

## PRACTICE BEING A SHEPHERD

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So, this morning we're going to talk about an important metaphysical symbol that appears in the Christmas story. Today, we are going to talk about the role and the importance of the shepherds and the spiritual message that they have for us.

But we're going to begin first by reading from the second chapter of Luke, Verse 8-20:

*"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And the angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

*But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid. I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a savior is born to you. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.'*

*Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly hosts appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men to whom his favor rests.'*

*When the angels had left them and gone to heaven, the shepherd said to one another, 'Let's go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.' So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what they were told about this child. And all who heard were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard."*

Besides this passage about shepherds, there are a couple other important ones about shepherds: the 23rd Psalm – *"The Lord is my shepherd."* And Jesus, in the 10th chapter in the Book of John, said, *"I am the good shepherd."*

Shepherds represent the source of the Divine: the divine guidance and divine being provided for -- being the divine source. It protects, nurtures, restores and leads us to green pastures, which is greater fulfillment. Leads us besides still waters, which represents peace and harmony. And gives us everything that we need to move through even the difficult times – the dark valleys of our lives.

Charles Fillmore said that shepherds are the symbol of the inner Christ mind and the consciousness that guides us.

And shepherds are kind of simple. They're just ordinary people. They have no halo. They have no special power, no resume, no Instagram following. [Congregants laugh] They're just plain folks. And yet, they were the first ones who heard the good news of great joy.

And the question would be: Why? And the "why" is because they were spiritually ready. They were spiritually prepared. And they are very good examples for us to follow on our own spiritual path.

So, this morning, we're going to look at four spiritual qualities – four lessons of the shepherd – for us to practice to truly receive the good news of great joy.

In Unity, when we look at the Bible from a metaphysical perspective/meaning, we see that every person and every place in the Bible represents some aspect in us. And we can utilize them to understand ourselves -- to unfold the fullness of the expression of the Christ's nature and divine potential in us.

So, the first practice of being a shepherd is **LIVING OUT IN THE FIELDS**. Living out in the fields, which really represents dwelling in a space of quietness and peace; of silence and stillness.

You know, the calming and grounding effect of that image of the field and the green pasture is also represented in the Parable of the Loaves and Fishes. You remember when there weren't enough fish and loaves? There were thousands of people. The first thing Jesus had everybody do ... you know what they did? Sit down on the green grass. And so, there wasn't any panic. There wasn't fear or anger. The first thing was a consciousness of calmness: being grounded and centered in peace, and creating the quietness in us to allow that to be able to happen.

Another example is in, again, the 23rd Psalm. It says, *"He makes me lie down in green pastures."* You know, that *"makes me lie down"* – makes me rest and relax into a sense of calmness and a sense of peace. Because that is always the greatest way to move forward in any situation in our lives.

You know, most people have a little challenge with stillness. Because we, as human beings, have just tendency to be busy, busy, busy. Always rushing; always in a hurry: go, go, go, do, do. You know, we think more is better; bigger is better; faster is better. But when we do so much of this doing, what happens is: the beingness gets stifled and diminished. You know, the spiritual essence of who we are gets kind of pushed away. When we are constantly busy, we are truly not as effective or efficient as we think. When we're constantly busy, we do not get as much done and we're not as peaceful or centered or grounded. We have a hard time being still and quieting ourselves.

Blaise Pascal said that all of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone. David Kundtz – in his book, "Quiet Mind" -- says, "Be still and be with yourself. By doing nothing, the being parts of us actually comes alive." The more still we are, the more we awaken that divine essence and presence and power within us.

And so, **the message of the shepherds is to take time to make space; take time for quietness and silence and stillness on a regular basis.**

And we all need to ask ourselves: How much of a priority is spending time in the quiet and silence and daily meditation of practice in your life? It absolutely behooves us to have a practice of stepping out of the busy and into the quiet. Out of the hurry and into the silence.

