

## Christmastide

Welcome to Christmastide! This season of the liturgical year will wrap up next Sunday with Epiphany. I trust that you all had a Merry Christmas on Wednesday. Now that the hustle and bustle of Christmas is over for most of us, we can get settled in, kick back and relax, and spend some much-deserved down time at home. Of course we know, our real home is with God. Our current homes and situations, as much time and energy as what we put into them – are only temporary at best.

In our Old Testament lesson this morning, we heard about Samuel serving God, even as a young boy. He, quite literally, was at home with God. Samuel served in what was the temple of the Jewish people of the day – more accurately called the tabernacle because the walls of it were made from animal skins and woven fabric – under Eli the priest. Though separated from his biological family, Samuel was nurtured in the presence of God. His mother, Hannah, faithfully visited him year after year, bringing him a robe as a tangible expression of her love and prayers.

As people, sometimes we have a warped sense of home, and family, for that matter. If you have your Bible or a Bible app handy, turn with me to Luke's Gospel. We're going to read from the second chapter, verses fifteen through twenty-one. **Read Luke 2:15-21.**

## Oh What a Glorious Night

Some of you probably recognize a few of these verses from the other night during our Christmas Eve service. It was the same passage we looked at then. We talked about the shepherds as an example for us to follow. I want to take things another way with you this morning, though. In other words, don't tune out if you were here Tuesday night – we're covering a different topic – one about what it means to be at home.

The Gospel lesson this morning opens partway through the events which happened on that first Christmas night long ago in the fields of Bethlehem. An angel appeared to shepherds in the field and told them the greatest news that the world had ever heard to that point, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger," (Luke 2:11-12). And then a great company of the heavenly host appeared and sang praises to the Lord. Can you imagine the excitement the shepherds must have felt, after they got over the shock of the sights and sounds of the angelic choir? Oh what a glorious night!

Talk about a once-in-a-lifetime experience! "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about,'" (verse 15). The angels' song wrapped up, and they returned to the throne room of heaven to continue in service to the Lord. And the shepherds hurried off, "and found Mary and Joseph, and

the Baby, who was lying in the manger,” (verse 16), Luke records. They wanted to see this sight which the angels spoke of.

### **Quest for Home**

The shepherd’s journey to search for God-with-us mirrors our quest for home. They leave their familiar surroundings and seek something – Someone – greater than themselves, drawn by the promises of peace, hope, and salvation. Their response is immediate and wholehearted. When they arrive at the manger and see the Babe in the manger, they are overwhelmed with a sense of awe and fulfillment. In that humble stable, they find much more than the Baby. They found their spiritual home.

The shepherds teach us that home for us, is where God’s presence dwells. It’s not defined by physical structures but by experiences shaped from being with Jesus. Luke records, “When they had seen Jesus, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this Child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them,” (verses 17-18). The shepherds’ joy and eagerness to share the Good News help remind us that encountering Christ transforms us. Encountering God-with-us also calls us to invite others into this divine home.

Now let me clarify something here for us. God gives us free will. He gives us a choice. Over the last five or so years, I’ve heard various people say they aren’t comfortable coming to church if \_\_\_\_\_ is allowed here. Now you fill in the blank. It might be a person, it might be a particular view, perhaps a political persuasion different than ours, it may be someone with a different lifestyle. And so, they sometimes quit coming. Instead of focusing on the main thing – Jesus Christ – they get bogged down in the minutiae and make mountains out of molehills.

### **What’s Going to Happen in Heaven?**

This is precisely what happened in the United Methodist Church during 2022 and 2023. Some folks decided they couldn’t live under the same big roof knowing there were people with differing points of view in the church as them, so they went and formed their own organization. And there’s been fighting ever since. Two weeks ago, in Nigeria, three people – a 27-year-old man was shot and killed, and two toddlers were burned to death when their huts were lit on fire, in violence between the United Methodist Church and the Global Methodist Church. Multiple people have been left homeless as a result of the on-going violence.

