

WORSHIP

DECEMBER 17, 2023

THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT SHEPHERD SUNDAY

LIGHT THE SHEPHERD CANDLE:

PRAYER:

Love's Remarkable Plan - by Max Lucado

Seated at the great desk, the Author, who is also the Creator, opens a large book. It has no words written in it because words do not yet exist. No words exist because no words have been needed. There are no human ears to hear them, no human eyes to read them. The Author has yet to create words and those who use them.

And so he takes His pen and begins to write. Like an artist chooses his colors and a woodcarver his tools, the Author chooses his words.

There are three. Three single words. Out of these three will pour a million thoughts, and millions of conversations, discourses, and books. And on these three words, the Author will build His story.

He takes his pen and spells the first. T-i-m-e.

Time did not exist until he wrote it. He, himself, is timeless, but His story would be encased in time. The story would have a first rising of the sun and a first sighting of the moon. . .the first cry of a newborn and the last breath of life. It would have a beginning. . .and an end – for time exists inside the realm of timelessness.

Slowly, tenderly, the Author writes the second word. A name. *A-d-a-m*. As he writes, he sees him, the first Adam. Then he sees all of the others. In a thousand eras in a thousand lands – the Author sees them. Each man. Each woman. Each child. Completely and permanently loved. To each he assigns a time. To each he appoints a place. Not randomly, but by design.

The Author makes a promise to these unborn: *In my image, I will make you. You will be like me. You will be able to think. You will be able to reason. You will be able to love. You will be able to create. You will never die. And you will write.*

They must write. For each life is a book, not to be read, but to be written. True, the Author starts each story, but each life will write the rest of his or her own story.

What a dangerous liberty. How much safer it would be to finish the story for each Adam. To script every option. It would not only be safer, it would be simpler. But it would not bring forth love. Love is only love when chosen.

So the Author decides to give each child a pen. "Write carefully," He says to each one of us.

Lovingly, deliberately, he writes a third word, already feeling the pain. *E-m-m-a-n-u-e-l.*

The greatest mind in the universe imagined time. The supreme ruler of the universe granted Adam a choice. But it was the Author's love that gave Emmanuel. It was love that moved the Author to enter his own story.

Emmanuel would become flesh. He, too, would be born. He, too, would be human. He, too, would have feet and hands. He, too, would have trials, loss, sorrow, pain, and tears.

And most importantly, he, too, would have a choice. Emmanuel would stand at the crossroads of life and death and make a choice.

The Author knows well the weight of that decision. He pauses as he writes the page of his own pain. He could stop. But how can Love not love? So, moved by love He chooses life, though it means death, with hope that His children will do the same.

And so the Author of Life completes the story. He will humble Himself in birth. He will endure disappointment and sorrow in life. And He will suffer horribly in death. Knowing the choice He has made, knowing the choices all Adams will make, he writes, "The End," then closes the book and proceeds to bring to life the story He has written.

HYMN

THOU DIDST LEAVE THY THRONE

Shepherds were often the youngest or the oldest males of the working class in Israel – because these two groups were seen as the least useful for even the common work needing to be done. Shepherds were considered so inferior that their testimony was not admissible in a Jewish court of law. And the work of a shepherd was such that they were seen as consistently religiously impure – especially in comparison to those who were zealous in keeping the ceremonial laws and practicing the purification rites. For this reason, shepherds were despised by the more religious, orthodox Jews.

And yet it was to shepherds that God announced the birth of His son. Think about this. When the son of God was born in Bethlehem, God made only one announcement of his birth, and He made it to those the general culture considered unworthy of testifying to what they heard and saw, and the religious community considered unworthy of entering the sacred areas of the Temple. Here is Luke's account:

LUKE 2:8-14 (#1) . . . In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. (9) And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. (10) But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; (11) for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. (12) This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." (13) And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, (14) "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

The common explanation for sending this marvelous and inspiring announcement to shepherds is because they possibly were shepherding the sheep used in the Temple sacrifices – and especially the sacrifices for sin. That may be the right, but we have no evidence to support it.

I suggest that a more practical, and therefore applicable reason God sent this announcement to shepherds is to set an example for how we are to treat those who are considered the least within our community – be it our religious community, our extended family, our neighborhood, or our nation.

You see, God exhorts us to “Be of the same mind toward one another,” that is, to give everyone the same consideration – regardless of their assigned status or position or income or gender or the color of their skin. Then God says, “Do not be haughty in mind,” that is, don’t think of yourself or your group as superior so as to treat others as inferior. Instead, God says, “Associate with the lowly.” And finally, God warns us not to be wise in our own estimation – or we might say, do not be conceited or vain or boastful or self-exalting (**Romans 12:16**).

Therefore, announcing Jesus’ birth to shepherds is not just an historical fact, it is an example that tells us what God is like, what His ways are, and what He values. In other words, it is an example that sets a standard for our daily living.

HYMN

WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS

Just as Bethlehem Sunday gave us two pictures of Christ (*His role as King and the Bread of Life*), so Shepherd Sunday gives us two pictures of Christ – first, in his role as the Lamb of God, and then as the Good Shepherd of God’s sheep. Today we will begin by looking at Jesus as the sacrificial lamb of God.

JOHN 1:29 (#2)

The next day [John] saw Jesus coming to him and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"

Bethann Bayne: Lamb of God

“Behold, the Lamb of God.” There are two truths that I want to point out about this short statement. **First**, Jesus was God’s perfect, spotless lamb who satisfied God’s demand that sins committed be met with the penalty of eternal death. And like Abraham placing Isaac on the alter, it was God who placed Jesus on the cross to die for our sin. **Second**, according to **1 Peter 1:17-21**, before God created the world, He made the plan to provide His own lamb as the sacrifice for our sins so we could live with Him forever. In other words, before God created us, He loved us in spite of knowing what we would do with our freedom to choose how we will live. Therefore, before creating us, God put a plan in place to save us from our sin so we can live with Him forever. This is a clear indication that God created us with the ability to believe, to repent, and to become new creatures who live by faith in Him, and according to the teachings and example of His son, Jesus Christ.

