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Singing the Questions & Answers of Christmas

3. Why Sing?

(Luke 2:1-19 NRSV) "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart."

Our Advent journey so far has sometimes been an intense one, hasn't it? In my first two Advent sermons, we looked honestly at the ambiguity and even pain that attends the season sometimes, reminding ourselves that to leap to quickly too Christmas leaves little room for you or me if we are not feeling jolly, if we don't feel like it's "the most wonderful time of the year," if we find ourselves perhaps unaccountably feeling blue. And in our choir's incredible offering of Bach's "Magnificat," we heard once again those intense, troubling, powerful, prophetic words that Mary sang when the angel told her she was to give birth to the Son of God: "...He has scattered the proud in

the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.” I suspect you won’t see those words anytime soon on a Hallmark Christmas special.

But today, this last Sunday of Advent, this Christmas Sunday, we now can see more clearly in the ever-shortening distance that for which we have been waiting and preparing, and with our honest acknowledgment of Advent’s ambiguities, we are now ready to embrace the coming of Christmas. But I still have one more question in my mind to ask this morning. Why sing? And to answer that question, let’s turn to those shepherds and the familiar story we heard this morning. Like you, I love the way the hymn “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” focuses one of its verses on the story of the shepherds, but at the same time, that verse has also always puzzled me. It, of course, goes like this:

*Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?
Say what may the tidings be
Which inspire your heavenly song?*

Do you notice something peculiar about that verse? Well, like the game “Jeopardy,” where the answer must be in the form of a question, this verse of this hymn, this re-telling of the shepherd’s story, is also in the form of a question: “*Shepherds, why this jubilee?*”

And yet there is a question that has to come even before that question. Because while the hymn so beautifully asks the shepherds why they are singing, we actually need to ask an even more basic question: “Why ***shepherds?***” For the story itself confronts us with that very question. What do I mean? Well, consider the very abrupt transition between two of the verses in the story. In verse 7 it says Mary “*gave birth to*

her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger....” And then, *immediately* following that in verse 8 it says this: *“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”* That’s a rather abrupt transition! The **only** thing connecting the verses would **appear** to be geography: ***“In that region there were shepherds....”*** But that’s a pretty thin connection; after all there must have been in fact all kinds of people *“in that region”* doing their thing. In other words, why do the angels go to those **shepherds** to announce the good news? What is the story trying to tell us by making those shepherds the **very first persons in the world to know of the birth of Jesus?**

After all, we **could** imagine the story differently, couldn’t we? For if ***it is simply geographic proximity*** that is the connecting link here, there were **indeed plenty** of other places, plenty of other people, that were *“in that region”* on that night. After all, the story **could** have gone this way: *“In that region” there were Roman soldiers on night sentry duty....”* If mere geography is the connecting link, the story **could** have said *“In that region, the Bethlehem police had stopped for a cup of coffee at Denny’s....”* But, of course, the story doesn’t go that way; no, the angels’ announcement is made to some scraggly shepherds on an unnamed hillside in a very unlikely place. In one of the songs in Andrew Lloyd Weber’s musical *“Jesus Christ Superstar,”* our question is asked this way, as the singer says to God: *“why’d you choose such a backward time and such a strange land?”* Indeed: Why here, why now, why shepherds. ***Why shepherds?***

If mere geographic proximity isn’t enough to answer the question, what does? Well, two things: first, the fact that they are **shepherds** is meant to remind us of the history of God’s gracious dealings with God’s people since the time of Sinai. How so? Well, the most simple way to say it is this: In the Old Testament the most-remembered shepherd was, of course, King David. Before he was a King, he was a shepherd, one whose vocation was the lonely one of making sure that the flocks didn’t wander off to

untimely deaths, didn't follow the false hopes of that yummy looking but poisonous plant, didn't drink from waters that were impure and that would make them sick. So this announcement to those Bethlehem shepherds – rather than to the tax collectors or the rulers or whomever – was a dramatic sign that God was continuing to keep faith with the people that he had chosen. For now, this child Jesus, One who was from the very lineage of David, would be the one to share that abiding grace of God not just with the Jewish people but with all peoples, and he would do so as a shepherd himself– and thereby showing us what God is like. So that's the first reason “why shepherds.”

