

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Boston
Year A, Christmas Day
December 25, 2022

How many of you here were ever in a Christmas pageant? Or played a member of the holy family—Mary or Joseph, or even Gabriel? How many of you found yourselves as a shepherd or sheep (or another preferred animal)? How many of you actually remember your part clearly?

Having sat through a number of Christmas pageant rehearsals and pageants, I realized this year that I rarely consider the shepherds in the nativity story. We can admit that they often get the short end of the pageant stick-- Mary and Joseph and Gabriel get starring roles, everyone loves angels with their adorable wings and haloes. But the shepherds are the quiet ones—they have no stand out lines to memorize or offer; they dress mostly in brown burlap; and they are some of the last to arrive on the manger scene. The role of the shepherds is to show up, witness and then leave, all the while, not taking center stage, or losing their sheep.

But in this year's telling of the birth of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke, the shepherds have a part. In fact, they are the ones who encounter the heavenly host who tell them those marvelous words, 'Do not be afraid'. They are the ones to whom the proclamation of the birth of Jesus is made. They are the ones who get up and *go* to see what is happening—not simply content to read about it the next day, or take another's word for it. They join in. And following their encounter with the holy family, they then go home—changed, joyous, glorifying and praising God, for they had just witnessed God's love made real, right then, right there.

As I prayed over the shepherds this week, another story of an unexpected family came to mind.

Michael Clark, Jr, at age five, arrived at a foster home on Thanksgiving weekend in 2018¹. A year later, he found himself in the courtroom in Kent County, Michigan, with his soon-to-be parents, lately his foster parents, ready to formalize the relationship that they already knew they had—that of being a family. He had shared this news with his kindergarten class—this change, this joy, this belonging, in his six year old life.

On the date of the finalization on a cold day in December, it wasn't just the family members who showed up for the adoption proceedings. Not just the judges who were there to 'bless' it. Not just the clerks who were there to record it. Michael's own Kindergarten class had asked to join in the celebration. As their teacher worked out how to make this odd field trip happen, she told people in the community about the journey they were to take to the courthouse. A local bus company heard the story and suddenly a bus was available and free of charge to take the kids. Only a few parents were needed to chaperone the trip, but when invited to sign up, nearly all of the parents offered to join, taking days off of work for the celebration of another child's family.

¹ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/kent-county-adoption-michael-orlando-clark-jr-kindergarten-class/>

As the family was being stitched together in the courtroom that December day, tiny pink and red hearts were floated up from behind the partition. Michael's classmates had attached construction paper hearts to rulers, and each child held one up, as a sign demonstrating that love cannot be measured.

In all cases of adoption and fostering, there is brokenness too. Grief, disarray, challenge come along and most often spark the need for a differently stitched together family. We cannot ignore that. But we can hold both in our hands as we see how an act of love—of risk and trust—became a conduit of grace not only for that family, but for their community, their friends, and for us—complete strangers who hear about these stories and experience them from afar. And how when brokenness is given a chance at wholeness, not only those who are grafted together are the ones who celebrate, but the whole world can seem to dance and hold their hearts high- in this case literally- around them. And for Michael and his parents and their community—as for us here in Boston this morning-- stories of love can become real, lived life.

And this is why we tell the stories of love this day. The shepherds were the only ones to hear the entire nativity story in Luke—the promise that God would be coming among humanity, born as one of us, the claim of a God hell-bent on loving us each back into wholeness. We tell this story again and again, we sing songs about it, we light up the dark in honor of it, and we can feel that mysterious stirring in our hearts when we get close to that thin space of Christmas Eves and mornings which call us out of our houses, into this place and to hear and witness the story of love made real once again.

The story of God's incarnation, the story of God coming to be with us, meant that in that moment we too were somehow bound into the life and being of our creator; that we were grafted on God's heart, and God's on ours. In that moment, the descent into an ordinary human life, made separation between God and humanity impossible. In Jesus, we were yoked. In Jesus, we were made family. Each of us. All of us. Every last one of us.

After reading all the articles about Michael Clark, Jr's celebratory adoption, the vision of those pink and red hearts hovering through the courtroom remained in my mind for days and weeks after. Those children showed up to see a family being bound together. Those kindergarten parents showed up to see love in action. Those teachers knew that love is a precious thing these days—hope-fueled, grace-infused love. The shepherds, dressed in their drab browns, ignored and passed over for being outsiders, those shepherds were the ones to tell the tale of love first—to proclaim that it was real, alive and HERE. They probably didn't wave red construction paper hearts on rules at the time, but if they could have, it would have all made sense.

Whether or not we have ever played a shepherd, we are all shepherds this Christmas. We have been told the Good News of God in Christ, who is and remains among us. We have been told where to find him—in the scripture, in the sacrament, in the people around us, in the ordinary lives of ordinary people who bear the image of the God who created us, who redeemed us and who abided with us. We have been shown what love can do and how love can make whole. And it is up to continue the legacy of the shepherds, by singing out that song, glorifying God, and

holding up a heart on a ruler—literal or metaphorical—when we see love at work in the world around us.

And friends, we need this message of love; of hope; that we are a better image of God when we see ourselves as connected through those ordinary stories of grace and love. This world needs us to get on busses and rejoice in unexpected relationships and hold our hearts high—even when it isn't our own story—and proclaim that love has come to abide with us, now and always.

“Do not be afraid—for see, I am bringing you good news of great joy.” That is what got the shepherds on that journey of promise long ago. Go out, friends, you modern-day shepherds, lose the sheep, but show up again and again for impossible, surprising love each and every day.

Amen.