However, just as we must endure various forms of suffering in order to grow in the faith and pursue godliness, so saving us from our sin so we can live a godly life and dwell with God forever included suffering for Him.

God foretold this suffering that His lamb would have to endure in **Isaiah 53:7 (#2)**, He was oppressed and He was afflicted, yet He did not open His mouth; like a lamb that is led to slaughter, and like a sheep that is silent before its shearers, so He did not open His mouth.

READ: You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd - by Sylvia Dunstan (#2)
You, Lord, are both Lamb and Shepherd. You, Lord, are both prince and slave.
You, [are] peacemaker and swordbringer of the way you took and gave.
You, [are] the everlasting moment; You, whom we both scorn and crave.

Clothed in light upon the mountain, stripped of might upon the cross,
Shining in eternal glory, beggar'd [left destitute] by a soldier's toss,
You, [are] the everlasting moment; You, who are both gift and cost.

You, who walk each day beside us, sit in power at God's side.
You, who preach a way that's narrow, have a love that reaches wide.
You, [are] the everlasting moment; You, who are our pilgrim guide.

Worthy is our earthly Jesus! Worthy is our eternal Christ!
Worthy your defeat and vict'ry. Worthy still your peace and strife.
You, [are] the everlasting moment; You, who are our death and life.

HYMN IN CHRIST ALONE

Tim Batty: Advocate

Not only is Jesus the Lamb of God, He is the shepherd of God's sheep. The Bible gives Jesus three different labels as God's shepherd. He is the **good shepherd** in **John 10:11**, He is the **great shepherd** in **Hebrews 13:20**, and He is the **chief shepherd** in **1 Peter 5:4**.

The main OT prophecy about Jesus being our shepherd is found in **Isaiah 40:9-11 (#3)**, Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news, lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news; lift it up, do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" (10) Behold, the Lord God will come with might, with His arm ruling for Him. Behold, His reward is with Him and His

recompense before Him. (11) Like a shepherd He will tend His flock, in His arm He will gather the lambs and carry them in His bosom; He will gently lead the nursing ewes.

In the NT, Jesus talks about His role as the shepherd of God's sheep. We read this in **JOHN 10:9-12, 14-15 (#3)**, "I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. (10) The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. (11) I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep. (12) He who is a hired hand, and not a shepherd, who is not the owner of the sheep, sees the wolf coming, and leaves the sheep and flees, and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. (14) I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me, (15) even as the Father knows Me and I know the Father; and I lay down My life for the sheep."

HYMN

THERE IS NONE LIKE YOU

Moses was shepherding his father-in-law's sheep when he saw a burning bush that was not being consumed. He went to investigate and heard God speaking out of the fire. It was at this time that God called Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. During this conversation, Moses asked God about His name. We read about this in **Exodus 3:13-14 (#4)**, Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" [14] God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"

John recorded Jesus using the "I AM" words seven times when describing himself. **John 10:11 (#4)**, "I AM the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep".

John 6:35 (#4), "I AM the bread of life; he who comes to Me will not hunger, and he who believes in Me will never thirst."

John 8:12 (#4), "I AM the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life."

John 10:9 (#4), "I AM the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture."

John 11:25-26 (#4), “I AM the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, [26] and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

John 14:6 (#4), “I AM the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.”

John 15:1 (#4), “I AM the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser.”

Kim Bayne: I AM

In English, being verbs such as “am,” “is,” and “are” are used to express either existence or equivalence. For example, the famous phrase, “I think, therefore I am” is used to prove existence. The phrase, “I am a pastor” is an equivalent statement used to indicate what I am as a person.

Therefore, the words “I am” not only show that I exist, they show what I am as a person. And in showing what I am as a person, they show what I do. In other words, I not only exist, I am a pastor, and as a pastor I am active as a pastor in the affairs of everyday life. The same is true for God and Christ in their use of the words “I AM.”

The writer of Hebrews affirms this view of God in **Hebrews 11:6**, “And without faith it is impossible to please [God], for he who comes to God must believe that He is (*exists*) and that He is a rewarder (*what He does*) of those who seek Him.”

Therefore, is it just as important to Christian faith to believe in the active presence of God, or the activity of God, as it is to believe that God exists.

HYMN

WHAT CHILD IS THIS, WHO, LAID TO REST?

As our shepherd, Jesus not only saves us from the penalty, power, and practice of sin, He sanctifies us. We read about this in **1 Corinthians 1:30 (#5)**, “But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” And in **2 Corinthians 5:1 (#5)**, we read, “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come.”

When Jesus sanctifies us, He changes and transforms us both inwardly and outwardly. But why both inwardly and outwardly? Because conduct is always an expression of character, just as our choices are an expression of what we believe, what we value, what we fear, and what we desire. Therefore, what we are on the outside is a manifestation of what we are on the inside.

Jesus told us this in **Mark 7:21-23 (#5)**, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [22] deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. [23] All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man.”

HYMN

NOW UNTO HIM (Who Is Able)

Without any question, being transformed in conduct and character is hard, especially at first. And living godly in an ungodly world is challenging, and even painful at times. Yet Jesus offers us hope in our struggles and confidence that He is with us through it all. We read this in **Matthew 11:28-30 (#6)** “Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

HYMN

JOY TO THE WORLD