

“The Shepherds Came”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 25, 2022

Nativity of the Lord: Christmas Day

Psalm 97:1a, 6-12

Rev. Dr. John Wahl

Luke 2:8-20

Steven Hawking once said that *half the battle is showing up*. Woody Allen said that *eighty percent of success is showing up*. He also said that *ninety percent of life is just showing up*.

No matter what exact percentage you attribute to it, showing up matters. In the final verses of Luke’s birth narrative, we hear the shepherds say to each other, “let us go...and they went with haste.” (v. 15, 16)

At last night’s service, I shared some historical background about who these shepherds might have been: that most likely they were hired hands, tending sheep that they did not own, working the long overnight shift, out in the elements, away from their homes and families. I likened them to what we call *essential workers*: those who labor behind-the-scenes, likely not in an office but in stores or factories, out on the road at night, helping to ensure that all the rest of us want and need – food, clothes, medicine and more – gets produced, delivered, sorted and stocked.

These shepherds would have served crucial roles in this ancient supply chain: sheep were essential for food, clothing, and proper religious ritual observance. They likely got neither paid sick leave nor holidays off. If a sheep was lost to predators or the elements, you can guess whose paycheck suffered. It would have taken something pretty remarkable to make these field workers leave their flocks – or, maybe herd their flocks into town – and go, with haste, to find this baby that had been born.

I love the details you find when you dig into Luke’s story. For example, he says that the angel told the shepherds, *a baby has been born, and here’s the sign that the baby has been born, you’ll find that baby*. Wouldn’t it have been better to – like Matthew – raise a star in the sky to lead them to the right place. Instead, we’re left to imagine a troupe of shepherds and their sheep, wandering through

Bethlehem at night, peeking into every stable they come across to see if there is an infant sleeping in the feeding trough.¹

When was the last time that we chose to follow such a sign, to deviate from what we planned to do, to temporarily let go of our routines or responsibilities to simply show up? What earth-shattering news might be required for us to change our intended direction and pursue a different course?

If the last couple of years have taught us anything, it is that we must be able to adapt to changing circumstances. When so much of the world shut down in March of 2020, it forced us to re-evaluate what showing up means. What if you can't be there in person? What if a portion of your family, friends, and neighbors are suddenly out of reach? What if the places where we are used to going, and the activities we need and want to do, are suddenly no longer available to us? What happens when our lives literally depend on maintaining a safe distance? Do we not show up? Or, do we learn new – even if sometimes inconvenient, uncomfortable, or difficult – ways of being with and for one another in community?

Despite all the obstacles of time, location, and responsibility, the shepherds came to the manger to confirm this good news they had been told and to see this baby that had been born. We're told by Luke that when they leave the stable they share this good news and that everyone who hears it is amazed. Who, we may wonder, might the recipients of this good news been? Did the shepherds find them in their own barns, or tending other animals? Were they gawking at the sight of an entire sheep-herd wandering through the streets of town?²

Showing up can sometimes be a wonderful sight to behold. I am amazed when I hear of the lengths some neighbors will go to help one another. It warms my heart when I hear children – often now grown – talk about the adults they consider to be their second or third set of parents. I am inspired each time I drive into the parking lot and think of how our friends with Homeless Hookup CLE impact the lives of our neighbors most in need; showing up in their neighborhoods with food and blankets, haircuts and hygiene kits.

Think about the impact that these shepherds showing up might have had on Mary: not yet married and 85 miles, by foot, away from home; standing in a stable among the animals; the new mother of this young child. Luke tells us, in one short verse, that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (v.

¹ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bible Worm Podcast*

² Mitzi Minor from *WorkingPreacher.com*

19) Surely, those words included the ones shared with her by the angel and Joseph and her cousin Elizabeth; words of gossip or criticism when people in Nazareth found out that she was pregnant; unwelcoming words they encountered in Bethlehem – the town of Joseph’s ancestors – that said, *no, they could not come inside*; the utter lack of words of congratulations, interest or encouragement when she became a mother.

In addition to all of these spoken or unspoken words, Mary could now add the testimony of the shepherds who came down from the hills, sought out this child, and shared with her the angel’s message of good news. Though the stable was eerily quiet, the hills had come alive with the sounds of the heavenly host breaking into song.

This, of course, is how community works. The complete truth rarely will manifest in one person – we need the knowledge and experiences of others to help us discern how to live. Mary takes in the information as it comes to her, accumulates it, continues to show a gentle curiosity, but do not try to control her seemingly out-of-control situation. Surely she knows how vulnerable she and her child are, but Mary stays attuned to the words being spoken in the community around her because there is always more to be unveiled, more to understand.

Christmas reminds us that as God came to be with us in Christ – born in unremarkable circumstances, sharing in all our vulnerabilities – so we need also to be with one another; to show up. With our words – and just as importantly, our actions – we help each other to better understand what the truth is: that in community, life can be about more than just ourselves. It’s impossible to say whether physical and emotional presence – being there, showing up – counts for 50 or 80 or 90 percent (that is something we can each ponder in our own hearts) but Luke’s gospel teaches us that, for God, showing up – the Word becoming flesh, taking the initiative to be with us and among us – means everything.

“To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11) “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace” (v. 14) and goodwill to all. Amen.