

CHRISTMAS

Is 9:1-6; Ps 96:1-3,11-13; Titus 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14

SHEPHERDS KEEPING THE NIGHT WATCH

Homily by Fr. Michael A. Van Sloun

December 24, 2011, 4:00 p.m.

December 25, 2011, 12:00 midnight, 9:30 a.m. at the Anoka County Jail, and 11:00 a.m.

On the **first Christmas** night, sometime around **midnight**,
on the night that **Jesus** was **born**, the **angel of the Lord** appeared,
and the **glory of the Lord** shone **brilliantly** in the **night sky** (Lk 2:9).

“It came upon a midnight clear, that glorious song of old.”

I have **several questions** for you; they are all **easy**.

Audience participation is encouraged.

Q: **To whom** did the angel appear?

A: **Shepherds** (Lk 2:8).

Q: **Where** were the shepherds?

A: Out in the **fields** (Lk 2:8).

Q: **What** were the shepherds doing?

A: **Keeping the night watch** over their sheep (Lk 2:8).

I hope that you are in a **singing, caroling mood**.

There are several carols that mention shepherds.

Number 363 in *Gather Comprehensive* is one such carol;

Go Tell It on the Mountain, only verse 1.

If you would like to sing along,

please take out your hymnal and turn to Number 363.

Let's sing it **up tempo** with **gusto!** (Refrain, one verse, and refrain).

*Go tell it on the mountain,
over the hills and everywhere;
Go tell it on the mountain
that Jesus Christ is born.*

*While shepherds kept their watching
O'er silent flocks by night,
Behold throughout the heavens
There shone a holy light.*

(“Go Tell It on the Mountain,” *Gather Comprehensive*, 363, v. 1).

The song says: “*Shepherds kept their watching.*”

The angel of the Lord appeared to **shepherds!**

What a wonderful event that was!

Let’s examine the plight of **shepherds**.

The shepherds were **outdoors**, not inside in a house.

They were out **in the country**, not in a village.

They were **with sheep**, not with other people.

They were **awake** and **vigilant**, not sleeping.

They had **enough to get by**, but they were not rich.

They were **knowledgeable**, but not highly educated.

Most of you probably knew the majority of these things already.

Here are a **few things** you **might not know** about **shepherds**.

The **orthodox Jews**,

the strict Jews, the “really devout Jews,” the holy, religious types,

the ones who lived in Jerusalem and worshipped in the Temple,

most of them thought that **shepherds** were

(it is not very nice to say this in church, not a very nice thing on Christmas): **low-life trash**.

There is very little water in the **desert**.

Shepherds **didn’t shower**.

They **did not wash** much.

They **did not launder** their clothes **regularly**.

There was **no deodorant**, **no antiperspirant**, **no perfume**.

Shepherds were **smelly**, **low-life trash**.

A **few shepherds** were **dirty rotten scoundrels**.

A few shepherds were **rustlers**; they stole sheep from other flocks.

A few shepherds took their flocks to **watering holes** that did not belong to them.

A few shepherds took their flocks **to grazing land**, to pastures, that were not theirs.

So the upper class, stuffy, snooty Jews of the city saw a **few bad shepherds** and generalized their objection to **all shepherds**.

“If a few shepherds are bad, then **all shepherds are bad**,” **low-life trash**.

But the **biggest objection** of the orthodox Jews **toward shepherds** was **religious**.

The strict Jews followed **dietary laws**.

In order to **observe the food laws properly** it was necessary to have

two different sets of **dishes** and two sets of **eating utensils**,

two sets of **pots and pans**, two sets of **forks, knives, and spoons**;

one for with **dairy** products, one for **meat without dairy** products (Ex 23:19; 34:26; Dt 14:21)

(see “Meal Customs,” *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. 4, 651-652).

If a person lived in a house in town, it was possible to obey these laws,
but if a person was a **shepherd** out in the desert,
it was **impossible** to **lug** all of this **stuff around**,
and there was not enough water to keep it all clean.
The Jews in town smugly thought, “We observe the laws properly,”
and with scorn, they thought, “But you shepherds don’t follow the laws like you should.”
To the strict Jew, that meant that **shepherds** were **low-life trash**.

We have saved the **strongest religious objection** until last.

The **Third Commandment** is “**Keep holy the Sabbath Day**” (Ex 20:8).

To the orthodox Jew, this means **two main things**:

first, on Friday night and Saturday morning,

it is an **absolute “must”** to go to the **Temple** or the **synagogue** to worship;

and **second**, on the Sabbath Day a person must **rest, no work** (Ex 20:9).

My friends, the **shepherds failed both** Sabbath requirements.

The sheep required round-the-clock supervision,

so the shepherds **did not** go into town to **go to church**.

