

Seeking Sheep

A Sermon for Worship with Communion on the 2nd Sunday of Advent
United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

December 5, 2021

Text: Ezekiel 34:11-16

Our focus this week for our Advent reflections are quiet and unassuming and yet they play a key role in the nativity story – the shepherds. These nameless and faceless individuals appear in many stories in the Bible, in both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. In the Christmas story especially, the shepherds have inspired so much of the imaginative carols we take for granted, even as we sing them. They feature prominently in *The First Noel*, *Angels We Have Heard on High*, *Silent Night*, and so on, and so on. They have also inspired all sorts of imaginings over the ages on what kinds of gifts they would have brought to the Baby Jesus, after following the angels' directive to seek out the babe in the manger. Like the little drummer boy who plays his song for the baby even though I am guessing the last thing the exhausted little mother and infant needed was a drum solo. And, while we're on the subject, does anyone else wonder why a shepherd would have a drum in the first place? A flute maybe, but a drum? Oh well, I digress.

As I thought about the shepherds in the nativity story this year, I wanted us to move beyond their rather narrowly defined role as described in Luke. Instead, I want us to think about shepherds and the shepherd imagery more expansively. So, trusty concordance at the ready, I did a search of texts in the Hebrew Scriptures for passages about shepherds and I came across this gem in Ezekiel. An unusual and “cool” prophet by any standards, Ezekiel is a fascinating character and one who was always getting himself into all kinds of mischief through his weird visions and antics. Probably his most well known vision is of the valley of dry bones where the dead skeletons of the army of Israel come back to life through the breath of God. An incredible vision on so many levels, really, but not what

our focus today as is we consider Ezekiel. Instead, I want us to consider this brief text from Ezekiel we heard read just a few minutes ago. This is a simple and straight forward text, by Ezekiel standards. Yet it presents a profound image of God describing God's own self as a shepherd searching for the lost sheep of his flock. "I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered." Then God goes on to describe all God will do to care for these lost and injured sheep when God finds them once more. God will feed them and make sure they have water to drink, and homes to live in. "I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak," God promises. That, dear ones, is what we are anticipating in Advent. We are waiting for God's presence to become known once more in our midst through caring and compassion shown to all as an act of sheer love. This is what we all long for – to know someone loves us enough to look for us when we are lost, to care for us when we are hurt or broken, to strengthen us when the cares of the world have brought us low. This is the promise of Advent – that God's promise to be with us, to love us unconditionally – will be renewed once more as the Christ Child is reborn in our hearts.

With Ezekiel's beautiful words already ringing in my heart, I came across some incredibly inspirational devotional readings just this past week. For our reflections this morning, I want to share them with you in the spirit of God as the loving shepherd constantly reaching out to us, searching for us, longing to comfort us, recognizing that God's wisdom comes to us from so many different voices . But it can be challenging to locate new voices, new perspectives to enlighten and broaden our hearts and perspectives. So, I would like to share with you three brief devotional readings from two of the Christian writers who most inspire me.

First, I would like to share this devotional written by Diana Butler Bass. Written originally for a column in *The Huffington Post* on December 2, 2012, it appeared in my email inbox this past Wednesday as Bass'

offering for the first of her daily Advent reflection posts on her blog, *The Cottage*.

What words better describe our world than those of Luke? “People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world.” (Luke 21:26) These are not the words of some far-off moment in time. They are words of NOW: Our cities and churches are full of people who are afraid – afraid of loss of their jobs, of income, of health care, of decency, of safety, of change, of pluralism, of ..., of ..., of ... The list of fears is nearly endless. Yet – be honest – has there ever been a time in human history when we’ve not been filled with such fears? Luke’s words are also the words of all of yesterdays. We may imagine the past was better, safer, cleaner, or more stable, but that is not the case. We are a fragile lot, we humans, and our history is roiled with fear – and the stupid things we humans do when we are afraid. And sadly enough, they are probably the words of many of humanity’s tomorrows. Apocalyptic theology does not augur escape; rather, it provides a profoundly realistic view of history – a view which should plunge us more deeply into the shalom of God in the world.

