

**First Presbyterian Church
Southampton, New York
“Celebrating Christmas like the Shepherds”**

Luke 2: 1 – 20

December 24, 2014

Christmas Eve

It’s hard to believe, but Christmas Eve is finally here! For a month we’ve been running from store, to school, to church, to grandma’s house, to work, to the neighbors, to the store again, to Uncle Charlie’s, back to home, and back to church, and to here and there and everywhere else! It’s been pick up this... and drop off that... and wrap up the other. We’ve cooked, cleaned, vacuumed, scrubbed, driven, spent, charged, eaten, and worked ourselves sick! And after weeks of this frantic frenetic pace, Christmas Eve is, as I said, *finally* here!

Most of the demands on our time have been met; most of our extra work is done; most of the parties are over; the programs and pageants are finished; the presents are all wrapped. And here we are, together, and sitting down! Actually resting... pretty much at peace: *and finding space in this one calm hour to hear the news that the Messiah has come... that the kingdom of God is here!*

How fitting, then, that the gospel should bring to us these words this evening:

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified... The shepherds said to one another, ‘Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened...’”

I wonder if we have any idea how *like* the shepherds we are tonight? I wonder if we understand how closely our story parallels their story, on that first Christmas so long ago? Like us, the shepherds were also busy, and stressed out, and burdened under a ton of responsibility. Like us, they had their flocks to care for: they had real sheep, we have our families, our clients, our patients, our students... not sheep, maybe, but no less in need of our loving care. Like us, the shepherds had to be there for the flock, day and night, rain or shine, winter and summer, in sickness and in health.

They probably didn’t have enough time for their families. They probably wished that the flock wouldn’t be so demanding. They were tired, overworked, and not very well respected. All complaints which most of us utter, at one time or another. Like life in terrorist-infested 2014, life was dangerous for the shepherds, too. They had to do battle with bears and lions and wolves; they had to fight hand to hand with robbers and rustlers; they were exposed to the harsh elements of the desert each and every day.

If *anybody* ever needed the chance to sit down, take a break, be at peace, and hear some good news... the shepherds were surely the ones! And Luke tells us that, on that one night, for those few moments... they got just what they needed! The shepherds were invited to step away from the stress and the worry and the danger and the work, and come

to Bethlehem to see the Messiah... to meet the family of the Savior... to see with their own eyes the fulfillment of God's great promise of the ages!

Just like we're doing tonight! The shepherds went to Bethlehem... we've come to this sanctuary; but we both hear the same glorious story of God's redemption! We're both given the same message of salvation! We both receive the same glorious hope! The God who, two thousand years ago, filled the hearts of the shepherds with a joy which no earthly power could destroy, offers the same joy to our hearts tonight... right here, right now.

We come to this service, as doctors and lawyers and teachers and homemakers and retirees and parents and children and so on... but make no mistake: tonight, in our souls, we are ***all*** really shepherds! They are here in Southampton with us... we were there, in Bethlehem, with them.

Tonight, with them, we gather around the same manger. With them, we worship the same blessed child. And with them, we shrink in awe at the incredible truth that Almighty God is ***here... with us...*** part of our lives from this time forward. And with them, we hope to leave this place as changed men, women, and young people... as people whose lives will never be the same again, because we've heard the message of the angels: that God has ***got*** us! And that He's never going to let us go!

You know, no one knows for sure just exactly what happened to the shepherds. After being given a front-row seat to the world-changing events of Christmas, we never hear from them, or about them, again. All we know for certain is that they eventually returned to their flocks. They went back to fighting with bears, and chasing away lions, and standing up to robbers, and freezing in their sandals every night.

But they did so, as Luke tells us, as changed men. For they went *"glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."*

In just a few short minutes, we, too, will go back to our bears and our lions and our robbers and our sleepless nights. Will we return to our flocks as ***changed*** men and women next week? Will this moment and the message of this glorious night send us back to our jobs and our homes and our schools as people who glorify and praise God? As people who know that God's Kingdom has come? As people who will walk in the light of God's hope, even when the darkness of this world tells us to throw in the towel?

We've been to the manger; we've heard the good news; we've been let in on the greatest story in history! With the shepherds before us, may we take it all back to our waiting and needy world... and may we spread the word which the angels spoke:

"There is good news of great joy which will be for all the people! Today a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord!"

That's the good news of Christmas; that's the best news of our life! In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.