

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Robert R. Hansel on the First Sunday of Christmas, December 26, 2010 at The Chapel of St. Mark in Port Royal, South Carolina.

## **The Wisdom of the Shepherds**

As we read, once again, the wonderful stories that tell about the birth of Jesus we have to be struck by the variety of messengers. The voices that proclaim the Messiah's birth cover the entire spectrum: all the way from the highest order of angels in Heaven to the lowest form of humanity—simple illiterate shepherds from the backwoods. Maybe you wonder why the most important message in all of human history would be entrusted, at least in part, to a ragtag bunch of rustics who wouldn't know a single word of Holy Scripture and couldn't tell Cherubim from a cedar shrub.

A few years ago someone gave me a book titled **A Shepherd's Look at Psalm 23** by W. Phillip Keller. That book helped me to understand something very unusual and special about shepherds. Keller explains a skill that I have come to think of as The Wisdom of the Shepherds. What shepherds have—that not very many other human beings possess—is their highly trained eye, an astute power of observation gained only through years of experience. Year after year, shepherds watch over the same physical places. They know exactly how things ought to be. They keep an eye out for anything that's changed, anything that's unusual or different: a newly fallen tree, a snake's den, a wolf lair, a sinkhole, a flooded stream. Any change, however small, to a shepherd's eye, spells potential danger to the sheep that are being protected from harm. Shepherds have to be absolutely sharp-eyed, reliable, credible. The story of the boy who cried "wolf!" teaches us how crucial it is that shepherds have to be absolutely dependable, believable, or else they're worse than useless. Their patience, their single-mindedness, their focused attention to basics is exactly what makes shepherds valuable.

Consider their part in the Christmas story. When they're told of the impending birth at nearby Bethlehem they don't stand around speculating, researching ancient documents, or developing elaborate theories. They do what shepherds do: they go and see for themselves. It's only what they see with their own eyes that they know to be true. It's only after they've checked it out in-person that they head back home to shout out the wondrous news.

Paul Tillich, the most learned and articulate of all 20<sup>th</sup> century theologians, author of huge volumes of Christian theology, was once asked during an airport interview, what he considered to be the "bottom line" on all his study and research. He replied, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Tillich wasn't trying to be clever or in any way to dismiss or demean the importance of academic knowledge and wisdom. His trust was based on the real-life experience of those who lived and wrote their stories of personal encounter with God. He was just saying that the truth that is convincing and really begins with a completely different kind of wisdom—the wisdom that's based on everyday living, wisdom of the eyes mind. That is a wisdom I have come to think of as The Wisdom of the Shepherds.

Early on in his ministry Jesus was being pressured by his detractors and opponents to prove to them that he met the scriptural qualifications to be the Messiah, the Chosen One. He doesn't engage in philosophical, historical, or theological arguments—no biblical quotations or doctrinal creeds. He simply says, “Come and see.” Jesus, in effect, is pleading for The Wisdom of the Shepherds. He invites them to see firsthand, that, in his presence, the sick are healed, those who have nothing at all—not even bread to eat—find nurture that satisfies their hunger, and those who have no hope at all find a reason to keep on living. And here's the important thing: scripture reports that those who accepted his invitation to “Come and see” always went away converted in heart and mind.

Even the enemies of Jesus—take, for instance, the Centurian at the foot of the Cross—saw with their own eyes the courage and dedication of one who would suffer and die in order that people might see the love and forgiveness that God offers to all of us. Looking at that deserted and dying figure on the Cross, a hardened and cynical Roman soldier had to admit, “Truly this is the Son of God.” Do you see? It's The Wisdom of the Shepherds at work.

Well, the message seems perfectly clear to me. Though it's now been two thousand years since his birth as the baby Jesus, Immanuel—God with us—is still around us every day. The continuing blessings and power of Jesus will be obvious to anyone who pauses long enough to take a good hard look.

Beyond the headlines about bloodshed and violence, the oppression and poverty, the selfishness and greed that are reported to us daily, you're invited to look harder and look more deeply. In the small stories, in the fine print, you will discover God's hand at work right now in medical miracles, lives of genuine honesty, hardworking parents, and compassionate acts of mercy and love.

The challenge, of course, this night and every day of the years that lie ahead, is to continue faithfully looking for those signs of a good and gracious God through the patient and skilled eyes of a shepherd. The promise of Christmas is that The Wisdom of the Shepherds is still the wisdom that works. **If you take the time to look, you WILL see.**

Thanks be to God.