

Shepherds: Meeting Jesus
December 24, 2006 11:00 p.m.
Luke 2:1-20

A rich widow lived in New York many years ago. When she died, she left all of her considerable estate to God. Her unique bequest sent the probate court and various attorneys into a frenzy. In order to settle the estate, lawyers made doubly sure that all the proper procedures were followed to the letter. They prepared a lawsuit which named God as one of the parties. A summons was then issued, requiring God to file a legal response. The summons was delivered to the sheriff, whose responsibility it was to serve such documents. When the sheriff's final report was delivered to the court, it read, "After due and diligent search, it has been determined that God cannot be found in New York City."¹

For hundreds and thousands of years, people have been on a quest to find God. And God has been waiting to be found. People were having great difficulty finding God and so God chose to make their search much easier. God came to be one of us, and this time the instructions for finding God were explicit. The shepherds were told, "You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And so the shepherds followed the directions to find God and did indeed meet Jesus. Their journey to Bethlehem reviews for us the steps of faith, the path toward finding God.

The shepherds were keeping watch. Even late at night they were awake, attentive, and alert.

And hear indeed they did. With their ears, the shepherds heard. Their watch was rewarded with the appearance of angels, messengers of God. The shepherds heard the angels tell of Jesus, of who he was and what he would do. Hearing this good news transformed their fear into fascination.

Having heard, the shepherds acted. With their feet, they ran to Bethlehem. They went from their familiar field to the place where God was to be found. They rose up on their two feet and searched for the signs of God's presence: the swaddling cloths of warmth and protection.

Their search was rewarded, for with their eyes they saw the promised child. Through the child they saw the gift of divine love, a love so great that God gave the only Son that people might meet Jesus and believe in God.

So overwhelming was this experience of meeting Jesus and being embraced by love, the shepherds ran in enthusiasm to tell others. So exciting was the news that they could not keep it to themselves. They raised their voices to tell the story and to share the path to meeting Jesus.

The shepherds teach us the steps to faith.

Keep watch for God to come. Faith grows by keeping watch for signs of God's presence. Faith is fed by a yearning, a desire, an ache, a longing. If we are asleep or inattentive or apathetic, we fail to see. But when we keep watch, we are sure to hear God stirring in our midst. Even if God was not found in New York City, God can be found in Lafayette and San Francisco and Richmond. God is alive and well and God can be found in Mississippi and Mozambique. God can still be found in Bethlehem and even in Iraq, if we keep watch.

Listen to the invitation to be in relationship with God. The invitation is offered to all people. The shepherds were nobodies, outcasts, and yet they were the first to be invited to meet Jesus. We only need ears to hear God wooing us into relationship.

Respond to the invitation by saying "YES!" and by running to meet God. Follow the path of the faithful trodden by pilgrims through the ages. The stepping stones of worship, prayer, scripture, and service lead us to a place of encounter with Jesus.

With the eyes of faith, we see the holy Child. We behold his glory. We are embraced by his love. And we are changed forever.

We can't hold it in. Our hearts are set to singing and our mouths cannot contain the joy, the hope, and the love we now know. We want others to know so we run back to share the good news.

Watch. Listen. Respond. Behold. Share. These are the steps of faith taken by the shepherds that holy night, the steps of drawing near to God, the path to meeting Jesus and being forever changed.

A family was decorating their home for Christmas. One of the children was given the task of setting up the nativity set. He set Mary and Joseph and the baby in the manger. Then came the shepherds with the sheep and wise men with camels. The boy set them outside the manger looking in toward the baby. The mother started to protest and suggest that the figures needed to face outward so they could be seen. But she paused, recognizing the wisdom of the child. The message of Christmas is that we are called to meet Jesus, to hear his invitation into relationship, to see God's gift of love in his life, to receive that love, and to share it with others. The mother left the nativity scene as it was, with its characters turned toward Jesus, as they and she were meant to do.

My friends, God wants to be found anew by you this holy night. God has come and is waiting to meet you. You are summoned to meet the living God in the person of Jesus, the babe of Bethlehem, the man of Nazareth, the

Son of God. Once you answer the summons you will experience a love so deep, so profound that you cannot keep it to yourself.

A missionary named Oswald Goulter served in China for 30 years, including three years under house arrest. He would be released by the Communists if he promised to go home. He said he would and his missionary society sent him money for transportation. He went to India to catch a ship. Before leaving he heard that there were lots of Jews sleeping in the barn lofts in that city. They'd been denied entrance to every country in the world except that one. It was Christmas time. Oswald went to the barns and greeted the refugees: "Merry Christmas! What do you want for Christmas?"

"We are Jews," they replied, "and we don't observe Christmas."

"I know," persisted Dr. Goulter, "but if somebody gave you something for Christmas, what would you like?"

They finally mentioned some German pastries of which they were fond. He scoured the city and found a bakery that made German pastries. He cashed in his ticket home and took boxes of pastries to the Jews. "Merry Christmas!" he exclaimed. Then he wired the missionary society and said, "I need a ticket home."

When Dr. Goulter later told of that wonderful Christmas which he had shared in India with Jewish refugees, a student asked, "But sir, why did you do that for them? They were Jews. They don't even believe in Jesus!"

"I know," replied Dr. Goulter. "*But I do!*"²

God became flesh so that we might know God through Jesus. The lowly shepherds were summoned as royalty to meet Jesus on that holy night. Those nobodies became special somebodies, entrusted with the honor of bearing witness in word and deed to the love of God made visible. On this holy night, may we meet Jesus anew and so experience the transforming love of God that we go forth proclaiming with our voices and our lives that God is alive and well, alive in us!

¹ Rev. Rod Wilmoth, Hennepin Avenue United Methodist Church, Minneapolis, MN, via Rev. Don Shelby.

² Fred B. Craddock, *Craddock Stories*, ed. by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward (St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001), pp 141-142.

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