

Good and gracious God, Divine Love,

You have come among us, to live and breathe as one of us on the earth you have made, offering grace upon grace. Enter our hearts once again, fill us with your Light and your Peace, for the sake of the whole world. In the hush of your holy night, help us to hear as for the first time these great glad tidings, and then to join your choirs of angels to sing your praise. Amen.

It is a chilly night, maybe not 20 below, but still, not a night you would want to be out in the elements. They sleep in shifts, listening for predators and the occasional wakeful noises of their flock. The main job requirement here is to stay with the sheep. Basque shepherders in remote parts of Wyoming and Nevada still live the same way, staying out in the hills with their sheep for months at a time, restocked by pack train. With achy backs and smelling of greasy sheep's wool, their bone weariness may be familiar if you've ever had a job where you work for a full day and are still on call through the night.

Your bedroll is soaked with dew, and your eyes fastened on the sky, waiting for the constellations to wheel around to the next hill so you can wake up your pal and catch a few winks of sleep yourself. Would you believe your eyes then, or would you think you're dreaming, when you see a bright light low in the sky? A meteor, you think? And then a voice very close to your ear but ringing in your head like a bell: don't be afraid.

Wouldn't you, in fact, be afraid? I would be terrified. But the voice says "Don't be afraid, because what I have to tell you is good news. God has come very near to you, God has come into your world today as a human being, a child, and this changes *everything*." Tiny fingers and toes, a soft swirl of hair, and that intoxicating baby smell. And you can go and see this for yourself.

So, OK, maybe you *have* to be a shepherd for this to seem at all plausible. The savior of the world a human child? How completely ridiculous. No one could believe it. Maybe you yourself do not. But, you see, shepherds, they have no fixed address. They live in tents, they're not important. They're so unimportant that Caesar hasn't even called for them to come out of the hills and be enrolled on the census. They literally don't count.

Maybe you have to be that unassuming, that invisible, to be receptive to this “good news of great joy.” To believe that God can work through the smallest and the most vulnerable to change the world. Why else would God’s angels have chosen shepherds to hear this announcement?

But you can also look through the whole history of God’s saving action in the world and see the same paradigm: God saves baby Moses from the murderous impulse of the Pharaoh and uses him to lead God’s people to freedom, God uses David when he is still a boy, a shepherd boy, to defeat a giant and a whole army; God so often raises up the underdog, the second-best, the poor, the overlooked. And uses them to overturn the wrongs and repair the brokenness of the world.

Of course, this is also a dangerous pattern, threatening to the powers that be. An intimation that proximity to power will not save us. No wonder Herod, in Matthew’s account, wants to repeat Pharaoh’s campaign of terror. No wonder we anticipate, even on this night of Jesus’ birth, the crucifixion and death that await. But still God can use a shepherd.

Hard to believe? The angel says, “Go and see,” just as Jesus himself will later say, “Come and see.” Don’t just take my word for it. Experience these things for yourself. Follow your nose to a baby lying in a feed box, and you’ll know he is the one. We pretty up that detail a little, the “manger scene,” but maybe it’s precisely this detail, babe asleep in the clean-smelling hay, that lets the shepherds know this Messiah is for them. No fine print, no asterisks or exclusions. He is for you.

In the Hebrew Bible, the ideal king is often compared to a shepherd: not someone looking for personal gain, but someone whose first concern is for his sheep. The Lord is my shepherd, who guides me and puts me in the way of all good things. And although Joseph is a builder and not a tender of flocks, Jesus grows up shaped by these teachings about shepherds. Maybe this first encounter has marked him, the curiosity and the humility of the shepherds, reminding him of his mission. I am the Good Shepherd, he says. And when it’s time to leave his disciples, he tells *them* to be good shepherds too: feed my sheep.

And so into our world of violence, says the song, comes Jesus the Word. He comes to break what *we* have believed to be God’s silence in the face of all that is evil. Turns out, God isn’t silent at all. This Word spreads peace, not through the sword or conquering armies, but gently as a shepherd.

And here begins what Howard Thurman calls “the real work of Christmas”: “To find the lost, To heal the broken, To feed the hungry, To release the prisoner, To rebuild the nations, To bring peace among people.” And then, remembering that God finds everything God creates to be *good*, “To make music in the heart.”

These cold, wet, bedraggled shepherds go and see for themselves, and then spread this good news wherever they go. You don’t have to be rich or famous or beautiful. You don’t have to be powerful or heroic or even *counted*. The Lord of hosts is with you here, a baby asleep on the hay who changes *everything*. Glory to God in the highest.

Peace on earth, and goodwill to all of creation. Merry Christmas. Amen.