

## THE SHEPHERDS

Rev. Richard Rogers

Wednesday, Dec. 18, 2024

Alright; I want to say a thank you to all of you. This being the last Wednesday night of the year, I want to thank you all for your support of this service; for attending the service; for your generosity to the service. I want to acknowledge everybody online who watches us week after week after week. Occasionally someone will come from -- we had somebody from Pennsylvania last week come -- and they came for the Sunday and they came for the Wednesday service because they've been watching for years, and they wanted to come and just celebrate this service.

So to all of you that are watching online, God bless you! Thank you! Thank you for your generosity this year and know that, as we move into this Christmas season, we are absolutely holding you in prayer. And that applies to the people that watch us online. And guess what? It applies to all of you, as well.

So this this season, I've been doing ... I've been wanting to look at the minor characters of the Christmas Story. And you can say, "*Richard, there are no minor characters in the story of Jesus.*" [Congregants laugh] Right? "*Everyone is important in God's eyes.*" True! Right? But sometimes we focus on the major ones ... that we don't. And I wanted to kind of slow this thing down so that we could kind of look at some of the other aspects of this Christmas Story.

And so, tonight I want to look at the shepherds. And I want you to know that I know a shepherdess. Do you know a shepherdess? I know a shepherd! She became a shepherd in Eastern Oregon and she is now an opera singer in New York City. And she began to train her voice by singing to the sheep. And you know, there's a line in Scripture where, "*They will hear my voice and they will respond.*" And her voice is enormous! And the way it got that big was she would sing in the valleys and in the hills, and her sheep would hear her singing her favorite opera, and they would come back down. And I love this! I mean, I know a shepherdess. I think I'm one of the few people on the whole planet that literally knows a shepherdess! Right?

And, in fact, she was ... My wife and I got married 16 years ago last week, and she was at our wedding. And we got married at Unity of New York. And we ... After the ceremony, everyone that was there walked down Fifth Avenue. We got married on a Saturday night; we walked down Fifth Avenue with all the Christmas lights and all the stores. And it was fabulous! We walked down from the beginning of Central Park where the Unity Church is there. We walked down Fifth Avenue. We ended up at the Rockefeller Center with a giant Christmas tree. And our whole wedding party was there, and she was there,

And she had purchased this gown from the Met: the New York Metropolitan Opera. And it was this white fur-trimmed cape, gown, hood ... just this magnificent dress. And when we got to the tree, she sang, "When You Wish Upon a Star," my favorite song. And so, of course, there's a star at the top of the tree and she sang, "When You Wish Upon a Star," with this voice that you could hear. And if you've ever been there during Christmas time at the Rockefeller Center, you are as packed as you can be. I mean, it is packed!

And she launches into "When You Wish Upon a Star," and all the little girls came from everywhere to stare at this famous person ... because they knew she had to be famous! She had the gown; she looked like she walked off the set of Disney. She was fabulous! And that is a memory that I will have forever.

"*When you wish upon a star ...*" [Congregants join in:] "*Makes no difference who you are.*"

Tonight I want to talk about shepherds. Because the role of a shepherd is to protect, defend and to provide for their flock. And I want you to think, in your own spiritual life, how many times have you wanted somebody to protect, defend, and provide for you in your time of need?

Like, there's that human wanting -- that human longing. And we can think so many times when we when we feel like a victim, when we feel like life isn't fair, when we feel like we're getting a bad deal. And we want somebody to step in to protect, defend and provide for us. And during this Christmas season, I want you to see that that is the role of the Holy Spirit in your life! That there is this level of divine activity that is guiding you and directing you and providing for you and watching over you.

And the only thing that we have to do is to be the good sheep and listen for that activity of God that is always calling us home! This activity of God that is always guiding us and directing us and will be our shepherd.

You know, the term "pastor" comes from this idea of being a shepherd. A shepherdess. Right? And that term's always made me a little uncomfortable. Right? Because I didn't want to be anybody else's shepherd. Like I felt like I was doing the very best I could, day in and day out, just listening to my own guidance of God. Right? And doing the work that God had given me to do.

And I truly feel like, that we're called -- especially during this Christmas season --to allow God to guide us, to protect us, to defend us, to provide for us.

