



Westminster Presbyterian Church
1200 Marquette Avenue
Minneapolis, MN 55403
(612) 332-3421
www.westminstermpls.org

Shepherd Joy

Timothy Hart-Andersen
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Luke 2:1-20

We began worrying about *Christmas in the Time of Covid* last summer.

Would we be able to celebrate it in person? Would the church be open by then? Would we get to sing our favorite carols? Should we order poinsettias and garland and wreaths? Would there be a children's pageant? What about Christmas Eve candlelight services? And - importantly for many at Westminster - would we have to go a year without *What a Wonder*, the Lithuanian folk carol sung in our church every year since the 1930s?

We were worried about the joy - that it might go missing. Hidden under layers of grief and all that has happened this year.

Now we're here, and in hindsight our concerns seem overdone. Christmas does not depend on *any* of what we worried about. We're *not* in the church building to celebrate, yet it's still happening. We can't sing the carols *together*, but we're still

singing them. We went ahead and ordered the poinsettias and greens to deck the halls. The pageant will be served up online at 4:00 on Christmas Eve. And *What a Wonder* is coming to us this year by video, later in this service – a project started many months ago by Amanda Weber before she even went on parental leave.

We will get there!

Riding my bike home through the neighborhoods of south Minneapolis the other evening, I became convinced there are more lights on people's homes than ever before. Maybe it's the mild weather, which makes stringing them up easier, but I like to think it's because we took Christmas into our own hands this year. We weren't going to leave it to the professionals in their beautifully staged sanctuaries. All those lights on our houses and apartments are colorful little acts of Covid resistance.

The joy is refusing to be held back. It's more resilient than we thought. It turns out it takes more than a pandemic to stop the story. It can be told in a thousand different ways. Christmas simply needs *someone* to notice what happens, someone to stop long enough to see the child.

In the Bible that falls to the shepherds. The account of the birth of Jesus might otherwise have slipped into the recesses of history, if not for the shepherds.

The story needs a witness – but why the shepherds? We might have expected someone with a little more influence. It’s a bit risky to leave it all to a handful of hillside farm workers who haven’t bathed in weeks and have sheep manure in their sandals. Maybe the innkeeper could have stepped outside to see the miracle that had just happened in the manger out back with the animals. He was a man with connections in town, someone who hosted people traveling through – a good way to spread the word.

Or, why didn’t the Magi play a more central role? They’re people of privilege. They get around. They come bearing wonderful, expensive gifts. They easily get an audience with Herod the Great. Wouldn’t it have been more effective if *they* had been the first to encounter the newborn Jesus? Think of how far and wide the story would have gone through their networks.

If anyone is truly innocent in the nativity narrative, it’s those Palestinian peasants out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. They’re minding their own business, when suddenly they become central players in history’s most impactful drama. Herod is really only a blip on the radar of the birth story. The wise ones from the east don’t show up until late in the game. Joseph has merely a supporting role. It’s really about Mary, the baby, of course – *and the shepherds*.

When Mary sang that God was “lifting up the lowly,” she may have had the shepherds in mind. Apparently, whoever sends out angels to announce good news had the same thought. The winged messengers flew not to those in authority or religious

leaders or those revered for their wisdom. No; that heavenly host hovered in the place where no one would have expected, above a ragtag little knot of uneducated sheep keepers.

Even as a baby, Jesus turns the tables on the powerful and privileged. It's central to the story. The prophets predicted it. Mary sang about it. And now, when the Messiah finally does show up, it's to those everyone would least expect. Jesus will continue like that: to confront the powers of this world throughout his ministry – eventually defeating even the power of death itself.

Imagine that: *good news of great joy for all the people*, entrusted to a clutch of night watchmen barely scraping by.

Luke tells us they live out in the fields – nomads moving with their flocks, like the itinerant Bedouins we've seen on our trips to the Holy Land, scattered across desert hills in tent camps. It's as if the angels show up in the night sky not above some great cathedral, where we might expect, but over those without homes, camped out under the stars in a city park.

The shepherds, like everyone else confronted by an angel in the Bible, show the requisite fright in the moment. I prefer the King James version here: *They were sore afraid* – so terrified their bodies hurt. They probably wanted to take off running across the field, scattering into the hills. But instead, they hold their ground to hear what the angels have to say.

