

The difficulty of preaching on Christmas is not that the sermon must be so big but rather so small. After all, we've just heard Isaiah deliver his prophecy, Luke deliver his powerful story, and Mary deliver her child: what is there left to say?

The best we may be able to do is to stand around the manger and let the hopes and fears of all our years meet in the encounter with the God who came to us as a newborn child.

Luke's story is so clearly written that we can almost set ourselves within the scene, kneeling by this marvel of a newborn, breathing in the sweet smell of fresh hay, watching the rise and fall of his tiny chest, hearing the sound of the cows lowing in the background, imagining the softness of the newborn's tiny little hand we long to hold. Salvation, born in a manger. As we collapse to the barnyard floor in adoration, we instinctively bend the knee of our hearts in utter humility before the face of salvation, this place where heaven and earth have met. We offer the hopes and fears of all our years before this bundle of a baby, who holds the future of the world in his heart. We lay before God incarnate the heaviness of our heart, the angst we feel over out-of-control situations, our heart-wrenching grief, our worst hurts, and our deepest fears for our loved ones and our world. We wait, we wonder, and we notice that our breath has begun to rise and fall along with his, for something draws us in further than we ever imagined possible into this place we call the holy. Something miraculous happens in our complete surrender of all that we wish were different, hope bubbles up. The worst of our lives has met the best of God and something has shifted. Our breath feels deeper, our hearts lighter, our minds clearer, and we lift our eyes to something beyond us. We have seen salvation and we are changed. This happens for us at the altar, for we have seen salvation in the broken bread.

We leave, like the shepherds, with hope, for with Jesus' birth, so much else was born: a new humanity, a new possibility—a new God, as it were, looking back at us with brand new eyes older than time itself. The hope born on Christmas day had a powerful hold on the hearts of the shepherds, as it does on our own.

When Jesus looked out at the world, after he gulped his first breath, he offered us grace that came in the form of hope, for I believe hope only comes from God. We may have reasonable and positive expectations of something working its way out well, but hope is different than that, it's deeper than that. It's a way of living, a way of moving through life acknowledging the workings of God. Hope comes from a different source, not within us. For it is never something we can manufacture, it is always beyond us, and it often comes as a surprise. Hope is imagining something yet to come, like capturing a sliver of truth, as untouchable and yet as clear as a moonbeam, or our hearts filling in with a fullness that is beyond our imagination. Hope is a gift from God, a particular form of grace, that always happens when we see and encounter salvation.

The shepherds saw salvation that cold and frosty morning, after a heart-pounding race into Bethlehem. They set aside all sane responsibility, leaving their sheep to tend to themselves, carrying only the few weaker ones or those who insisted upon following behind them, with their

tails wagging in delight, seeking the restoration Jesus came to offer to all of creation. The shepherds scooped up the little ones, put them around their necks, and bolted toward the lights of the little town of Bethlehem.

They were running because they wanted to see salvation themselves. They wanted to hold the baby with their own dry, cracked, and dirty hands; they wanted to hear his soft whimpers or cries of hunger with their own ears; they wanted to see with their own eyes what the angels had proclaimed through a host of heavenly terms. The shepherds dashed there because they intuitively knew hope resided there, in that baby in the manger. They got the message that this was for them and this little baby turned the world, making love accessible once again to all.

The Shepherds' Field, in the Holy Land, was one of the places that most grabbed my heart during my visit there last year. Maybe it was because I could imagine the night sky being filled with light and joy and the angels' shouts of praise, for the sky is beautiful and open and clear in that area, or maybe it was because I could actually see the town of Bethlehem down below in the valley, or maybe it was reading Luke's tale in that spot that awakened something new in me. What I remember most though is being transfixed by the altar in the church, held up by four stunning bronze statues of shepherds. I thought about the symbolism of the outcast of our society, as the shepherds would have been in those days. I thought that these are actually the ones, who, in God's kingdom, do indeed hold up the rest of us, the ones who with their bended knees, their opened arms raised in praise, or their lowered head signifying quiet devotion hold up the altar of the world, the place where grace is broken open.