Jesus, four or five times a day, stepped out of the busyness of life and withdrew. He came apart awhile. He was still, calm. Quieted himself. This "living out in the fields" is about being calm and present; more grounded; more centered on a consistent and regular basis. Because, when we step out, we not only quiet our minds, but we kind of have a little introspection. Like asking ourselves: What is mine to care for? And how can I do a better job in caring for myself? Or my relationship? Or my family? Or my health? What in my life needs some time and attention? Some nurturing?

The Christ light is revealed, not in the hurry, but in the holy stillness and silence. That's why the whole idea about the manger is where the child was born and not in the inn. There was no room.

And if you look at the vital and important things for us to do – like to have introspection, time for reflection, and contemplation and meditation – all of them require a commitment to create some quietness. To create some time and some space to be still and to just sit in the silence and allow the Spirit and the magnificence and the wisdom to bubble up and come forth from us.

So, the first thing we need to do to be more shepherd-like is to make sure we're "living out in the fields": taking time for stillness and quietness on a consistent and regular basis.

The second thing they teach us is to **KEEP WATCH OVER OUR FLOCKS AT NIGHT**. The flock really represents our thoughts: our thoughts, our feelings, the natural life energy that flows from us that

sometimes gets a little bit scattered. Watching the flock by night is an actual discipline of tending to our own thoughts; of guarding our minds; making sure we're staying positive and we're staying more love-centered and compassion-centered.

Because sometimes it's hard to manage our own thoughts. How many people have ever had your mind filled with negativity or worry, and you just couldn't stop it or shut it down? Anybody have your mind just keep going and going? But how many people also know and believe that your thoughts have a huge impact on your quality of your experience, your life, and what you attract in your life?

Keeping watch over our flocks by night is an important discipline for all of us, because our minds can get distracted, preoccupied and overly focused on the negative. Sometimes we just think the same thoughts over and over and over again ... and usually not the helpful ones. That's why, when Paul said, *"Be transformed by the renewing of your mind,"* he was saying that because our minds need renewing. And we have to do that job on a regular basis.

You know, our minds are tough to work with, because we already have a negativity bias. Because of that "fight or flight" instinct, we're always kind of looking out for the danger. And it gets even worse. Did you know that we are more negative at night? It is called the "mind after midnight" effect. [Congregants laugh] For real! We tend to get more negative at night.

A friend of mine once said, *"My mind is like a bad neighborhood; you don't want to go there at night."* [Congregants laugh] And he also said, *"My mind is like a darkroom; that's where the negatives get developed."* [Congregants laugh]

You know, watching our flock – our thoughts – by night is hard; it takes work! Our minds can wander and jump all over the place with all kinds of crazy, negative, irrational thoughts. And the particular type of thoughts – sometimes it's fearful thoughts. Our minds are flooded and filled with fear. Notice when they told [the shepherds] the good news, you know the first thing they said? *"And they were terrified."* Their minds went to fear. But the angel said, *"Do not be afraid, for I give you good news of great joy."*

And so, the message here is: Can you lay aside your fear? Can you let go of your fear and absolutely trust that God has something good for you? You will be guided to something greater and better if you just let go of the fear; if you calm the thoughts – keep them more positively centered – that God will lead you and guide you to something greater, just like the shepherds were also led.

My mom always used to tell me, *"Richard, guard your mental house."* Because she knew that we all can slip into negativity. And it's an important thing for us to help ourselves keep our mind as positive as possible. Because sometimes we can say things like, *"Life is unfair."* *"Things never work out for me."* *"I always get the short end of the stick."* *"There never seems to be enough."* *"I probably won't get that raise or promotion."* *"You know I'm really lousy with names. I can't remember people. I have just a horrible memory."*

We say these things; we don't even realize what we're doing to ourselves! If our thoughts do, in fact, create and attract our experiences and our feelings in life, then we need to be careful! Look at the words that we are speaking!

