Let's talk about these shepherds.

We love the image of the shepherd in our Christian traditions. Just last week, we had cute little 3- and 4-year-old shepherds in here for our preschool Christmas program.

In one of my favorite Christmas program memories, twin brothers played the roles of the shepherds. They came to the center of the room, wearing their burlap clothing and carrying their shepherd staffs. They were astounded and shaking in fear and they fell to their faces when the angel told them to go find the baby in a manger in Bethlehem. “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!” (2:10-11)

The twins did a wonderful job imagining what it was like to be in that field. To feel terrified at this otherworldly, shocking sight of a messenger of God looming over them and talking to them like that. It may have also helped that the role of the head angel was being played by the twins' big sister, who had likely struck fear into their hearts once or twice before.

Anyway, after the angel told them “Do not be afraid,” the shepherd twins did go find the manger and then they knelt down. They looked at the baby in the manger and worshipped him – like those shepherds did all those generations before – the infant Messiah, perfect and healthy, poor and invisible-for-the-moment to Earth's human kings and powerful people – this most unconventional Savior of the whole world.

It was beautiful.

Shepherds appear throughout our scriptures. Many of our most important Old Testament figures tended sheep – Abel, Abraham, Lot, Moses. You may also remember David, who would become King David... the one who the baby in the manger descends from, according to the prophets … *that* David was a shepherd too, before he was fighting Goliaths and ruling over much of the known world.

Jesus uses the image of the shepherd often as he teaches his disciples, and now, through the bible, all of us here, gathered around these stories some 2,000 years later. Jesus uses the image of the shepherd to show us how much we are loved by God, how God's law is a sign of that love because it doesn't limit our freedom but rather opens all of us up to all the freedom God intends for us in the first place.

“I am the good shepherd,” Jesus says in the Gospel of John. “I know my own and my own know me ... And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.” (John 10:14-16)

And, of course, when we think of the biblical image of the shepherd, most of us, whether we find ourselves in church a lot or not, whether we lose ourselves in the pages of the bible regularly or not – we may think of the beloved Psalm 23. “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want ...”

The shepherd is an important image for us. It gives us great courage and comfort, even if it is a bit romanticized – cleaned up a little. I will not be giving up these images or teachings about the good and gentle, diligent shepherd anytime soon.

However, I think it also helps us to think a little more realistically about who these shepherds are in our story today – these first people God chooses to know the true identity of the child, the first people to come worship the newborn King. I think it helps us to hear this story a little more like the first hearers of this story would have heard it, people who were much more likely to know shepherds or maybe even be shepherds.

The life of a shepherd was not an easy one. In the big picture of a village or region and what makes things run smoothly, shepherds were especially low in the hierarchy. If they were tending their family's sheep, they were probably a child who may or may not survive to the full productivity of adulthood. Or they were the youngest born boy who didn't stand to inherit a thing and would be dependent on older brothers his whole life.

If they were hired shepherds, chances are they were wanderers who often lived hard and earned rather dodgy reputations. And even if they had a family and home, people shamed hired shepherds because they stayed out in the fields all night, instead of protecting their families.

Their lives were spent outside for the most part, leading the completely dependent sheep to food and water each day, sometimes over many, many miles and in all weather conditions and extremes. The shepherd had to keep the flock together during these treks and protect them – a task that was particularly important at night, when the sheep were often rounded up into a cave or, if you were lucky, an enclosure. The shepherd would guard them all night against predators, like panthers and bears and robbers.

Outside of a cloak made of sheep skin, a staff, a slingshot, maybe a light tent and a small bag for a little food, the shepherd had no possessions. They ate what they could find and drank milk from the herd.

I imagine, after a while, especially with a cloak made of sheepskin on their back, a shepherd would start to look and smell and behave like the rest of the flock, much of the time.

So, with that portrait of the shepherd filing your senses, just think about it.

These are the first people called to bear witness to the birth of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. These smelly, uncultured, often ruffian, always expendable shepherds are the people God invites first to meet the one who is on his way to a cross in Jerusalem in just a couple of months here on the church calendar. The one who will die so that you may live without the burden of your mistakes and missteps. The one who makes it possible for you to turn back to God at any time and as many times as you need.

In a world where it is much more likely that the birth of a King is announced to those at the top and then allowed to trickle down to people like the shepherds over time – if it ever gets there – God has chosen to literally turn the world upside down in the arrival of *this* King – this Savior of all creation whose Reign will have no end.

I think we are very much like the shepherds. “In the shepherds we find people like us who are simply doing what they are supposed to do … they are going to work, contributing to the family and community, tending the flocks and their responsibilities...These are not kings and queens, they are not the wealthy and powerful, they are not the elite or the pedigreed. They do not move around with bodyguards or have armies at their command.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

And God’s ways of being an active force in the world are much the same all these generations later. Consider what God is doing right now in gathering us …

… gathering us into a safe space where we can repent for what we have done wrong in our lives – even the stuff we do not know about – be forgiven all of it and be invited to leave it all behind so we can more clearly see and hear and feel where God is calling us.

… gathering us into this safe and welcoming place so we may be nourished at the table of the Lord; so we may receive life in the bread and wine of our salvation.

… gathering people like us throughout the world tonight and tomorrow around this story of the birth of the Savior of the World. It is still Good News of great joy for all people these days and it is Good News revealed primarily to us.

And so, the question becomes, what do we do with this information and this freedom, this revelation that has been put into the hearts and hands of shepherds and people like us rather than kings and emperors?

It is here, I suggest, that we continue to follow the faithful lead of the beloved shepherds of our story.

“When (the shepherds) saw (the Christ child in the manger), they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them ... The shepherds returned (to their lives in the field), glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” (Luke 2:17-20)

Tell the story, friends. The world needs it so.

And let it not be lost on us: If 2,000 years of Christian Community could come from a starting place like the Christ Child born in a manger, loved by regular and faithful people like Mary and Joseph and witnessed first by a few surprised and surprising shepherds, well then what can’t God accomplish through all of us? Amen.

1. 1.26-38 UnexpetedUnlimitedMysteriousGodActivity12.23.17 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)