

December 6 – Second Sunday of Advent

Rise Up Shepherd and Follow

Searching and Seeking

Luke 2:15 and Matthew 2:1-12

When you begin to look at this carol you immediately sense a problem. It was the wise men who followed the star, not shepherds. We realize that the song harmonizes the stories found in Luke of shepherds abiding in the fields and Matthew's story of the wise men or kings, but why? Some suggest that by replacing Matthew's priestly travelers with persons of lowly estate the slave songsters subtly created a revolution in status for themselves. They became the wise seekers because they were following the star that leads to the place where salvation is found. The slaves would more likely identify with shepherds than wise men. This song represents their longing to follow the star.

This song again brings up the concern of plantation owners who were hesitant for slaves to become Christians. They thought that if slaves experienced spiritual liberation, they would also want physical liberation. From Colonial times, laws were put in place to make sure that both the enslaved and the slaveholder understood that this was not to be. In 1664 Maryland was the first colony to pass a law stating that baptism had no effect on the social status of slaves. Many other states followed suit. Later, some southern theologians went so far as to assert that slaves had no soul justifying treating them as property instead of as human beings.

The lyrics for "Rise up Shepherd and Follow" would have given many a slave owner great concern. They would not want their slaves singing about rising up. Slave revolution was always a concern. They are also encouraged to follow the star, which could have been a metaphor for the North Star that many followed out of slavery. They were also told to listen, which could be a reminder to pay attention to the details of your escape and listen to the conductor leading you north. And most of all they sang about leaving; forgetting your flocks or we could just as easily say, your slave obligations. The slaves knew what it was to be ripped away from home and family and herds. They were singing about what they knew and what they would have to do. It was a song

celebrating the birth of the Christ Child but it was also a song of revolution and liberation.

So, beyond the interesting history of this carol what does it say to us today? The Christian faith is all about searching and seeking. It makes me first of all ask, what star is guiding me today? All of us have that one or few organizing principals around which we shape our life. Have you reflected on what guides you in your interactions and decisions, especially in those times when you just do what comes naturally? If your star is power or wealth or control you are going to make certain life choices. If it is service, love, and faith you will make radically different choices as to how to spend your time and your resources. You will interact with people in very different ways as well. We are reminded this Holy Season that there is a star from God and we are asked to follow it. We need to ask how well we are doing at this task, especially in a time like December, when all the busyness of the holiday season can rob it of its true meaning and purpose. Find your Polar Star of Faith and follow it.

This carol also asks what are we willing to leave. The shepherds were told to forget their flocks and seek the Messiah who was born in a manger. Jesus' birth was one of solidarity with the poor and the outcast. Shepherds were part of the outcast of their community and often very poor. For them to witness this miracle they would need to leave their flocks. The challenge given to the shepherds by the angels and sung about in this carol, for me, symbolizes in our day and age all of the stuff that we have, and asks us how important is that stuff? Often we think our stuff brings meaning and value to our lives. I have heard people say, "I don't know how I could live without...." I see people who purchase bigger and more expensive whatever's to impress their neighbors, friends, and families. What are we willing to leave for our faith? Jesus challenged the rich young man to leave all to follow him. When he refused Jesus said, and I am paraphrasing here, "It is harder than you think to let go of your stuff and follow me."

Now I am not advocating that we need to sell all we have as a symbol of our faithfulness to God. But I want us to ask the question, "Does our attachment to our stuff keep us from being as faithful as God would intend?" I have been in churches where it

was a struggle to allow community groups use of the building because they might mess it up. I am proud to be serving a church that sees part of its mission to the community is to make its building available. When the hold on our stuff reduces our ministry as a church or an individual we need to leave it.

Michael Slaughter, who has built our United Methodist Church in Ginghamburg, Ohio into one of the largest UMC churches in the nation, wrote a book some years ago with the title, "Christmas Is Not Your Birthday." He reminds people that Christmas is about the birth of Jesus and asks the question, "Why do we spend all this money on stuff for us during this time?" He challenged the people in his congregation to give one dollar to a special mission project for every dollar they spent on gifts, food, parties, cards, etc. for the holiday. When this started everyone laughed at him and said, "No one will do that." He kept preaching it. Now this congregation raises hundreds of thousands of dollars each holiday season. Their project is water in the Sudan. They have raised many millions of dollars to dig wells in the dessert because Mike got them to let go of their attachment to the idea that Christmas is about buying stuff for each other and instead the congregation works at living out the ideals of Jesus.

In the song they are asked to do things differently. Leaving your sheep on the hillside and traveling to town was risky behavior. Where do we need to risk, to try new things? This is part of what it means to grow in faith. The "we have always done it this way" committee is not the committee for faith or community growth. Yet it is scary to contemplate doing things differently. We don't know what will happen. Are we giving up something important for this new thing that is not so good? Is this new idea worth the risk? Yet if we never do anything different how can we change.

You know the old jokes about how many people in various occupations it takes to change a lightbulb. One of the answers for the church is, "lightbulb! Who wants a lightbulb? Candles are just fine." We celebrate this Christmas season that the shepherds were willing to listen to the angels and go and seek and ultimately find the baby in a manger.

Recently a few of us had some training about change in a church. One of the things we were told is that whenever you instigate change expect resistance. Most of the time, when we try to do something new, we suppose everyone will joyfully embrace the idea. After all, we have thought it through and think it is awesome. We are then surprised when there is pushback. We were reminded that this is normal and to be expected. We should never be deterred from trying new things just because change is risky. If the shepherds had not left their flocks and journeyed into town they would have missed seeing the miracle of the Messiah among us. What is God asking us, as individuals or a church, to seek for, to risk, to leave behind in search of greater meaning and life?

Finally, this song really asks, what are we willing to do in order to anticipate a brighter future for all of God's children? This was a marching song of the slaves. It was a song that proclaimed that God's liberation and freedom was for them. We are still called to work at bringing light and freedom to all. We need to be advocates for the poor. We need to insist that medical care is a right for all and not just for an entitled few. We need to be uncomfortable every time we sit down to eat until we know that all are fed. We need to be aware that slavery, in many forms, still stalks the lives of people in this country and around the world. They might not be physically owned but we hear frequently of people who are kept as virtual slaves working for people because they are undocumented, women enslaved in the sex trafficking world. The list goes on.

The light of Jesus should lead all to freedom, to abundant life and love. This is shalom, wholeness. By being prayerful and open we can have the energy to go on a journey that will create change in the world.