My mom introduced me to this thing in Unity. How many people know what denials and affirmations are? You know, a reasonable amount of us. And what a denial is ... I used to just like the affirmations. You know, *"I am wonderful, and things are working out well,"* and blah, blah, blah. But the denial is to try and uproot some of those deeply held beliefs that we don't even realize that we have ... like, *"Life is unfair, and things never work out for me."* You know, *"I'll never get the promotion,"* or *"I'm bad at this, or I'm bad at that."*

And what it does: it doesn't deny its reality or its experience, but it denies that it has power to control us our lives. So: *"I deny that my previous belief that life is unfair has any power over my success and happiness."* And it's about denying those negative things. Acknowledging them, and then affirming something better, affirming something greater. You know, that *"Life is unfair' has no power over me."* And we could replace it by saying, *"But all things are working together for my highest good. That is the truth."* Or to say, *"My thoughts on fear have no power over me, because I am positive, I am peaceful and I am prosperous."*

That it's always important to notice – watch our flock by night; see the things that aren't working, and bring some of those in to transform them into something more positive, and something more prosperous.

I love Psalm 19, Verse 14. It says, *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Thy sight, o Lord, my rock and my redeemer."* And what it's saying is: make sure, when you speak your words, that they are in alignment with the kind of person you want to be, with the kind of life you want to live, for the difference you want to make, and the things you want to experience and create.

Our words and our thoughts reflect what we want to attract and create. And so, we need to change the words that really aren't supporting the kind of life that we want: the kind of life of peace and love and harmony and joy and prosperity. You know, there is good for us, but it's our job to align our flock; to align our thoughts and our energies with the good that we desire.

So, the second important thing that the shepherds teach is to keep watch over our flock by night, and to help us align them towards the things that we desire.

The third thing that they teach us ... It says, *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened."* And I think what they're really saying is: *"Let's go and let's see it for ourselves."* It's one thing to hear about something; it's one thing to talk about something; it's one thing to say, *"Oh, that's so nice"* and high-five one another because we're so excited about it. But sometimes we end up doing nothing with it. We just get excited.

How many people have been excited about some new thing that was going to make your life better in some way, somehow. And a couple weeks later, you go back to the old way and you don't even complete it. Anybody ever have that? I see nobody raising their hands, but I see a lot of hedge nodding.[Congregants laugh] Okay. A nod will do!

And so, the important thing it's saying here is ... *"Let's go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has happened"* is saying, **I WANT TO EXPERIENCE IT FOR MYSELF.** I want to own this and embody this and have it be a part of my consciousness, a part of my life. I want my life to be changed, and I am willing to do the work. I'm willing to travel that road. **I'M WILLING TO GO THERE AND MAKE THAT JOURNEY.**

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, *"Why should we not have a first-hand and immediate experience of God?"* It is not just reserved for the few – for the exceptional – but it is available to every single one of us if we are willing to do the work.

Do you want to go deeper? Do you want to feel God at a more profound level than you ever have before? Are you willing to make that commitment and that journey?

And the journey can only be inside us. We're the only ones that can take that journey. And so the question is: Are we willing to go there? Because the kingdom of God is within us! The only way that it can happen is if we do our inner work.

So, the shepherds made the journey to Bethlehem and found the Christ child. And the question is: Are we willing to make that journey and go deeper and find a more profound and personal experience and oneness with the Christ child, with the Spirit of God in us?

I went on a silent retreat like six years ago. I think I've mentioned it a number of times. It was 10 days long – 11 hours of meditation every day. We started out with 68 people, and 54 finished. Fourteen people dropped out, because being in the silence can be hard. Being in the stillness and the quietness is not easy. Spiritual work is hard work. That's why the word “work” is in there. It's because it's tough and it takes work.

But what greater work could you imagine doing than going deeper and to opening a space to allow the wisdom and the beauty and the peace of God to come forth in us and in our lives? To get to the place of the Christ consciousness? To get to alignment, to self-realization – whatever we call those highest levels of oneness in our spiritual life? Wouldn't it be great to go deeper than we ever gone before? To feel that on oneness in a way we've never known it?