I have a question for all these folks who think they can’t be in the same church with various people they don’t like. What are you going to do when you get to heaven? When you get to heaven, and look through the pearly gates, and see someone you didn’t like here below? Will you go on in – because there’s plenty of room, even here at New Hope – or will you say, “Nah, Lord, I can’t be here with this person, send me in the other direction.”? I mean, we can laugh about it, but in all seriousness, if you can’t stand being around people who God loves, where does that leave you? I think it’s something worth considering as we close out 2024. When we get to heaven, are we

going to treat people differently than we did here, and if so, then why aren't we treating them the way we would there, now?

Samuel dedicated himself to serving God over his entire lifespan. Being at home with God involves dedication as well as service. How do we serve God in our daily lives? Do we let our lives become dwelling places for God on the other six days of the week?

### **Examples of Faithful Servants in Action**

Jim and Elisabeth Elliot were a missionary couple who went to Ecuador to a remote indigenous tribe in the 1950's. The tribe they went to had never heard the Gospel. Jim was killed by members of the tribe. Despite the brutal murder of her husband, Elisabeth continued the mission and saw many of the people turn their lives over to Christ.

Another example is Dr. Kent Brantly, a missionary doctor who served in Liberia during the Ebola outbreak of 2014. Brantly contracted Ebola while caring for patients and almost died. He recovered and credited his faith and calling for his willingness to risk everything to serve others. His story reflects a modern shepherd's heart, seeking to dwell in God's presence even in the most challenging circumstances.

James Lawson stands out as another powerful example of someone who gave up comfort to follow God's call. Born into a family of Methodist pastors, Lawson got involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and used nonviolent principles rooted in his Methodist faith. He was arrested, faced persecution, but remained steadfast in his commitment to justice and reconciliation.

Finally, there's the example of Mary McLeod Bethune. She founded a university in Florida. Born to former slaves, Mary overcame incredible obstacles to pursue her calling as an educator and advocate for Black children. Her life exemplifies a deep commitment to creating a house of learning and opportunities for those in need, rooted in her Methodist faith and values.

### **At Home in God's Presence**

All these examples, along with Samuel and the shepherds, found their home in God's presence. God's home is open to all people who seek Him with humble hearts. Mary was a humble person, and we see what she did. Luke says, "Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart," (verse 19).

How does this happen? Well, friends, it's all the work of God. John 1:14 says, "The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us." Through Jesus Christ, God makes His home with humanity. He invites us into a relationship that transforms and fulfills us.

How do we apply the idea of being at home with God in our lives? First, we seek Him earnestly, and seriously, as the shepherds did. This means we prioritize prayer, worship – including corporate worship with our church family – Bible reading and making space in our hearts for God to take up permanent residence. Second, we must be more like Samuel.

What that means is that we must recognize we're called to serve faithfully, using our gifts and talents to glorify God and bless others. Finally, we are called to share the joy of God's home with the world. The shepherds didn't keep the Good News to themselves. Luke tells us, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told," (Luke 2:20). The shepherds were eager to tell the Good News to anyone who would listen to them.

### **Ambassadors Doing the Work of Christmas**

They spread the news far and wide. Similarly, we're called to be ambassadors for Christ. Whether we like it or not, we represent the Kingdom of God to the world. Sometimes we do pretty good at that, and then other times, not so much. We're called to invite others to experience the love and peace found only in Him.

Being at home with God should be – and is – the ultimate fulfillment of the deepest longings of those who call themselves Christians. The stories of the shepherds and Samuel remind us that God's presence is our true home. It's a place of belonging, growth, and joy – and sometimes we find that we have some "crazy in-laws" or "cousins" in the mix, but we love them anyways. As we journey together through life, let's continually seek to dwell with God, serving Him faithfully, and inviting others to join us in His gracious embrace. Now is the time for us to begin what the late United Methodist theologian Howard Thurman called *The Work of Christmas*:

When the song of the angels is stilled,  
When the star in the sky is gone,  
When the kings and princes are home,  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,  
The work of Christmas begins:  
To find the lost,  
To heal the broken,  
To feed the hungry,  
To release the prisoner,  
To rebuild the nations,  
To bring peace among the people,  
To make music in the heart.

**Prayer:** We bless You, Abba, Father, for You have visited Your people in One like us in all things but sin, and in human fragility You have revealed the face of divinity. Gather into Your arms all the peoples of the world, so that in Your embrace we may find blessing, peace, and the fullness of our inheritance as Your sons and daughters. Amen.