In this chapel, there were multiple images of the shepherds on their way to the town of Bethlehem – their faces filled with anticipation of salvation, for that is what hope is: salvation. That's what saves us from the ordinariness of our lives, from the trauma and the drama of our days – it's what allows our fears to turn into our hopes. It is the awareness that there is something else offered to us – something that is different, something that is life-changing, something that is of God and is ours to hold.

I was so struck by the images of the facial expressions of the shepherds hearing the news and setting off on their pilgrimage, that I began to capture images from elsewhere on my trip of people who were looking at the face of salvation, in the person of Jesus. It was fascinating to me to see the common expressions of those, who, at different times in Jesus' life, saw salvation – expressions of amazement, puzzlement, peace, humility, wonder, adoration, surrender, and a far-off gaze which tell me their hearts had gone silent, for what has happened to them was too great for any words or thoughts. There were often tears in their eyes. One image that still resonates in my heart is one of a woman holding her small son as Jesus processed through Bethany on his way into Jerusalem, her expression one of fear and trepidation at the encounter with salvation. I thought, "how exactly right!" Even though God is only good and only love, seeing and encountering that which will utterly change our lives, even for the good, can be intimidating. In salvation we find hope, and if

we hope, truly hope, we are trusting that God is true, God is right, God is all powerful, and that God's way will become our way.

We all know this Christmas pageant story and we know that the shepherds found the face of salvation in a manger. I often imagine the story is told this way because it was the one place where the shepherds would have felt comfortable – in a stable, with the smell of fresh hay filling their nostrils, with the sounds of the donkeys braying and cows mooing, and sheep bleating, and the animals would have known them. If Jesus had been born in the temple, the shepherds would never have been able to go in, for they were considered impure. But a stable, amidst the animals, the earthy real place of their lives, works for them. I think this is actually one of the most important parts of the story. Hope showed up for these men in a package, in a particular situation, that they could understand and know. That is how God works, showing up to us exactly where we are.

I'm not the first one to imagine the symbolism of Jesus being laid in a trough which fed animals, and welcomed the shepherds into a place familiar to them, yet extraordinary, and our altar during the Great Thanksgiving, when Jesus' body is being laid on the altar: a place familiar to us, yet extraordinary. Just as the mundane feeding trough was where heaven and earth met for our salvation, our altar becomes the place where heaven and earth meet, for our salvation, where hope resides.

The face of salvation will meet you this evening at the altar, for Christ is always present to us here. That's why we call the Eucharist a sacrament. It is an outward expression of an inward grace, present to us here in the broken bread, but also present to each of you in the earthy real places of your life.

My invitation this evening to you is that you trust that God will show you hope in the place that makes most sense to you, that is as recognizable to you as the manger filled with straw was for the shepherds. And when you find it, you will be changed. You will be filled with hope.

For some, that place for seeing salvation will lie in the reminder inherent in this story that the manger is a symbol of exclusion, of the outcast, of those discarded and ignored, and perhaps it is in these places that we will find hopefulness, because God has given us a way to make a difference in the world.

But that manger, which represented exclusion of the poor and impure has been transformed into an altar, where the reverse happens, where no one is outcast, where all are met with love. We can all gather around the altar, as the shepherds gathered around the manger, and we can lay our hopes and fears of all the years before Jesus ~ and know they are heard, and somehow infused with a hope and peace that passes all understanding.

Today we are drawn to the mystery of the Incarnation of God born Jesus in Bethlehem and come seeking an encounter with this God who become human. In our heart of hearts, we are all seeking

a peace and a purpose, a place of belonging, a meaning, and sense of worth beyond what our own lives and our world can provide. We yearn for something more, something new. So, we look for a star to guide us, angels to lead us, but mostly for a face of salvation we can see with our own eyes, hold with our own hands, cherish in our own hearts. It is here, on the altar, anticipating and waiting for you.

O holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born to us today
We hear the Christmas angels
The great glad tidings tell
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel
O come to us, abide with us
Our Lord Emmanuel

Come to the altar, where hope resides.
Amen.