

Morning Meditation – December 21

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

I wonder what kind of GPS did the shepherds have to help navigate them to find Jesus laying away in a manger? We have conflated and combined Matthew's story of a star leading the Wise Ones to Jesus with Luke's narrative. Re-read the passage above. Just as there is no donkey and no innkeepers who refuse to rent Mary and Joseph a room; there is no mention of a "star of wonder, star of night, star of royal beauty bright, westward leading still proceeding, guide us to thy perfect sight."

Moreover, I don't know about you, but when I go with haste, I tend to make a lot of wrong turns. When I am in a hurry and life gets blurry that is when I have unforced error after error.

Moreover, what compelled the shepherds to overcome their fear and go searching? That is really my question in these dwindling days of December. How do I overcome the fear that sits and stirs and simmers in my soul to step out faithfully in search of the sacred that is also searching and waiting for me? It is so much easier to stay where I am comfortable spiritually and intellectually and emotionally. Our brains are hardwired to tell us to stay put. Our brains will say things like, "Whoa! Let's be careful not to put the cart before the horse. Slow down there, Wes, do you realize how much work that will be to dismantle your racism? To try to change the world? To really let God's love loose in this world? Can you really make a difference? Do you know how many people will resist you? Why not just binge watch something on Netflix instead?"

My mind might not really say all that, but it does calculate and compute the cost of trying to change and can tend to overemphasize how many obstacles there will be. The truth is that there will be obstacles to letting hope, peace, love, and joy loose in our lives in these days and every day in 2021. There are costs. People will react and respond in less-than-positive and support ways. We will be called, "Foolish" or "Naive" or worse! We will feel that foolishness, we will see how long it takes to make a difference, and we may get lost along the way.

I wonder if the shepherds took a wrong turn. If they had to knock on every barn door, peak and peer inside to see if by chance there a baby was inside or just the curious stares of cows saying, "Hey (or hay), I am trying to eat here!" And I wonder if the shepherds knocked on wrong doors, "Um, we were just wondering if the Son of God just happened to be born in your barn?" Confused person who just opened their door to a group of shepherds, "Come again?" I really want to know did they bring their sheep along with them!!

Perhaps it is good that Luke simply says they went, the shepherds figured it out along the way. They kept on searching because you and I keep on searching. The promise of this part of the Christmas story is that in the midst of our wandering we find the wonder of the sacred right there in our lives. May that truth be encountered and experienced by you and me on this the longest night of what has been the longest year. And may God's hope, peace, love, and joy enfold you now more than ever.

Prayer: Guide my feet, O God, while I run this race...help me slow down to a savory pace that lets my soul keep up today. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 22

¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Who exactly does the “all” in the verse above refer to? Were Mary and Joseph amazed by what the shepherds said? To be sure, the shepherd’s story of how a choir of angels suddenly start singing to you, telling you to go search for a baby in a barn laying in a manger, and then that the shepherds were able to find them is pretty amazing.

Or maybe, the shepherds after knocking on other barn doors had congregated a crowd of people with them. “Come on,” they said, “We are searching for the Savior in a dirty, dusty, drafty barn.” That would probably convince others to join in, I say with sarcasm in my voice.

No, I think the “all” refers to you and me. We are amazed by this story each and every time we tell it to others. We are amazed at the way God works and what God is up to in the world comes in the form of the fierce and faithful Mary and Joseph; comes in the form of shepherds; comes in the form of a grand entrance in a barn. A barn! We are amazed that God moves in the lives of those who are on the fringe and fray then and now. We are amazed by God’s hope, peace, love, and joy that burn brightly before us and within us. We are amazed of the powerful and powerful pregnant pause shared between Mary and Elizabeth. We are amazed that God enters the world through an unwed teenager who is the God-bearer. We are amazed that God invites us to let God’s love loose through our lives in these days.

I invite you today to pause and to ponder the amazement you have sensed around you. Make a list and litany of the ways hope seem possible with a vaccine now being administered; with worship still happening; with moments your heart is strangely warmed. Make a list and litany of the way peace has been discovered within and around you when you looked at Christmas lights or make an altar or wrote prayers for yourself in the coming year. Make a list and litany of the way love has been let loose to you and through you, then thank those whose love makes a difference. May a list and litany of joy that you feel when you sing along to Christmas Carols and watch *A Charlie Brown Christmas* special.

Our lives flow on in endless song even here and now. May that truth surround you and sustain you every single day.