Angelus Silesius, a 17th century German Christian mystic, said, *“Though Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born -- if he's not born in thee, your soul is all forlorn.”* And it could happen outside of us a million times, but it is only until it happens – the awakening in us – will it really make a difference?

And I love the words from Jeremiah. One of my favorites: 29:13. And here's what it says. It says, *“If you seek me, you will find me, if you seek me with all your heart.”* That is the only requirement needed to have a deeper sense of oneness and a connection with Spirit – to have the Christ be born in us – is: Are you willing to seek God with all your heart?

So, the third thing is: Let's go to Bethlehem and let's see it and experience it for ourselves, and to be willing to make the journey.

And the final one is to **SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS AND TO GLORIFY AND PRAISE GOD.** St. Francis Assisi said this. He said, *“Preach the gospel at all times and, when necessary, use words.”* [Congregants laugh] And so what he is saying is: live it; be it; embody it; express it in your face and your smile and your words and your thoughts and your actions and your interactions.

And [the Scripture] said, *“And all the people were amazed.”* Like, when we touch on a more profound level and radiate that light and that essence of Spirit, people are amazed.

Everybody remember the movie, “The Ten Commandments”? I think you might have heard of it. And there's a scene that I love, and that's when Moses is coming back down from the mountain, carrying the tablets with the Ten Commandments written out. My favorite part is how radiant he looks. His hair's gotten gray; his skin is, you know, all tan and shiny. And you could just tell this man was profoundly changed. He has gone to a place he's never been. You can see his essence – his spirit – just radiating.

And the fact is: that when we go deeper ... and when I say, *“We let our light shine,”* it means we radiate the essence of Spirit in us. And whether it's as peace, as joy, as love, as kindness, abundance or prosperity, there is something powerful and amazing about that. It spreads the word -- our action, our beingness -- more than any words can.

Everybody remember the movie “City Slickers”? Billy Crystal. Remember? I think his name was Mitch and he was going through a midlife crisis: not happy with his job, didn't know what to do, and blasé with everything in his life. And he's really stuck in a tough place. His wife or somebody encourages him to go to a dude ranch with a couple of his friends. They get into all these adventures. They weren't ranchers at all. So, it was really funny and interesting to see all the things they went through.

And they were intimidated and learned and inspired by a ranch hand named Curley, who scared the heck out of him. And through that process of getting to learn him, he died on that trip. And so, that shook them up a bit. And then they ended up helping give birth to a calf named Norman, I believe.

And so, he comes back after the dude ranch experience to the same wife, same house, same kids, same job, same life. Same everything. Nothing changed. But everything changed! Because he found his smile. He found his joy. And even though he went back to the same life, he wasn't the same person. He was radiating an essence and a presence that was so powerful and incredible that he embodied it.

And for all of us, when we touch and connect with that deeper Spirit, it's going to come out and be expressed in different ways. For some people, it will be expressed with kindness and joy. And some it might be forgiveness and compassion. For some, it might be smiles and laughter. For some, it might be being more encouraging and supportive.

You know, there are all kinds of different ways that the Spirit will express through us. And it's important for us to just do what's most authentic for us. That's what will radiate the most. That is what will spread the Word the most and glorify Spirit.

"The Little Drummer Boy." I haven't heard that in a long, long time. I don't know where it came from, but the little boy feels bad that he's not good enough to play for the king. And then somehow he gets this awareness that all he has to do is play is best. That's all that's needed. That's all that's asked.

And so a question for all of us is: Are you playing your best for yourself, for God, and for the people in your life? Are you expressing the best of your gifts? Are you expressing the best of your Christ qualities? I want you to think of one quality that you would like to embody and express and radiate on a daily, on a conscious, on an intentional basis. So, it could be appreciation; it could be kindness, encouragement; it could be compassion; it could be generosity. But could you imagine ...?