Those with the courage to stay – even though they’re afraid; those with the wisdom to listen – even when they dread what they might hear; those willing to tell the truth – even if others don’t want to hear it; they’re the ones who help history move toward a new day.

One of the shepherds must have had to stay behind to end the flock while the others hurried into Bethlehem. The Magi, of course, have the luxury of traveling for weeks, leaving their affairs in the hands of their servants back home; the shepherds can’t afford to miss one day on the job. They don’t linger over the child; they hustle back to work.

I thought of the shepherds this week when I saw a video of frontline healthcare workers – orderlies, clerks, nurses – at the Boston Medical Center. They’ve been braving the virus wilderness daily for nine months, like others around the world, putting their lives on the line for others. Their hospital had just received news that the Covid vaccine was on the way. Some of the workers hurried outside in their scrubs and masks and face shields, to do a happy dance that has now gone viral.

In an interview, one of the workers said, “It’s such a positive turning point...receiving the vaccine...We wanted to highlight that, to give hope to everyone.”

When hope makes its way into the world, that story needs a witness, someone to share it – and the world needs to hear about it.

Those medical workers were celebrating *good news of great joy for all the people* – and then, *as did the shepherds*, they headed back to work, knowing that the arrival of the vaccine does not mean the instant end of the pandemic. Like the love and justice Christmas portends, the light of dawn comes slowly.

Of all the characters in the story, the shepherds seem to enjoy it the most. They can't stop talking about it. The Christmas story needs a witness, and it has several in the shepherds.

Unlike the Magi who quietly slip out of town, the shepherds go back to work “praising and glorifying God.” They comprehend the significance of what has happened: *this incarnation will change the world*. So, they return to work and make a lot of noise along the way. They do a happy dance right out of Bethlehem, all the way back to the fields.

That is *shepherd joy*, and the world needs more of it these days.

One of our elders sent an email a couple weeks ago. The subject line read, *God was working at Ridgedale today*. She had gone to the mall to shop for gifts for one of the children from the YWCA childcare program across the street from Westminster. Each year our church officers have a joint gathering in December, and they're asked to come with a gift to share with children in the YW program.

This year, for the first time, the YW sent the children's names and what their specific Christmas gift request was. Most listed toys, but some came with requests for clothing. One child had put down "socks."

The elder writes in her email:

"I chose a child with clothing and shoes beside her name thinking she must be very needy since there were no toys listed. I ventured out to Macy's as soon as they opened, to avoid crowds. Only a few others were there. I soon had my arms full of pants, shirts, shoes, and a shiny pink vest. I deposited the pile of clothing at the checkout counter and the sales person commented, 'Some little girl is going to be very happy! Is it your granddaughter?'"

The elder told the store clerk about the YWCA and Westminster's tradition of gifting at Christmas. She said she didn't know the little girl, but that she had said she would like some clothes for Christmas.

"Tears started rolling down her cheeks," the elder wrote,

"And pretty soon I was crying, too. Another customer - standing six feet away on her X on the floor - offered a tissue, and she too, had tears in her eyes. She had overheard the story and asked if she could buy a robe and slippers for the little girl. I accepted her offer, and while she was selecting the robe and slippers, another shopper approached.

He took a few bills from his wallet, sprayed them with disinfectant, and asked me to buy some books for the little girl. Of course, I did.”

“I had not expected,” the elder said, “To find a village of God’s people at a shopping mall. Oh, for the magic of Christmas!”

She had experienced *shepherd joy* – in spite of the circumstances of our time, she had experienced the kind of irrepressible trust that the world can be a better place and that we can love one another and that we can expect the dawn to come after the long, long night.

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.” (Luke 2:16-18, 20)

The Christmas story needs a witness – and who better than us?

Can we find our way through the night, through the injustice of our time, through the anxiety of these days, and make it to Christmas? That’s what we started worrying about last summer – would there even *be* a Christmas this year?

Well here we are, with the angels and shepherds, the healthcare workers and the shoppers at Macy's, and with our church - and we see signs of joy all around us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.