day's journey in your life. He has come to give you living water and divine food to sustain you through life's struggles. He stays with you, always nearby, so that you can take comfort in his presence and look to him in all those times when your strength and confidence begin to fail. He has defeated the devil, that prowling lion who seeks to snatch you away from His flock. Nothing can steal you away from the God who loves you and has sent His Son to be your shepherd. Once you are his, living in God's grace through Jesus, your previously ordinary life will never be the same.

That first Christmas morning, the shepherd and his companions went out from Bethlehem having experienced the extraordinary breaking into the world. Going out from this place tonight, how will you respond to the report that they shared with Mary and Joseph that this Jesus is the Savior? Our hymns and songs this night echo the angels' message, and we even ask, "*Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong?*" That's a good question, and one that we should ask ourselves. The shepherd's story is your story. You have heard the good news of great joy that God has sent into the world for all people, you included. **Jesus is here to be your shepherd.** That's the reason why he was born. It's why he died and why he rose, breaking the power of sin and death.

The Savior is here as a shepherd, for you. Blessed Christmas!

Amen.