*One of my favorite scriptures is in John 10 where Jesus says:*

*"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. For the hireling is not a shepherd, who does not own the sheep, and sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and flees; and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. And he flees because he's a hireling and cares not for the sheep.*

*But I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me. As the Father knows me, I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for my sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this field; and I must bring them also and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd.*

*And for this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life and I will take it up again. And no one takes it from me. But I lay it down by my own accord. And I have the power to lay it down and I have the power to take it up again; for I have received from my Father."*

Like, tonight I believe that we are truly here during this Christmas season to receive the fullness of God. Like, from the beginning of time, we have been told that we are created in God's image and likeness. And, for most of this, that's kind of an intellectual understanding: "Yeah, yeah, yeah, created in the image and likeness." But we don't really believe it!

Like, we really believe at some level we're broken. Some of us believe that we're severely broken. Some of us believe that we're less than. And yet, tonight, what if you were willing to receive the fullness of God and let God guide you and direct you in your spiritual life that you may receive more than you've ever had before? That you may receive the light, the love, the peace, the healing power of God?

For in the Christmas Story, the shepherds play a key role. Reading from Luke :

*"And in that region, there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of God shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, 'Be not afraid, for I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: that you will find him a babe wrapped in swaddling cloth and*

*laying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.'*

*And when the angels had gone away, they went and took heed. And the shepherds came to one another and said, 'Let's go over to Bethlehem and see the thing that's happening, which the Lord has made known to us.' And they went with haste and found Mary, Joseph and the baby laying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known what had been told to them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.*

*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them by the angels."*

The shepherds would wander and they would tell the tales of what and what they had seen. And I really wondered: Why did the angel appear to shepherds? Like, why shepherds? Like, what's the big deal? Why shepherds?

And as I thought about it and prayed about it, I realized that the shepherds were the first social media of our time. [Congregants laugh] They were! Right? Social media: you can have an opportunity to share your good news. And, you know, in that time, there wasn't a real way that you could reach hundreds and hundreds of people very quickly like we can now. Now with social media, we can reach lots and lots of people with either an inspired message ... or cat videos. [Congregants laugh] Not that cat videos aren't inspiring from time to time.

But I want you to see ... Because I really prayed about: Why did the angel reveal to the shepherds? What was it about the shepherds that made them so important that they were given this pivotal role in the Christmas Story? That the angels would show them what was going on?

And it's because the shepherds were traveling. They were always moving. Their job was to share the good news!

And I want you to see, as we move into this new year, that you have a role to play in this Christmas Story: in the story of what God is doing in your life. And your role in this Christmas Story is to share the good news with family and friends and the people that God connects you to that want to hear the good news of what God is doing in your life.

You know many times in our life, we begin to lose faith. We wonder if there is a Power or Grace or Principle that we can hold on to. And I believe that the shepherds being the first ones that revealed the birth of Jesus was a way of revealing to all of us that we have a role in sharing the good news in what God is doing in your life.

But for us to be aware of that, we actually had to be paying attention to what God is doing in our life! That, many times in our life, we get so busy with what's not working, what we don't have, what's missing that we forget about all the ways that God is showing up, day in and day out, to bless us. And asking us to take that out into the world: to be the messenger of good news to the people that we have contact with; for the people that we can make a difference.

And so, when we move into this new year, are you willing to take on the mantle of a shepherd, and really look at how God is calling you to share the good news of what's going on in your life?

You know, earlier in this series, I talked about how I believe this holy season is truly a spiritual process. And that it begins with Thanksgiving. And in this church, we spend this 40 days really diving deep into gratitude and spending time really giving thanks. And then we go into Christmas, which is about

awakening to all that God is in us, and really giving birth to the Christ within. And then we move into a brand new year. And in that year, we're called to actually move into that year as a greater expression of ourselves. And part of our work is really to let our light shine: to give the good news; to share what God's doing. And to do that, we actually have to stay awake! We actually have to be looking for the good news. We have to be looking for what God is doing in our life and how God is making our life better, blessing us, moving us forward. And to be willing to share that with others so that they can hear the good news and celebrate with us.

So there are several reasons, I believe, that we are called to share the good news. And one is that sharing your good news improves your mental health. Sharing positive news can increase your feelings of happiness and allow you to feel more stable. Can you imagine there may be times in the new year where you're feeling a little unstable. [Congregants laugh] Nobody? I'm the only one that ever feels a little unstable? Right?

And what I want you to see is: when you're feeling unstable, when you're feeling a little rocky, when you're feeling a little upset, I want you to ask yourself: Have I been sharing the good news about what's going on in my life? Because if you weren't paying attention to your good news, we begin to get a little freaked out. That's a spiritual term. [Congregants laugh] I think God said it to Moses when they were wandering in the wilderness.