But secondly and even more importantly, it is the **words** that the angels say that connect the dots, as it were, from the birth of Jesus to those “in that region” to those throughout Israel to those throughout the Mediterranean to the whole world and ultimately to you and to me on this day in downtown Colorado Springs. What were those words? “Do not be afraid.” Do not be afraid. We all know that part of what hurts us is our anxiety and our fear. It is fear that often isolates us from one another. It is fear of someone different that sometimes makes us respond in ways that are less than our best. It is fear that can keep our vision too narrow and our sights set far too low. It is fear that can keep us imprisoned. And those things hurt. They harm us. They are the things for which we and the whole world need healing. This admonition and this comfort “Do not be afraid” is in fact found over one hundred times in the Bible.

In short, Luke's telling of the Christmas story proclaims to us that we can be healed of that which is harming us and harming God's world. Luke's story of how God acted on that night so long ago is the story of first of all of healing and hope. God **could** have chosen oh-so-many things for the angels to say about Jesus – but that first thing that was said was “be not be afraid.” For when all is said and done, the reason that we can indeed not be afraid, the reason that it is possible that we can be healed of what is hurting us and holding us back, is that God has become human. God knows

what our lives – our wonderful, motley, messy, complex, joyous, tragic lives – are like. God has lived as a human; that’s what the incarnation, Emmanuel, means.

And all of that finally tells us, then, the answer to our original question - “Shepherds, why this jubilee?” - as well. How so? Well, the great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, said this 80-something years ago: *“On the whole, people do not achieve great moral heights out of a sense of duty. You may be able to **compel** them to maintain certain minimum standards by stressing duty, but the **highest** moral and spiritual achievements depend **not upon a push but upon a pull.**”*¹ *“Not upon a push, but a pull.”* My friends, **that**, in a nutshell, is why the shepherds’ jubilee. For what has been made known to them this night is that the universe is **not** ultimately coercive, **not** ultimately threatening, **not** ultimately ruled by force and violence and hate – all those things that so often **do** indeed seem to **push** us and this world in directions we don’t want to go – but by persistent, long-suffering, gentle, persuasive love. Not the “push” of coercion and threat, but the “pull” of a vision of gentleness and hope.

For, after all, you and I know all too well – don’t we? – about the coercion and the hurt and even the violence that inhabits the world, that affects our lives, that is too often indeed the “push” we didn’t want and didn’t need and yet which shoved us along. We know about the “push,” the coercion of disease and homelessness and hunger, the “push” of unfair people having too much power over our lives because they control our paychecks, of relationships that have become brittle because of the “push” of violent words or even actions, the “push” of racial injustice or children shot dead because of feckless adults, the “push” of an addiction whose power is coercive indeed, the “push” of mortality and finitude that forces each person inexorably into an increasing diminishment of choices which finally ends in a narrow grave. Oh yes, we know the

¹Reinhold Niebuhr, Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 75. Emphasis mine.

“push” of life. We know the power of force. We know the ways of hatred and hopelessness and hurt.

But, my friends, the good news this morning, the good news of Christmas, the good news at which the shepherds leapt and shouted and danced and sang is that it is not these “pushes,” real as they are, it is not the force and unfairness of life, real as they are, that are the ultimate, the final, the most real things about life and reality. No, the shepherd’s jubilee is because at the heart of reality is **NOT** “push” but “pull.” One writer puts the point this way:

...the Christmas story... is a mass of contrasts: there is squalor, and there is splendor. There is the stinkiness of the stable, and the aurora of angels. There is the violence of the Roman [empire], and the peace proclaimed to God’s people on earth.... There is the way Mary and Joseph are pushed off to the sidelines of things in the stable, and the way the birth of Jesus makes that stable the very center of the world.²

God through Christ is indeed *pulling* the whole world toward that stable. And it is our choice how we respond. For that stable shows us that God is indeed a pull, not a push, that God is unfailingly good, that nothing is beyond God’s love. Even on those days when there is too much “push” in our lives, even on those days that we would sometimes despair that the “push” of violence and meanness in too many parts of the world is too strong, even on those days when mourn and grieve the bitter “push” of disease that too often takes life in too untimely a way – even amidst all these things and more, it is that stable in Bethlehem that houses the news that finally it **is** about “pull” not “push,” that finally the world is under the care of a God who loves us so much that He became one of us, that finally and always “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not” – and does not and will not – “overcome it.” And **that’s** why we sing.

²Paul S. Nancarrow, www.processandfaith.org/lectionary/YearA/2007-2008/2007-Christmas.shtml