Let's say you chose to embody and radiate and express appreciation. How would you express appreciation every day? What are the forms or ways? Who would you express that appreciation to? How would you express more appreciation into yourself,? Into your relationship? Into your family? Into your work? Into your health? Into every aspect of your being? It is a powerful, transformative thing to spread the Word.

I heard this story about this guy who lost his job and he was really down. It was in a Napoleon Hill book. I don't think it was "Think and Grow Rich." It was a different thing. Anyway, Napoleon Hill said to the guy, *"Within a mile radius of your house, go to all the stores there and offer your help to them every single day. And no matter what the service, no matter of the project, just go there."*

And so he started going to these places. Some people thanked him but didn't really need. But him just reaching out and offering and reaching out an offering began to change things. He began to be known in the community. You know, he began to make a difference for some of those people. And he not only ended up getting a job, but he created a better life. He was radiating an idea of service and support and help so much. It not only blessed his life, but it enriched it in a greater way than he imagined. And he became a part of the community that I'm sure absolutely blessed other people.

Do you remember the parable that says don't hide your light? *"Don't put it under a bushel basket, but put it on a lamp stand so it gives light to everyone in the house."* And that's my favorite part, is: when we let our light shine, we're really blessing everyone in the house. We're really blessing everyone in our community and in our family and in our world. That's what we're here to do – is to bless everyone! Radiate; spread the Word! And, when absolutely necessary, use your words! But use your life – let your life be the example, and how you show up and express yourself.

A shepherd was herding his flock in a remote pasture when suddenly a brand new BMW came out of a cloud of dust. The driver was wearing an Armani suit, Gucci shoes, Ray Ban glasses, and a designer tie. And he rolled down the window and said to the shepherd, *"If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?"*

The shepherd looked at the man. He looked at all the sheep grazing. And he said, *"Sure; why not?"*

Then the young man parked his car and pulled out his MacBook Pro computer and connected to his AT&T cell phone. Then he surfs to an NSA page on the internet and calls up a GPS satellite system to find out the exact location of where he is. And he connects to another feed of the NSA satellite and scans the area with an ultra-high resolution photo. The young man opens a digital photo in Adobe Photoshop and exports the image to a facility in Hamburg, Germany. Within a few minutes, he receives an email on his iPhone 17, and the image is processed, and the data is stored, and he uploads it and prints a 150-page report.

And he says to the shepherd, *"You have exactly 1,586 sheep."*

And the shepherd said, *"Yeah, that's right. Well, I guess you'll have to take one of my sheep because that was our deal."*

And so, he goes over the guy and grabs one of the sheep and stuffs it into the trunk. [Congregants laugh]

And then the young man says, *"Hey, if I do the same thing – if I tell you exactly what you do for a living, can I get back my sheep?"*

And he says, *"Sure!"*

And then the shepherd said instantly, *"You're a consultant."*

The guy said, *"Wow! That's correct. How did you guess that?"*

He said, *"Oh, I didn't guess at all. You showed up here when nobody called you. You want to get paid for an answer I already knew to a question I didn't ask, and you don't know anything about my business. Now, give me back my dog."* [Congregants laugh] All right.

So, shepherds are powerful spiritual symbols. **They are the source of guidance, and they provide for us** in so many ways: they restore, renew, and lead us to greener pastures. And the way we can help bring forth more of the shepherd in us is to live out in the field: to create more space in your life, more quietness on a consistent basis. Keep watch over your thoughts by night, and transform those with denials and affirmations to be more in alignment with the kind of person we are and the kind of life that we want to live. Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's prove it ourselves. Let's live it ourselves. Let's be willing to go deeper than we ever have gone before. **And spread the Word by radiating your light and your essence.**

Christmas is calling all of us to be prepared; to be spiritually ready. And we can do that when we practice being a shepherd.

God bless you all.