Jesus says, “When you see these things, do not cower in fear, for your transformation is drawing near.” Advent teaches us that in the darkest places of human oppression, the pain of hunger, and political distress that God’s reign is among us. Do not be caught off guard by the fear-filled tides of history, Jesus warned. “But be mindful, praying for strength, that you may escape the fears that roil the earth, and may stand with God.” (Luke 21:36)

This second reading also comes from Diana Butler Bass, first appearing in *Sojourners* on December 3, 2008 and currently featured in her Advent devotional series on her blog, *The Cottage*. Bass here is writing about her encounter with an owl in an Advent calendar she purchased for herself, reflecting on a story about a tiny owl discovered one year in the

branches of the live Christmas Tree purchased for Rockefeller Center in New York City. She writes:

The owl is an ancient symbol of wisdom. Many religious people think faith is about answers, but we may be remiss in that assumption. Scripture teaches us that we are to seek wisdom, that holy Sophia, not the certainty of easy answers. Faith is not passing a doctrine test; rather, faith is about the wisdom of God. Wisdom is a kind of knowing that probes the soul; it goes past answers, often raising more questions on our journey toward God than it resolves. The Jewish philosopher, Victor Frankel, referred to wisdom as “knowing penetrated by unknowing.” Yes, wisdom is elusive. Yet it is considered the greatest of all treasures, more precious than gold. Over and over, the Word directs us to seek, pursue and chase wisdom.

According to both ancient Hebrew and Christian traditions, wisdom has an active quality. Indeed, 50 years ago, the great writer Huston Smith pointed out that wisdom is the ethical life of God in the world. It is the living expression of justice, beauty, and love. Wisdom does not allow its children to sit contentedly in prayer closets, congratulating ourselves on how deeply we experience God. No, holy wisdom calls, pushes, directs, and compels every one of us to act on behalf of the great God of the universe and make shalom. ... Wisdom comes not through money, politics, or power. Rather, wisdom is a way open to all who long for it, experienced through redemptive time and practicing peace. Wisdom, hallowed time, and shalom – each a holy sign directing us away from fear and pointing our pilgrim way toward the Prince of Peace.

So, what is our role here in our church as we anticipate, wait for, plan for, dream about Advent? How can the church be a part of the solutions the fearful people of the world are searching for so desperately? I love the

words of my friend and colleague Mary Luti, a retired academic and pastor, who writes for the *Daily Devotional* published by UCC.org. I was especially entranced by her post just a few weeks ago on November 23. Explaining some of the key nuances of the way in which the United Church of Christ understands the sacrament of Communion, Mary wrote:

It used to be that if you didn't understand it, weren't baptized, didn't believe correctly, or weren't morally pure, you were barred from Communion. It was called "fencing the table." Everybody did it. But these days some churches are unfencing. Completely. They say Jesus never turned anyone away from his table, so neither should we.

Never mind that Jesus was always a guest with no table of his own to welcome anyone to. Or that the early church emphatically excluded notorious sinners, the unbaptized, and heretics. Or that the church has consistently taught that Communion is for members. Only.

We're opening our tables anyway, even though we've never done it this way before. Really. Never.

Now many people once ruled out are coming. Little kids, unbaptized adults, intellectually disabled people, the weary, the sin-sick, the doubting, the curious – they're all coming.

Because they want it, this gift they can't explain, don't believe in correctly, or were told they don't deserve. They want it, this company for their loneliness, this healing for their estrangement, this home for their wandering, this approval for their very beings. This pardon. This love. This memory. This meeting. This mercy. This food.

Above all, this food. For a bottomless hunger.

And the church that's always needed to have all its theological ducks in a row before budging an inch; the church that's always gone to the wall for its beliefs and put others up against the wall for theirs; this obtuse yet still teachable church is finally starting to obey Jesus: "You give them something to eat."

There is so much hunger.

The church has bread.

There is so much hunger in the world outside our doors, dear ones. And the church has bread. We have bread. For the weary, the fearful, the marginalized. But also for the wealthy, the healthy and the powerful, if only they seek for more than the privileges they already have. We have bread for anyone and everyone desiring to hear and answer God's call to love and service, humility and justice. The church, this church – our church – is here with bread for all, with love and compassion for all. Our fences are down. Our doors are open and we are here, ready and waiting for the gift of Emmanuel once again this Christmas. May all who are searching for a place to belong and find comfort know they are welcome here, now and always. Amen.

Sources:

Diana Butler Bass from The Cottage (dianabutlerbass@substack.com)

December 1: Transformation is drawing near

December 3: The Advent Owl?

Daily Devotional (dailydevotional@ucc.org)

November 23, 2021 Needing Bread