

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

East Moline, Illinois

Pastor Becky Sherwood

December 22, 2019, The 4th Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7, Luke 2:8-20

THE JOURNEY--WALKING THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM—ARRIVING AT THE MANGER IN BETHLEHEM

Like many of you, I love the Advent and Christmas Season. But I have a confession to make about a part of this season that makes me grumpy. Every year I watch Christmas commercials to see how they twist the Christmas story to their own ends.

Maybe I should really say it's a guilty pleasure, because then I let myself self-righteously rant about those commercials to anyone who will listen.

This year there are two commercials that have gotten me ranting more than others. The first is for Amazon Prime. With Ave Maria playing throughout, and words on the screen reminding us that the things we're seeing can be shipped to us the next day with Amazon Prime,

we see in freeze-frame a teenage daughter stumbling out of her bedroom toward her brother's room where the words "Band Practice" are on the door.

Behind that door we see the brother jumping on his bed, frozen mid-air guitar in hand, while his friend pounds on the drums. All these things ready for next day delivery.

The camera takes us downstairs to dad, relaxing on the couch, steam rising from his coffee, noise cancelling head phones on his ears. Also available next day!

And then the tag line: Amazon Prime. Peace Delivered.

The other commercial is for Lincoln SUV's and we see mom driving up the drive, going into the house and finding her parents have arrived early for Christmas. They are doing yoga, and cheerily inform their daughter they've brought their goat yoga goats Steve and Mark. Mom backs out of the house, gets back into her Lincoln, adjusts the seat, opens the sun roof and words that have made me the craziest this season appear: "Discover the Power of Sanctuary, Joy to the World."

I'll save you from the rants that go with these commercials. Let me say instead that you who gather here Sunday by Sunday have truly discovered the "power of sanctuary," as we gather in God's house to find welcome and renewal, and to worship our God.

We gather in this season of true "Peace Delivered" that has come to earth in the Baby born in the manger,

who brings "joy to the world, "

joy that lasts longer than noise cancelling headphones and Lincoln SUV's.

Coming to Bethlehem

This week we conclude our Advent walk through Adam Hamilton's book "*The Journey, Walking the Road to Bethlehem*." In the past weeks we've talked about Mary and Joseph.

Today I'd like to invite you into the joy and peace of this season with some ideas he shares as we travel with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to the Bethlehem manger.

The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem would have taken about 10 days. For those of you who have experienced pregnancy, and those last couple weeks before giving birth, you can imagine what a difficult journey this was for Mary. With or without the donkey it would have been a momentous 10 days.

But it wasn't just the distance travelled because of the census that made it a momentous journey. Mary was having to leave her mother, her family and known midwives behind. She was

facing her first child's birth with a new husband who probably knew as little as she did about giving birth.

Adam Hamilton writes: "In hindsight, we can see what Mary couldn't as she entered that stable, her contractions getting closer and closer together. She couldn't yet hear the angels singing, couldn't see the shepherds running to the stable, couldn't know that the magi were already on their way with their gifts to welcome ~~pay homage~~ to the little king.

And she certainly couldn't see that we ~~you~~ would be reading her story two thousand years later, reflecting upon its meaning for our lives ~~your life~~." (p. 110)

Hamilton reminds us as we approach Christmas morning and Jesus' birth, that Jesus walks with us as we journey to places that scare us, or surprise us, or that we never expected.

In Mary's story we are reminded that that while we can't see God's plan as it unfolds, God has a plan and deep loving care for each of our lives.

As we journey toward the reminders of God's love in Bethlehem, let us sing together the first two verses of Hymn #121, O Little Town of Bethlehem

Hymn #121, vv. 1-2 *O Little Town of Bethlehem*

The Shepherds

For those of us 2000 years away from that first Christmas, we take the story of the angels singing to the shepherds and sending them to see the baby, as a basic part of the story. But on that first Christmas and in the years immediately following, this would have been a shocking part of the story!

Shepherds were at the lower end of the socioeconomic ladder. And truth be told, they worked with sheep outdoors, so they didn't smell so great either. (p. 123). The first witnesses to the birth of the Son of God weren't high officials of the land, or the wealthy, but those looked down on by many of the society. God chose the humble to hear the Good News and go welcome the Savior of the World.

There are many messages hidden in plain sight in the birth of Jesus. Adam Hamilton reminds us that through the words of the prophets God told the people that God was a shepherd, and God's chosen people were sheep that needed care.

When God chose Israel's king David, God chose a shepherd. In time God promised that one day there would be a new king, like David, who would be a Savior and a shepherd for all the lost sheep.

When Jesus, that promised Savior grew into adulthood, this man who had been born in a manger called himself "the good shepherd" who would lay down his life for his sheep (pp. 124-125).

Remembering that we are each sheep in need of the Good Shepherd, let us sing together verses 1, 2, and 6 of Hymn #117, While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Hymn #117, vv. 1-2, 6 *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks*

The Angels

The angels sang the good news to those shepherds, and then told them that the baby would be found in a manger, wrapped in bands of cloth. Adam Hamilton points out that when Luke wrote his gospel, that he tells us three times that Jesus was born in a manger. There was no room in the inn, so he was born in the stable and placed in the manger. The angels told the shepherds about the

manger, and finally they found the baby lying in a manger.

A manger was a feeding trough. After years of Christmas Pageants, including our own last week, we often think of the manger being made out of wood. But actually, it was probably carved out of stone, a rectangular box where the animals came to eat (p. 122)

Adam Hamilton writes that after 30 years of preaching at Christmas Eve it hit him one year that Luke really wanted us to see that Jesus spent his first night sleeping in the manger, the place where animals come to eat.

As an adult Jesus said to his disciples then, and to all of us: "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."

Each time we celebrate the Lord's Supper we are reminded of Jesus saying to us: "This is my body given for you." He is our life sustaining, faith sustaining food.

Hamilton reminds us that Jesus the Bread of Life is the only one who can "satisfy the deepest longings of our souls." Jesus is the only one who can truly feed us. (p. 139). He writes:

"What we really hunger for will not be found under the tree on Christmas morning.
 We hunger for meaning, for joy, for hope in the face of despair.
 We hunger to know that we can be forgiven and start anew after things we regret.
 We hunger for a love that will not let us go and for life and triumph in the face of death.
 These come through a baby born in a stable, laid to sleep in a feeding trough,
 visited by night-shift shepherds.
 He is for us the bread of life.
 And we must come to the stable to satisfy the deepest desires of our hearts." (p. 139)

So, let us find the Power of Sanctuary, Peace Delivered, and Joy to the World, as we too come to be fed at the Bethlehem Manger, as we sing together verses 1 and 3 of Hymn #113 Angels We Have Heard on High.

Hymn #113, vv. 1, 3 *Angels We Have Heard on High*

The Advent Sermon Series "THE JOURNEY--WALKING THE ROAD TO BETHLEHEM--WITH..." is based in part on: Hamilton, Adam, *The Journey—Walking the Road to Bethlehem*, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2011, 2016