

**“The Meaning of Christmas: Through the Eyes of The Shepherds”**

Mary Henderson Bowman

**Date:** December 17, 2023



And the angel proclaimed to the shepherds: “Behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!”

And when the angel was finished sharing what this Good News was, there was a whole host of angels — literally an army of angels — who burst out in song at the Savior’s coming! Heaven literally couldn’t contain its joy or its praises for the One who could make such a wondrous thing happen.

And the angel said, “Behold . . . “

“Behold” is an unassuming, but loaded theological word.

“Behold” is a code word that signals something important is about to happen.

“Behold” alerts us to pay attention, to stay awake, and to notice what is happening.

Because when “behold” is used — that something that is happening or about to happen — it is always God at work.

And it is not just that God has initiated something.

“Behold” tells us that God is very near to us in this initiating.

“Behold” communicates that God is present in the right here and the right now.

And it is not just that God is very near, but also that God is acting with an urgency, an immediacy related to God’s purposes.

“Behold” cues us that God’s purposes are actively being worked out — right now.

“Behold” means that God is present and on the move — right now.

And we can see that the birth of Jesus captures these elements in dramatic ways.

Jesus is the ultimate nearness of God.

And Jesus is the ultimate expression of God working God’s purposes out for the good of the world.

Emmanuel — God with us in the flesh — has arrived!

Now, there is one more element of “behold” that is important.

This aspect involves the hearer.

You see, “behold” is also a word that demands a response.

“Behold” is extending an invitation to be a part of God’s purposes.

“Behold” calls us to action.

“Behold” prompts us to say, “Here I am.”

We heard it last week with Mary.

And we see it again this week with the shepherds.

I love the way the shepherds are totally present to the supernatural wonder of angels.

The shepherds are amazed! They are awed by what they have seen!

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Perhaps like Mary, they treasure and ponder what it all means.  
But they don't waste any time in their response.  
We are told that they go IN HASTE to see what the angel promised them.  
They heard the “behold” and they responded.

And there is something so beautiful about these shepherds being the first to see the baby who in time would come to be known as the Good Shepherd.

Now perhaps you are like me — a little intrigued about why God chose the shepherds to be the first ones to receive the Good News about the Messiah.

We notice that it is not the powerful who get visited.  
Although the religious and political leaders of Israel are a mere 6 miles away from Bethlehem, they apparently received no visit.  
There is no recorded visit to King Herod, the political leader in Jerusalem or to the Chief Priest, the spiritual leader of Israel.  
Instead, it is the shepherds who get the heavenly invitation.

In their day, the shepherds were the lowliest of workers.  
They were often both poor and poorly regarded by others.  
They had no real status and often lived a nomadic life caring for the sheep.  
We might say they were the original remote workers — back when working remotely meant out in the countryside.  
They were also the workers who worked the late shift.  
We might call them the essential workers.

The Scripture tells us the shepherds were keeping watch that night.  
Their occupation trained them to stay awake.

And personally I wonder if this is one of the reasons that the shepherds were chosen.  
They were keeping watch.

Our first Scripture reading this morning tells us how important it is to stay awake and be watching for God.

And this is hard work in our culture.  
Our culture is loaded with all kinds of distractions.  
Our culture has all kinds of things that can steal our focus.  
And the little device (iPhone) with all of its pings and likes and dislikes, with all of its apps and notifications is a big piece of our distraction.  
But it is not the only thing.

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If we are honest, there are things in this broken world that are hard to see, that we don't want to see. Feelings that are hard to feel, that we don't want to feel.

Sometimes it comes from reading the news, sometimes from sharing others' lives and sometimes from our own.

There is pain in this world and sometimes it feels easier to step away from the world through different things that distract us or numb the pain.

There is a wonderful book by Johann Hart called *Stolen Focus: Why You Can't Pay Attention--and How to Think Deeply Again*. In this book, the author talks about all of the things that make it hard to pay attention. If you have been struggling to stay focused while reading or doing other things, Johann Hart says you are not alone. Our world has lots of things that steal our focus.

In light of our world's distractions, the shepherds are an object lesson for us.

On that night long ago, they kept the main thing, the main thing.

For them, the main thing was to keep watch.

And OUR main things is to keep watch.

We are called to stay awake and to keep our eye out for God.

Shepherds lived in communities.

Communities can help us live out what is important.

The shepherds also had times of silence and solitude built into their vocation — time and space away from the world.

It is important that we too build a bit of time and space where we find silence and solitude.

Both silence and solitude can feel uncomfortable in an often over loud world, but this is the space where we can daily offer God our focus, and we can listen for the “beholds” in our lives. I think it was Mother Teresa who said that one of God's languages is silence.

Even a few minutes of quiet prayers — where we open ourselves to listening to God — gives God the opening that is needed to tend to our pain, to expand our focus, and to whisper “behold.”

Jesus is always knocking.

It is our job to pay attention, to be watchful, to listen for the knocking, and to open the door.

Because God is right here, right now — actively present and actively at work in the world.

Can we be like the shepherds — keeping watch, ready to move in haste?