The shepherds led the sheep to water, led them to grazing land,

chased down strays, and kept an eye out for predatory animals and thieves.

Shepherds worked all day, every day, even on the Sabbath Day.

To the orthodox Jew, these **non-law-abiding shepherds** were **low-life trash**.

Shepherds may be smelly, a few might be dishonest,

they did not obey the dietary laws, and they failed to observe the Sabbath laws.

Shepherds are like we Dutch, they **don’t amount to much**.

Isn’t it **ironic**, then, that when Jesus was born,

that the **angel of the Lord** made the **announcement** to **shepherds**?

There were plenty of people that would have thought

that they **should have received this great announcement first**.

Orthodox Jews probably felt that they were most deserving.

The **chief priests** and the **elders** would have felt the same.

Wealthy merchants and **nobility** were certainly entitled classes.

And then there was the **king**, Herod the Great,

and the **emperor**, Caesar Augustus,

who felt like they ranked **above everyone else**.

But in **God’s great providence**, the **shepherds** received Jesus’ birth announcement.

The **truth** needs to be told about **shepherds**.

Dirty and **tattered clothes** and **smelly** on the **outside**

says nothing about the **person** on the **inside**.

Clothes do not make the person. Hygiene does not either.

Shepherds might have spent a lot of time alone,
but when they came **together**, they were **buddies**.

If one shepherd got sick or injured or needed to take a break,
one or more other **shepherd's would fill in** and watch the shepherd's flock.

Shepherds may not have gone to church,
but they spent hour upon hour out **in the fields alone**,
one shepherd together with fifty, or seventy-five, or hundred sheep.

Most of the time **things** were rather **calm**,
and watching the sheep was not very labor intensive,
and the shepherd could just lean on his shepherd's staff, or sit on rock,
in the great outdoors,
under the sun,
in the gentle breeze,
in the fresh air,
enjoying the glory of God's creation.

And while the orthodox Jews would go into the Temple for a few hours a week to pray,
the shepherds were in **grand cathedral** of the **great outdoors**
where many of them **prayed off-and-on throughout the day**,
sometimes shepherds prayed for **long hours**, almost like contemplatives.
Many **shepherds** were **extremely prayerful good guys**.

The **truth** needs to be told about **shepherds**:
they were **not low-life trash**;
they were **friendly, hardworking, dependable, prayerful** people,
decent, down-to-earth, ordinary folk – pretty much like you and me.

God made a **major decision** about who was going to get the message and who was not.

The message did **not go to arrogant**,
people who think that they are better than other people;
the message did **not go to the rich and powerful**;
the message did **not go to "beautiful people," or "popular people"**;
the message did **not go to the super-religious** people,
people who think they are **"holier than thou."**

Jesus' birth announcement went to **shepherds**.

By choosing shepherds, **God** is making this **statement**:
"When it comes to human beings, no one is low-life trash."

Every single person is **valuable** in God's eyes.
Every life is precious.

From the baby in the manger to the babies and little children in our congregation,
from the strong and fit to the disabled,
from the young to the old,
from the healthy to the sick and elderly,
every person, every life, is precious to almighty God.

And so on Christmas night God must have been thinking,
“Some of you misguided people think that others are low-life trash.
I’ll show you.”
And **God chose shepherds.**

God choice is a sign that **God** has a **special love** for
the lowly, the misunderstood, the outcast, the marginalized, the mistreated.

The announcement of Jesus’ birth was made to shepherds:
shepherds who were **not so preoccupied** that they could **pay attention**,
shepherds who were **not so narrow-minded** that they could receive the message with joy.

The **shepherds** were **our representatives** that night.
Through the shepherds,
peoples of every nation, language, and way of life,
peoples of every time and place over the ages,
have received the **good news** proclaimed by the **angel of the Lord**:

**“Today ... a Savior has been born for you
who is Messiah and Lord”** (Lk 2:11).

Let’s **close** with a beautiful **Christmas carol**.
If you would like to sing along, it is number **377** in *Gather Comprehensive*.
The **first verse** speaks of the infant **Jesus**,
while the **second** speaks about the **shepherds**.

*Infant holy, infant lowly, for his bed a cattle stall;
Oxen lowing, little knowing, Christ the babe is Lord of all.
Swift are winging, Angels singing, Noels ringing, Tidings bringing:
Christ the babe is Lord of all.*

*Flocks were sleeping: Shepherds keeping vigil till the morning new.
Saw the glory, Heard the story, Tidings of a gospel true.
Thus rejoicing, Free from sorrow, Praises voicing, Greet the morrow;
Christ the babe was born for you.*

(“Infant Holy, Infant Lowly,” *Gather Comprehensive*, No. 377, vv. 1-2).