

## **December 20 – Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Go, Tell It on the Mountain

Go! Tell!

Luke 2:8-20

We are just a few days away from Christmas. Whenever I hear the story of the shepherds I am profoundly moved. Since most of the land in Palestine was owned by rich people who lived elsewhere and shepherds could not afford to pay these people grazing rights, they camped on this land illegally. Also, they had to work on the Sabbath, breaking a commandment, and they were rarely at home to attend the synagogue because of their flocks, so they were also seen as notorious sinners. Being branded lawless sinners meant they were forced to live on the edges of society. They were a necessary evil, in most people's minds. You needed them, for wool and lamb were important, but you would never invite a shepherd over to your house for dinner.

It is to such as these that the angels were sent to share the good news. Think about what that moment would have been like for the shepherds. They had been told that if they saw God it meant that they would die. To all of a sudden have their dark night turn bright and have heavenly messengers telling them an incredible story of the messiah being born in a stable, it is no wonder that they were afraid.

After the angels left they discussed what to do. We usually think, well it's obvious. They should go to Bethlehem and see the baby! I think the conversation was more protracted. Questions like: "Did we really hear this message right?" or "So what difference is it going to make to us?" and "Whose going to have to stay behind?" and so forth would have filled the night air. Yet finally the message was too compelling. The people of Israel had been waiting for a long time for God to send the Messiah. If the words of the angel were indeed true and it was happening, they wanted to see it. Even more compelling was the idea that this Messiah might really make a difference for people like them. He was not born in a palace but a barn. And so they went and found the baby. Then they told Mary all about the angelic vision and their moment in history ends with these words: "The Shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

The spiritual we are lifting up today is the one we have been singing as our closing song all during Advent. "Go, Tell It on the Mountain" was first written down in 1865 in a collection by John Wesley Work Jr. In its day it was a song of celebration reminding the slaves that even they had good news to tell. Remember that many plantations tried to keep the Christian faith away fearing its message of equality and liberation. Yet no matter what the rules, the Good News of Jesus spread because the slaves told others the message of salvation, of hope. They saw it as their task.

It is a song that has been reworked many times to fit different needs. During the Civil rights moment the chorus was changed to end, "Go tell it on the mountain to let my people go!" It became a song of liberation and of hope for a new time and place.

Advent is supposed to be a time of waiting and of anticipation. Part of the meaning of this spiritual is that too often we get stuck watching and waiting. There are times when we need to get up, get moving, and get involved, just like the shepherds had to make a choice to either stay with the sheep, or see this thing God was doing.

One of the problems is, "How do you know when what you are hearing is a word from God?" We hear people saying that they know what to do to fix the problems that are facing us. They are so confident. Yet others equally confident tell us something else. Both sides ask us to get involved. They want us to quit waiting and do something. What do you do? This call to listen for the word of God is harder than we want to admit. Even when we might hear it, we still are not sure. We are like the shepherds on the hillside deciding whether to go into town and see the baby. If you believe that God has spoken, of course you will go. But if you are doubting the vision or the message, maybe not.

For me, the answer to this question of how do you know, comes down to several criteria. For one, is the message surprising? I have rarely found God takes the trouble to confirm what I already believe or know. My calls from God always leave me feeling unsettled, asking, "Can this really be true?" just as what must have happened with the shepherds. Also, messages from God are never about violence towards others but

always messages of love, forgiveness, tolerance and more. Keeping this in mind helps me sort through some of the chatter that surrounds all of us.

More important is the question: "How can God tap you on the shoulder?" For the shepherds, the answer was pretty obvious. They just went about their business and angels appeared. I doubt that will happen for you. I believe you will hear God's tap on the shoulder when you mentally prepare yourself to move into action. When you believe that God has something for you to do, a message to share or something else, and are ready to do it, you will usually hear from God.

Sometimes that word will come in the words of a friend or acquaintance telling you about some new project, and a light goes on inside, and you think I want to help. Sometimes you read or hear about something and the same response happens. Other times you learn of a need and begin to ask, "What can I do?" The words of this carol remind us that we have to move from thinking to doing.

So, what message do we have to share? I was just reading an article about a church that began an intensive evangelism effort. In the beginning everyone was resistant because they didn't think evangelism was their job. When the leader asked for a show of hands of people who had never invited an acquaintance to church almost all hands went up. The leader said, "Make it a point this month to not only invite someone but offer to pick them up or at least sit with them if they come." Then she went on to ask, "How many of you have ever helped out in the community, at the food bank, or some community project or helped a neighbor in need?" This time almost all of hands went up. "How many of you have mentioned you go to this church when doing this work?" "How many wear your church name badge when volunteering elsewhere" No one raised their hand. The leader said, "When we help we need to do it in the name of Christ. We need to let people know that people in this church care. This is evangelism." One attendee said, "But that is so simple. Inviting someone or wearing a name badge. Anybody can do that." "Yes," was the reply, "but you aren't doing it." We have good news to tell. We are challenged to share it by our words and our actions, just like the slaves strove to tell the good news even in the face of oppositions.

Think about who needs to hear this message of Good News? These are people that you come in contact with on at least a weekly basis. Many of you will go out to lunch today following this service. The wait staff and cooks and dishwashers are like the shepherds of old. They rarely make it to church because they are working. We maybe assume that they don't want to go to church. Is there a word you could share with them that would lighten their day and let them know God loves them? Are you going to be involved in any activities this week through a club or volunteer opportunity? Is there a way to let people know you attend this church? Is there a way to share the hope of this season? Is there a way to offer love, compassion and forgiveness?

I want to share an event that just happened. I get together with the three other United Methodist Clergy here on the peninsula. Sometimes, Tony Brown, the pastor at Port Townsend brings his daughter Miriam with him. She is four. When we last met she was with us and Julia, pastor at Port Hadlock, asked Miriam if she would like to pray for our meal. She, like most four year olds got embarrassed and so dad did the prayer. We thought nothing about it. A little later a man who had been dining alone behind us stopped at our table as he was leaving. He mentioned seeing the interchange about prayer and asked if there were certain special prayers we say over the food. He was from Neah Bay and a member of the Makah nation. He mentioned that he had attended the Catholic church early on but had not attended any "Christian" church in some time. He was surprised that he was having a conversation with four ministers but when Julia mentioned that there were no specific prayers but that we want to teach our youth to be grateful for what God has given us and so we ask them to pray he smiled. "I get it." He then said he would be inviting his granddaughters to give thanks for the blessings of food. He said, "It is important to give thanks." It was a delightful moment of grace all because we stopped to say grace!

We have good news to tell. Why are we silent? Go Tell!