



BIRMINGHAM FIRST
A UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

The Spirituals of Christmas:
“Rise Up, Shepherd, and Foller!”

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In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors! 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.” (Luke 2:8-14)

In the mid-1800s, Soren Kierkegaard wrote a parable about two robbers who entered a jewelry store and did something very strange: they switched all the price tags. They didn't steal anything. They just took the high-priced tags off the expensive jewelry and put them on the costume jewelry. Then they took the bargain price tags off the costume jewelry and put it on the really expensive stuff. The next day when the jewelry store opened for business it was business as usual. In fact, for the next several weeks no one noticed that folks were buying \$10,000 rings for a few dollars, and that others were buying \$39 necklaces for thousands of dollars.

Kierkegaard's point is obvious, isn't it? He was saying that the people of his day had no ability to discern the truly valuable from the virtually worthless. Naturally, he wasn't talking about jewelry, but about life. And Kierkegaard is saying that that's what God did in sending us a savior. Christmas turns things upside down – all of our understandings of what is of true value – and you and I are likely to miss that aspect of the story. If you are like me, you turn Christmas into something full of tinsel and warm, colored lights.

I confess that I love the sentimental mood of Christmas. It bathes the narrative of the messiah's birth in a vague glow of warmth and good will. As a result, everything about Christmas becomes re-envisioned in my mind. The area around the shepherds isn't difficult, rocky terrain – it's a

lush green field. The temperature isn't freezing; it's really quite comfortable. The stable resembles one of the creche sets we have in our house – it doesn't have the nose-stinging smell of a collection of animals in a small cave at all.

Yet we all know that Christmas didn't come in those dream-like, sanitized settings. It turned everything upside down. And it still does. Joseph and Mary had to change all their plans. The Magi had to forsake their studies and their positions in order to travel for almost a year in following the star. We see the harshest of realities in King Herod, who is so frightened at the news he starts to kill innocent children. And the shepherds – well, today we turn to their story.

First, let's hear what Luke is telling us. We don't realize it, but Luke's telling us that the announcement of Christ's birth came to those at the bottom of the social order. That's the shepherds. God didn't come to accomplished, respectable folks, but to the lowest of the low. Staying out all night with some of God's most incredibly stupid animals was looked upon with scorn. They were at the bottom of the social scale even in a first-century Palestinian village.

Mike Yankoski tried an experiment in which he made himself out to be a homeless person to see what it's like to be homeless in America. He reports how people would just pass him by as if he didn't exist. He received verbal abuse just for asking simple directions. Even church-folk would kick him off the church steps on a Saturday because their ministry with the homeless didn't take place until the next Tuesday. Shepherds would have been regarded just a little higher than the homeless. And the African-American who wrote the spiritual we heard this morning knew exactly what it was like to be at the bottom of things.

Yet, these lowly shepherds, watching their flocks one night, suddenly became part of the God's mighty act of salvation. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, glory shown all around them, and they were frightened. But the angel told them: "Do not be afraid. I bring you great and joyful news which is for all people. For you a child is born in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The angel told them how they would recognize the child: and then a throng of angels joined in a chorus of praise to God. And then the shepherds were left alone. What should they do? No doubt their first impulse is: Tell no one. Swear each other to secrecy because people will think they're crazy, make fun, maybe drive them out of the county. They are like the drunken fisherman out on the boat all night who come home to tell their wives they were abducted by aliens. Who's going to believe them?

We romanticize it, but everybody back then knew: shepherds are a ragged lot. They are all dirt-poor, shabby-dressing, foul-smelling, belly-scratching, hard-drinking, lippy-eared, flea-bearing, mean-fighting thugs barely above the level of common thieves and slipping over that boundary often enough. God doesn't come to such as them. Who is going to believe the Almighty Eternal God chose them for angels to visit with this remarkable news?

Generations later, plantation workers in America's south heard some camp meeting preacher tell the story and they knew that the angels announcement was meant for them. And one of their own, with a gift of insight and a feeling for melody, began to sing. And here's the way it came out:

*Rise up, Shepherd, and foller!
Leave yo' sheep and leave yo' lambs;
Leave yo' ewes and leave yo' rams,
Rise up, Shepherd, and foller!
If you take good heed to the angel's words,
You'll forget yo' flock,
You'll forget yo' herd!
Rise up, Shepherd, and foller!*

That is, don't just sit there enjoying the music; do what the angel said. The great tragedy of the Christian Church is that we don't do more about what we've heard. Jerome Ellison, longtime editor of *Colliers* magazine, after his conversion to Christianity, said that he marveled at the amount of good that might be done in the world through the multitudes who belong to the various Protestant and Roman Catholic churches. He saw a reservoir of power in the hundreds of millions who say they are followers of Jesus Christ. Unfortunately, that power doesn't often show itself because so many simply don't "rise up and foller." But this spiritual wisely tells the shepherds to move.

Bill Glass, a tremendous defensive end who played with the Detroit Lions and the Cleveland Browns, later became a full-time Christian minister. He created a ministry with at-risk youth and prisoners called *Champions of Life*. When Bill was a football player, he was intense, and he brought to his Christian life the same kind of intensity. But Glass is troubled by the half-hearted religion he sees. "I see a lot of casual Christians," Glass wrote. "What if I, as a defensive end, lined up on the defensive line in a football game like some casual Christians try to serve Jesus Christ? A defensive end that lined up like that would get knocked on his casual can."