Prayer: Gracious God move in my life with an amazing grace and help me find my voice to name the ways Your presence makes all the difference. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 23

¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

Here we are on the day before Christmas Eve. I know tomorrow will be different than years past. I know Christmas Day will be different than years past. I know that I grieve not being able to sing together, the holy hum of the sanctuary, the beautiful processional of children with the creche scene, the moments that the tiny hairs on my neck stand on end, and the joy of being able to wish everyone a “Merry Christmas” at the end of the 11 pm service.

I know that this year is different and difficult. Yet, I return to the truth that the first Christmas was difficult too. The challenges Mary and Joseph faced, their fierce faithfulness, and their prayerful pondering sings to my heart this year.

To ponder is to pause. To ponder is to be open. To ponder is actively wait, watching in wonder or with curiosity for what is unfolding around you and with you. To ponder means that we stand in the straw next to the shepherds steeped and surrounded by the sacred. To ponder is worship without words but from the depths of our souls. To ponder is the prayer posture I want to bring to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day this year.

To ponder is to reflect on what has been. Take time today to look back at the good, the bad, and the ugly of this last year. Take time today to see what God has been up to in your life over the last twelve months.

To ponder is to reflect on what is, right now, in this present moment, on this day before Christmas Eve. To open your ears, eyes, hearts, and whole life to God who is soaking and saturating every second of our lives.

To ponder is to look forward to what awaits us, not with fear, but a faithfulness born of the promise of Emmanuel, God with us and for us each and every day.

To ponder is my invitation to you right now.

Prayer: Here I am, God. Here You are, God. Here we are together. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 24

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The shepherds went back home forever changed. I wonder if they returned to their normal life which no longer looked the way it did before they encountered and experienced the One who has eternal love dancing in his eyes. Did they go back to the field where the angels had sung to them, but that holy hymn will forever hum in their hearts? I wonder this because I wonder if tonight might cause a shepherd-like shift in my soul? Can I return to normal life, especially after this year?

Tonight we tell the sacred story that is at the heart of this year. The question every year is the same, how will tonight change everything? Are you and I willing to let the truth of Emmanuel, God with us and for us stir your way of being? Or will we force ourselves back to familiar patterns especially because everything has felt out-of-whack this year?

We are on the threshold of the mystery and marvel of God's grand entry into this world. We are about to encounter the holy on a Christmas Eve unlike any in our lifetime. Can you and I come with anticipation? Will we come with expectation and open hearts to God's presence moving in our midst? Or do we just write this year's Christmas Eve off as unusual and a story we will tell next year when we can return to our normal schedule Christmas celebration?

This night still changes everything. This night, especially this year, has a different potency and power and possibility. This night can still evoke our praise and glorifying God. This is still a holy and silent night of God's love entering our hearts, homes, and whole world. Deep in my heart, I do believe, that God does arrive in our lives and gives us strength to sustain us every day. I pray for each of you that you will find your inner-shepherd voice to sing out wherever you are.

Jesus our Christ is born.

This changes everything.

This changes me.

Prayer: O come Thou Long expected Jesus, meet me in the hopes and fears, help me sing out with Hark! The herald angel choir that Your hope, peace, love and joy are more than words; this is the truth that is a light to our lives. Amen.

Morning Meditation – December 25

God of Goodness, we give you praise the light of your presence in the ordinary birth of the child. We give you praise that unobtrusively you are in the center of human affairs, involved in the struggle of life, and sharing human experience. We give you praise that out of compassion you take our part, and open to us a new way of life. We pray that this day we shall be able to see its true glory. - *Caryl Micklem, Contemporary Prayers for Public Worship*

I pray for God to meet you in the midst of your life today.

I pray for the holy to hover and hum in the midst of the less-than-perfectness of this Christmas; the could have beens and should have beens of this year.

I pray for hope of Christmas to be found in phone calls and Zoom calls and moments of connection that let us know that one of the most beautiful parts of humanity is sharing our support, care for each other, especially this year.

I pray for the peace of Christmas to be found in gazing at the lights on our tree, listening to music, quietly looking out at the world that is both familiar and strangely different.

I pray for the love of Christmas to burn brightly within you and around you; to be renewed as the way God works and what God is up to. Open us, O God to You as the composer and conductor

of life. Awaken us to join and lend our voice, actions and presence to Your sacred symphony. Help us find the shepherd-like courage to tell the good news of great joy from the mountains. I pray for the joy of Christmas to be found anew and afresh, especially in serendipitous and surprising ways on this day.

Most of all, I pray that the mystery and marvel of Christmas would continue to ground and guide you every day this year and as a New Year dawns in one week.

Let the glory of God's presence here and now shape our soul for the living out of these days.

Amen. – Rev. Wes Bixby, Christmas morning 2020