As you show your good news, it improves your outlook on life. It increases your feeling of kindness and generosity. There is even a study that shows that, if you're sharing your good news, it will reduce your blood pressure, your cholesterol levels and your stress level. Amen! If you could -- instead of taking medication -- if you could just more effectively share your good news, can you imagine how impactful that would be?

The second point of why I think you need to be sharing your good news is it strengthens your relationships. Sharing good news creates a bond of intimacy and deepens relationships. When people respond enthusiastically to your good news, you can feel a connection, and both of you are blessed! Because you don't know -- when God gives you the encouragement to share your good news -- you have idea how that's going to impact someone else's life. And they're going to feel connected to you, because they're going to feel important enough that you would share the thing that for you is probably your most cherished thing. It builds relationship. It strengthens relationship. That, by you having the courage to share your good news with others, they will feel special, and you will feel heard.

Three: it restores hope. Positive news can restore faith in humanity; it can restore faith in God. And it reminds us that positivity still exists in the world. Can I get an amen? [Congregants: "Amen!"] Right? Sometimes we just need to remember that the world isn't going down the drain; that God is still in charge, and that good is at work in our lives.

Point number four: it refreshes our soul. Good news gives us ... renews our soul, refreshes us, and reminds us of God.

And five: sharing good news can inspire you to find solutions to even your most difficult problems. You know, one of the things -- when we go into the Hebrew Bible; when we go into the Old Testament -- from time to time, the Israelites would have hit a wall, they'd hit a challenge, they'd hit a problem. And what they would do when -- if you read the Old Testament -- is they would tell their story again. They would tell the story of how God helped them through one challenge; one problem after another. And they would be inspired by the idea: *"If God got us through all this stuff, God is going to get us through this."* That the God that lifted us out and out of the wilderness and took us into the Promised Land is going to bless us here and now.

That, every time you need to be inspired about your life, I want you to look around and be reminded of all the ways that God has made a difference in your life.

There was a study done by Nathan Lambert of Brigham Young University, who said that people who share positive news stories about themselves and others, and do it at least twice a week, are statistically happier than other people.

So, that's the model for the new year: that, at least twice a week, you're sharing your good news. Whether it's in your prayer group, your small group, your mastermind, the buddy on the bus, a coworker, a family member ... It doesn't matter, but your good news is worthy of you sharing it. If you want God to bless you -- if you want your life to become greater and greater and greater -- I think the give back for us is that we have to be willing to share that.

*"Let your light so shine that others will see your good works and give glory to God."* It is the basis of our spiritual life that, once you are blessed -- and we are all blessed! And once you are blessed, you have a job; you have a role; you have a responsibility to share that good news as quickly and with as many people as you can without being ultra annoying. [Congregants laugh] Right?

There is a line, right? There is a line. I don't want you to go over the line, but I want you to go up to the line! I want you to be just this side of the most annoying person you know, because you are always sharing your good news and what God is doing in your life.

I want people to be saying, "Here he comes." [Congregants laugh] *"I don't know what he's going to have to say, but it's going to be a good story. I wish the guy would just get depressed once or twice a year. Because he's just got so many good stories about what God is doing in his life."* But that is our role! [Congregants applaud] It is! Thank you! Right?

The reason the shepherds were the first one that the angels went to after Christ was born was to reveal the good news so that they could hold ... Let me say it:

*"Be not afraid. For behold, I bring you good news of great joy, which will come to all people."*

That's you! You're now the shepherd! You're the one that God is going to bless! And, as you are blessed, your job is not to hide that -- not to keep your light under a bushel -- but to share the good news, knowing that, as you share the good news, you may never know how that good news is going to impact somebody else's life. But it will!

And think about it: when somebody shares their good news to you, I want to rub their head. Like, when they share good news with me, I want to rub their head! Because I want it to rub off on me, right? I want to add the good news to my life, and I want it to multiply and expand for all of us.

If you want to increase the good in your life -- and then I'll get off of it. If you want to increase the good in your life, constantly, regularly, abundantly tell the story of what God's doing for you. Because we need to hear it: that God is an active, fully present in our life to bless us, to heal us, to prosper us, to be our God. And our job is to be like the angels who praise it and acknowledge it, and like the shepherds who take it out into the world. That was their job, and they did their job.

Will you pray with me?

I invite you to open your mind, your heart, your soul to the activity of God tonight. That we are absolutely here for God. We are here to be blessed by God. We are here to enjoy God. We are here to know that, over and over again, God is at work in our lives. And our job is to take that good news and share it with the world. So in all things -- in all things -- we give thanks. And it is done. Amen.