If that's too graphic for your taste, the point remains: how dare we be "half-hearted" about following and serving Jesus Christ? Why be half-hearted about anything to which you are committed? Martin Luther, the great Reformer, once said, "Whatever is most important in your life becomes your God." Whatever that is for you, how can you be half-hearted about it?

Now, I have absolutely no problem with the idea that we should find enjoyment in the Sunday hour of worship. The sermon and music should be as excellent, inspiring and uplifting as possible. But there's always a danger that we respond as spectators and connoisseurs. Know what I mean? Having heard the sermon and the choir, we're likely to say, "Wasn't that beautiful?" We might better be saying "That inspired me! What can I do today, this week, in response? How can I make God's love known?" My fear is, if the shepherds had been like many of us they would never have gotten to Bethlehem. Those long-ago plantation workers who gave us this spiritual saw the danger of such "spectator responses." So they cried out: "Rise up, Shepherd, and foller!"

The African-Americans who gave us this spiritual worked in fields and barns. They knew very well that if the shepherds rose up and went to Bethlehem, they'd be leaving something behind – their sheep. Some of our Christmas art portrays a shepherd bowed with a lamb in his arms as he stands by the manger. Maybe so; but the herd remained out on the hillside. The spiritual is right:

*If you take good heed to the angel's words,
You'll forget yo' flock, you'll forget yo' herd!*

If a person really believes the Christmas story, she'll know it's the most important thing on earth. Christmas means that God has come among us – can anything really compare with that? Don't think I'm suggesting that a person should forsake his or her responsibilities because she has become a Christian. To the contrary, becoming a Christian should make a person more responsible, more dependable, more trustworthy than ever. But if a person becomes a Christian, she will surely have to re-think her priorities. Some things which used to seem important may now prove to be trivial.

Let me simply say this: when the shepherds left their flocks and herds, they were the first of a long and distinguished line. As they ran from the hillside to the Bethlehem manger, they started a path which millions of others since have trod. Years later, Jesus came upon a tax collector busily making a personal fortune. "Follow me!" Jesus said, and he put down his ledgers and followed. Another day, Jesus came to two fisherman who were repairing their nets in preparation for the next night's work. Again the word: "Follow me!" and again they left their business, their economic livelihood, and followed. The tax collector was named Matthew; the fishermen were James and John – and where would we be without their immediate response and the witness of their lives?

*Leave your sheep and leave your lambs, Rise up, shepherd, and follow.
Leave your ewes and leave your rams, Rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

They left their economic certainties to follow Jesus and it was the greatest adventure of their life. Most people don't leave their daily occupation in order to follow Christ, but it's impossible to follow without leaving some things. There is a sense, in fact, in which we have to leave everything. You may regain part of it; you may even get all of it. But that's almost incidental. The point is this: that we must be ready to leave it all, and when we do, with Paul, we count it all gain. We must acknowledge that Christ is at the heart of it all, the fullest revelation of God. To paraphrase Jesus, "What does it profit you to come to the end of your life and discover that you missed the whole point of living?"

We have to see that the single most-important consideration in life is our relationship with God. And if you have a problem with the reality of God, well, like Jacob, go down to the river and wrestle until you feel God's blessing. If you have a complaint with God, God's big enough to hear it and deal with it – if you're big enough to take it to God. But get that relationship right. It isn't so difficult with a God of love. And once God is at your center, everything else will find their proper places. As you've heard all fall, the key is to "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength, and your neighbor as yourself – and then you'll find that you're on the right road in life.

By now someone is thinking very unkindly of this sermon. You may even have turned it off completely. When you think of Christmas, like me, you think of lovely things: of roasting chestnuts on an open fire, toys for children and grandchildren and the joy in their faces; ornaments and tinsels, cards and letters from old friends, cookies and fudge unnumbered.

But, you see, I'm not trying to take Christmas from you. To the contrary, I'm trying to give you the whole package. Look at it this way. Suppose those long-ago shepherds had heard the angel message, the glad song of "Peace on earth among persons of good will," and had seen the heavens lit up with God's special brightness, then had settled in for a "long winter's nap" to enjoy these marvels, without ever going on to Bethlehem. Why, they would have missed Christmas. They would, indeed.

Christmas was not out on the hillside with the music and the lights, it was down in Bethlehem, back of a cheap hotel, a stinking cave really, where Jesus was born. All of that happened up on the hill was like a hand pointing them to where they needed to go. And so is all of these trappings today: the wonderful choir anthem, the organ and carols, the stained glass and candles and warm greetings – all of them are our humble efforts to point you to Jesus Christ. We simply don't want you to miss the real Christmas, God-with-us here and now. It's a birth that's waiting for you to happen.

And of course "missing Christmas" is what millions of folks will do this year, as in every other Christmas. They'll stop long before they get to Christmas and the Christ who awaits.

Like a band of scruffy shepherds who first heard the news long ago, it is our choice now. We can stay where we are or we can run in haste to see, try it out for ourselves, then tell everyone we know. We can take him into our lives until he becomes part of who we are and we become messengers of his peace, channels of his love. Or we can pretend we didn't hear it, have a brief holiday and go right back to same-old, same-old, nothing new under the sun. How shall we respond?

For Jesus Christ is God's Christmas gift. And if we accept the Gift, life takes a special turn – a turn guided by God's love for you. What kind of new turn? I can't answer that question specifically for you, for God will work with you in a way which is just right for you alone. Just remember that God changed the price tags on everything through that baby Jesus. And remember what this spiritual says so wisely:

*If you take good heed to the angel's words,
You'll forget yo' flock,
You'll forget yo' herd!
Rise up, Shepherd – and foller!*