

"THE LITTLEST SHEPHERD"

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008 – Grace Church, Haddonfield

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

Merry Christmas! Here we are again, gathered on Christmas Eve with all the lights, the flowers, the people. Here we are gathered to celebrate the Glory of God's coming into our world. Here we are ... celebrating the birth our Lord Jesus Christ! There are consequences for our lives because of this night. We have joy! Hope! Light! Life!

The story of Jesus' birth is a familiar one for us. We hear from Luke's Gospel tonight about Mary, angels, shepherds and more! It is an old story ... it's our story! We hear tonight that God comes looking for us. God comes to us in the birth of a boy ... in humble circumstances ... to a common woman. But nothing about Jesus, or this night, or his birth is ordinary. Tonight the story begins that will lead us to life!

What about the shepherds in the story? What was it like to be like a shepherd back then? It was not a glamorous life. The work was long and hard. Shepherds were on the bottom of the social ladder. Too often they were thieves or scoundrels who couldn't be entrusted with other work. They worked hard, often alone, to earn a living in this bleak existence.

This is where God chooses to break into human life ... in an unexpected way and at an unexpected time. God's love comes to us in the presence of a baby boy. He brings hope and clarity to our lives. If we wish to live the true meaning of Christmas, we might want to become like the shepherds. We are called to be like them, to LISTEN to the message of the angels, to GO & SEE the baby Jesus, and to TELL OTHERS of the miracle that has come to us.

For me, this reminds me of another story. It's about the littlest shepherd in a Christmas pageant. The story begins when we meet Johnny. There is nothing special about him. Johnny was short and small for his age. The bigger and older kids often picked him on. Johnny found it best to be shy and quiet, to make him as small as possible. He rarely spoke up in class and didn't participate in games at recess.

Sadness came into Johnny's life when his mother died about three weeks before Christmas. It was sudden and difficult. Johnny and his dad were left alone. His dad went to Mary, the pageant director at Church, as asked here to give him a part in the Christmas Eve pageant. He told Mary that he wanted to keep life as normal as possible. Mary agreed. She made Johnny a shepherd. She even asked him to say a line during the Christmas story. Johnny nodded his head in agreement.

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The first rehearsal went poorly. Johnny was so shy and soft spoken that he couldn't be heard. The other boys made fun of him. Mary wasn't certain what would happen. After the second rehearsal, Johnny came to Mary. "May I talk with you, Mrs. Smith?" Mary agreed. "Do you believe in angels?" Johnny asked. "Yes I do, Johnny. Just like those in the story, I believe God sends messengers to us."

Johnny's next question caught Mary off guard. "Do you think people who die become angels?" She thought for a moment and said, "Yes, I believe that if God wants, those who die can become like angels. Why do you ask?" Johnny looked down as he spoke, "Well, I've been praying to my mom ever night since she died. Daddy said that people become angels when they die. I ask her every night to protect me."

Mary was stunned by the boy's conversation. Johnny went on, "I know the other kids don't like me. That's okay. But I miss my mom. Last night she was in my dreams ... she looked so beautiful. She was all light and white and floated. Mom said that I shouldn't be afraid. She said God loves me. I'm okay and you and daddy will be okay. I love you."

Mary didn't know what to say. Johnny looked up at her and said, "Don't worry about the Christmas pageant, Mrs. Smith. I'll be okay." Mary watched in amazement as Johnny walked out of the room. She didn't know what to expect next!

The night of the pageant came. It was all chaos. Mary had the take away the crooks from the shepherds who were using them for swords. Several angels were crying because their halos or wings were crooked. Mary and Joseph were found in the kitchen eating all the cookies for the reception. She gathered the kids with the help of several adults and wondered why she was part of the annual Christmas chaos!

The pageant began in front of a packed church! Finally, Johnny came out into the chancel with the other shepherds. The angels appeared with their proclamation of the birth of Jesus. Mary held her breath ... Johnny spoke up loud and clear! "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that God has made known to us." Whew, Mary thought ... he made it! The shepherds went to the manger and the

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nativity scene. The narrator continued, "And they made known what was told to them to all ..."

The shepherds were supposed to all exit from the scene at this point. As the boys moved, Johnny stepped forward unexpectedly. Everyone was surprised by the little shepherd's move. Johnny took a deep breath and spoke to the audience, "My angel told me that tonight, none of us should be afraid. She said that Christmas is God's way of saying that we are all loved. The baby Jesus is God's gift of hope for you and me. We'll be okay. Just tell everyone that we are loved."

Johnny moved down the steps and past his dad, who was crying. He stopped and threw his arms around him and gave him a big hug. Dad stood up and took Johnny by the hand and they walked down the aisle. The narrator broke the silence by saying; "And HE made known what was told to them ...". The congregation broke into clapping and smiles as Johnny and dad went out the door. The littlest shepherd made the biggest impression that Christmas eve. Mary Smith stood by the chancel smiling, tears streaming down her face.

The truth is that tonight we are all shepherds. Despite what difficulties we face in our life ... and there are many ... unemployment, fear, war, illness ... we are never alone. God promises to be with us always, especially in the midst of difficult times. Christmas is not just a holiday for kids ... it's a celebration of the birth of hope into our lives in the person of Jesus. Life is hard.

It is often in the most difficult times that God sends us angels with a message of hope. Joy is ours to hold onto and embrace. New life comes time and time again, because God loves and cares about us. Now it's time for us the shepherds to LISTEN to the Good News ... to GO & SEE the miracle of life in our midst ... and to TELL OTHERS what God has done for us.

Christmas is a night to become part of the story. It doesn't matter how big or small we are ... it doesn't matter whether we are rich or poor ... we are all loved by God. This is a night to believe in miracles ... a night when the smallest of us can speak with bold voices. Christmas is a time to celebrate the coming of Jesus, the promise of God, into our lives. So let us listen to the good news, let us go and see for ourselves what God has done, and let us share with others the joy of this night! Merry Christmas!