

“Shepherding In Your Heart: God's Goodness to All”

Fourth Sunday of Advent: Love

Rev. Kit B. Billings, M.Div, MA

Dec. 19, 2021

Scriptures

Psalm 145:8-13

Luke 2:8-15

Hymns/Carols

"God Rest You Merry Gentlemen"

"O Little Town of Bethlehem"

"O How Shall I Keep My Christmas"

Insight for Worship

Secrets of Heaven 8153, by Emanuel Swedenborg

“Heaven is not located on high, but where the good of love is, and this resides within a person, wherever he or she might be.”

Psalm 145:8-13

The LORD is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.

⁹The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

¹⁰All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your saints shall bless you!

¹¹They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom
and tell of your power,

¹²to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds,
and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.

¹³Your kingdom is an everlasting kingdom,
and your dominion endures throughout all generations.
[The LORD is faithful in all his words and kind in all his works.]

Luke 2:8-15

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And an angel of the Lord appeared to them,

and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was 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 those with whom He is pleased!"

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

SERMON: "Shepherding In Your Heart: God's Goodness to All"

There truly is a happy and benevolent spirit at Christmastime. It flows through our hearts and minds unbidden, perhaps hearing the Christmas story read during worship, and while singing our beloved Christmas carols. We may feel it at home while wrapping Christmas presents. There's a sweet, innocent spiritual energy flowing around us during Advent, which may be felt while the darkness of night is lit up cheerfully by the many colored Christmas lights blessing the cold of wintertime.

This cheerfully elegant, warm and peaceful energy of Christmastime stems also from the many Scripture readings we find in God's Word, which point us to the miracle of God's arrival on Earth 2021 years ago. These many readings remind us of God's goodness and benevolence strewn throughout the true story of Advent and Christmas. And so we know that when human life on Earth had fallen into its bleakest and lowest ebb—when people were suffering in numbing spiritual apathy—God delivered unto our world His very best!

The fact of the Lord's Incarnation, of God who makes Himself man like us, shows us the unprecedented reality of Divine Love. God's action, in fact, at Christmas is not limited to words. Rather, we can say that He is not satisfied with speaking alone through His prophets of old, but rather God immerses Himself in our history and takes upon Himself the worry and the weight of human life. God's way of acting is a strong stimulus for us to ask ourselves about the reality of our faith, which should not be limited to the arena of feeling, of our emotions only, but must enter into the concrete

reality of our existence. It must touch our everyday life and orient it in a practical way into the goodness of life. And at the same time, down inside the furthest depths of our thoughts and desires, the Lord comes at Christmas to heal us where we feel the most vulnerable, the most downtrodden and the most hopeless too.

It is important, therefore, that we rediscover our wonder at this mystery, that we let ourselves be enveloped by the grandeur and innocence of this event: God walked our paths as man. He entered into human history to give us His very life. And He did this not with the splendor of a sovereign, subjugating the world with His infinite power, but with the humility and gentleness of a child.

When I read or when I hear someone else reading our Advent and Christmas Scriptures, I feel God's soulfully uplifting power and influence breaking through the veil between this world and the next, and suddenly the darkness and coldest wavelengths from the hells lose their punch.

For example:

"The people who walked in darkness
 have seen a great light;
 those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness,
 on them has light shone.
³ You have multiplied the nation;
 you have increased its joy;
 they rejoice before you
 as with joy at the harvest,
 as they are glad when they divide the spoil.
⁶ For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given;
 and the government shall be upon his shoulder,
 and his name shall be called
 Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
⁷ Of the increase of His government and of peace
 there will be no end,
 on the throne of David and over his kingdom,
 to establish it and to uphold it
 with justice and with righteousness
 from this time forth and forevermore.
 The zeal of the LORD of hosts will do this." (Isaiah 9:2-3, 6-7)

And here's one of my new, favorite verses from *Zephaniah 3:17*...

"The LORD your God is in your midst,
a mighty one who will save;
He will rejoice over you with gladness;
He will quiet you by His love;
He will exult over you with singing."

It is the living Christmas spirit flowing down into our lives right out of Heaven itself that takes us back in time to the first Christmas long ago in Bethlehem, when all of these very best and brightest divine happenings took place. For example, it is a beautiful thing that the first announcement of the birth of the Lord in Bethlehem came before those simple, poor shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Shepherds were despised back then by the orthodox religious leadership. The reason was because they were unable to keep the details of their ceremonial law—they were unable to keep the ceremonial hand-washings and other rules and regulations, which the Pharisees believed were required to remain "clean" in God's eyes. The shepherds' flocks made far too many demands on them, and so the orthodox rulers looked down on them, judging them as sinners, unfairly.

It was to simple men of the fields that God's greatest message of Good News came first. Anyone who has been blessed to spend the night outside, out in nature where the humbling splendor of being out under the blanket of stars we call the Milky Way, can appreciate the precious depth of humble humanness within those shepherds. Likewise, the truth that those sheep herders felt the influence of needing to keep diligent watch over their darling, innocent animals, who at any moment could become dinner to hungry carnivores. Their work required them to be very watchful caretakers of sweet lambs, willing to fight off hungry beasts. Those Shepherds signify the sweetest and gentlest affections we can have as caring people who choose to love—and they also reflect to us how fabulous the Lord is every day, our Divine Good Shepherd, who is **ALWAYS** willing to intervene for us, protecting us from the Hell's overwhelming influence, empowering us to continue to cherish feelings and attitudes of humble innocence and compassion.

The truth is that God has no need for our praise. But He knows that His Spirit of goodwill toward all, grounded in simple good deeds births the Lord's Christmas Spirit that wants peace on Earth that lasts forever. The goodness of this Spirit is expressed well in these words from our teachings: "***We are not born for the sake of ourselves, but for the sake of others.***" (*True Christian Religion 406*)

¹³ And suddenly there was 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 those with whom He is pleased!"
Amen.