**"Who Listens to Angels?"**
**Luke 2:1-20**
**December 24, 2019**
**The Rev. Dr. Mark W. Jennings**

If you've been with us the last few weeks of Advent, you know that we have been talking about angels. More specifically, we've been talking about the archangels that are mentioned in the Bible: Michael, Raphael, and Gabriel. Most common for us in the Christmas story is Gabriel, because it is Gabriel that appears to Joseph in a dream, it is Gabriel that appears to Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, it is Gabriel who appears to Mary to tell her about the miraculous birth. But we don't know who this angel is that appears to the shepherds. This angel is not named. He just comes and tells the news of Jesus birth to these shepherds on the hillside and then heads back to heaven. But since we don't know much about him, what about those to whom he gives the message? What about these shepherds? Did you ever wonder why the angel goes to the shepherds on the hillside that night? Why did he go and give the message to them of all people? Why the shepherds?

Fortunately for old preachers like me, there are scores of book and commentaries written about these Christmas stories, classic sermon collections, scripture commentaries, preachers and scholars who have soared to great heights in their speculations, rhapsodizing about the sheer simplicity of these shepherds. They point out how they represent the common folk, the oridinary person-in-the-street or on-the-hillside; someone just like you and me.

Still others have theorized that these men were actually outcasts, disruputable rogues even, maybe crooks; those, at any rate, whose work conditions made it impossible for them to keep up with the requirements of the Jewish law; and who therefore represented the very sinners that our Lord had come to save.

A third school of thought maintains that they were sacred shepherds, that the sheep they were keeping watch over that night were the holy flocks of the Jerusalem temple and that the shepherds were almost priests, watching these unblemished sheep who would be used for sacrifices in the temple. This way

scholars think that there is a link between the newborn Lamb of God who is welcomed by the sacrificial lambs of the old covenant.

All these ideas are fascinating, maybe even helpful, but they are speculative at best. We don't really know. We don't really know who they were or why they were out there that night when it seems that any sensible and responsible shepherd would have had the sheep safely tucked into the fold for the night, not wandering about some hillside. There's lots we don't know, but we do know something. We know what they did.

What did they do? Well, it's simple. They heard the angels. They heard the announcement. Big deal you might say. Well, it is. Maybe they weren't the first. Maybe the angel went to the innkeeper first, but he was too busy, he had no time to listen to that buzzing in his ears, he had people to feed, beds to make, complaints to listen to, so he never heard the announcement. Then the angel went to the soldiers who were in the tavern in Bethlehem, but they didn't listen either. They were having too good of a time to listen to any song that might be at the edge of their hearing, besides they had their own songs to sing. Then the angel came to us, to you and me. But we were too busy cleaning and shopping and wondering how we were going to pay for all of this. We were cooking because all these people were coming over and which ones are vegan or vegetarian or gluten-free, or we were getting ready to go to Uncle Steve's for Christmas Eve dinner and what would we bring for a host or hostess gift, we can't go empty handed, can we? And what kind of wine do they drink anyway? And those silly songs on the radio, we've heard them a million times by now, can't we just turn them off? Who needs this Christmas music? Nobody was listening, and so Gabriel or Michael, or Raphael, or whoever it was decided the heck with them and left town without deliverin his message. But on the way out of town he saw those shepherds on the hillside and decided to give it one more try. And maybe because they were bored, or had nothing better to do, or maybe because they had been sitting quietly looking at the majesty of the stars and their hearts were somehow attuned to the heavenly song, they heard. They heard the angel speak and they heard the heavenly song. They heard. We at least know that about

these shepherds.

Do you hear? Do you hear the words of the angel? "Fear not. Don't be afraid to listen. This is a good thing. This is a great joy if you let it in. There is a savior. There is someone who loves you and gives himself to you. To you." Do you hear? Maybe you have heard and maybe that's why you're here. Because the other thing we know that the shepherds did is that they got up and went to Bethlehem to see the baby. They got up and went. Maybe you did too. Maybe you heard a few words of the angel or a few notes of the song and it brought you here, hoping to see the baby. Or you went home to that quiet place in your house where you can sit quietly for a few minutes, or you went for a drive in the country to see the stars and the lights, or you went to that quiet place in your heart where you can think for a minute or two. You went to where the angel was calling you to come. You may not have even known that it was an angel calling, because angel voice so often sound like the other voices around us that we sometimes have a hard time discerning which is the message of God from among all the other messages of our age. But you heard, didn't you. And you came—to wherever it was. You heard the angel saying, "Come." And you joined with those shepherds, whoever they were, walking with them to wherever your Bethlehem is. Come. Come let us adore him.

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*The theme of the shepherds as being ones who were there to listen comes from J. Barrie Shepherd's "Faces at the Manger."