

### Intro to our Advent Journey

Welcome to the final week in the season of Advent -- the coming of Emmanuel draws near. As we continue along our Advent journey, we reach another set of characters from the Christmas story. We have spent time with Mary, Joseph, and John the Baptist. Today we journey with the shepherds as we wait upon the arrival of our Shepherd.

If you have your Advent-in-a-Box (or if you have some candles lying around), I invite you to take a moment and set out your Advent Wreath. Although we are apart, we light this wreath together, led today by the Onken Family.

### Lighting the Advent Wreath | Onken Family

**Caleb:** The Advent wreath is a circle with no beginning and no end. It is a symbol of God's unending love and faithfulness.

**Emily:** The shepherds were the first to hear the joyful announcement of Christ's birth -- the good news of great joy for all the people. Upon seeing the baby Jesus, the shepherds spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed.

**Bradley:** We have also heard this wonderful news. We welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit. And we are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy.

**Chris:** With joy we light this candle and remember God's gift -- the Word made flesh who lived among us. We light this candle, we prepare, and we wait.

### Advent Wreath Response | *Light One Candle to Watch for Messiah* v.1-4

ELW 240

*Light one candle to watch for Messiah: let the light banish darkness.*

*He shall bring salvation to Israel, God fulfills the promise.*

*Light two candles to watch for Messiah: let the light banish darkness.*

*He shall feed the flock like a shepherd, gently lead them homeward.*

*Light three candles to watch for Messiah: let the light banish darkness.*

*Lift your heads and lift high the gateway for the King of glory.*

*Light four candles to watch for Messiah: let the light banish darkness.*

*He is coming, tell the glad tidings. Let your lights be shining!*

### Confession + Forgiveness

Because it is so hard to wait, it is not easy to live through Advent's days. But watch what God does during this time. God waits for us to turn from our old ways to find the right paths; God waits for us to admit what we have done, and failed to do, so we might be forgiven and graced with new life. Let us approach the One who waits for us.

*(Silence)*

Waiting God, **it is never easy for us to confess our sins. There are the hurts we have caused to our families and friends, which we would like to forget. There are those we believe are impossible to love, and so we don't try. There are people who live on the edge of our society, and we ignore their cries for help. Forgive us, God who comes near to us. When we have lost our way, show us yours. Lead us in humility down the streets of your kingdom. Teach us your truth, so we might be able to keep your Word, revealed to us in Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior.**

God does not remember our sins, but does remember the promises which have been made to us. God does not shame us, but lifts us to new life. Lead us in your hope, O God, and teach us your love. You are the God of our days, we wait for you to come to us. **Amen.**

### Children's Message

Opening Hymn | *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel* v.1, 2, 4 ELW 257

*O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel,  
That mourns in lonely exile here until the Son of God appear.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O Come, O Wisdom from on high, embracing all things far and nigh:  
In strength and beauty come and stay; teach us your will and guide our way.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

*O come, O Branch of Jesse, free your own from Satan's tyranny;  
From depths of hell your people save, and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.  
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to you, O Israel.*

Gospel Reading | Luke 2:8-20

Now there were shepherds nearby living out in the field, keeping guard over their flock at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were absolutely terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid! Listen carefully, for I proclaim to you good news that brings great joy to all the people: Today your Savior is born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a vast, heavenly army appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among people with whom he is pleased!”

When the angels left them and went back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, that the Lord has made known to us.” So they hurried off and located Mary and Joseph, and found the baby lying in a manger. When they saw him, they related what they had been told about this child, and all who heard it were astonished at what the shepherds said. But Mary treasured up all these words, pondering in her heart what they might mean. So the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen; everything was just as they had been told.

Alternate Telling | *The Bednar Family*

### Reflection

No Christmas program is complete without the little band of shepherds. Frightened by the angel’s sudden appearance, they marvel at the good news from the angel and rush to Bethlehem to see the Savior-King. As they return to their flocks, they praise God and tell all who will listen about the birth of the Christ child. They finish spreading the good tidings, step off to the side, and we hardly give them another thought. But why did this announcement come to them at all? Why was it the shepherds who were the first to hear the news of Jesus birth? Why not the scribes or scholars, priests or kings? Who were they that they should be eyewitnesses of God’s glory and receive history’s greatest birth announcement?

Not many are aware that these shepherds, composed of men and women, were considered outcasts of the society in their time. Pope Francis gives an striking description of their state:

*By reason of their work, they were men and women forced to live on the edges of society. Their state of life, and the places they had to stay, prevented them from observing all the ritual*

*prescriptions of religious purification; as a result, they were considered unclean. Their skin, their clothing, their smell, their way of speaking, their origin, all betrayed them. Everything about them generated mistrust. They were men and women to be kept at a distance, to be feared. They were considered pagans among the believers, sinners among the just, foreigners among the citizens.*

And so we learn that in Christ's day, shepherds stood on the bottom run of the Palestinian social ladder. Although it had once been a noble profession, shepherding had lost its widespread appeal and eventually forfeited its social acceptability. They shared the same undesirable status as tax collectors and dung sweepers. Some shepherds earned their poor reputations, but others became victims of a cruel stereotype. Smug religious leaders maintained a strict caste system at the expense of shepherds and other common folk. Even so... into this social context of snobbery and class prejudice, God steps forth, Jesus arrives. How surprising and significant that God handpicked lowly, unpretentious shepherds to be the first to hear the joyous news: *Today your Savior is born in the city of David. He is Christ the Lord.*

So, why did a host of angels bring these shepherds the glad tidings that Jesus was born? Maybe because this foreshadowed Jesus' role as the Good Shepherd. By announcing the good news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds, Jesus hinted right from the beginning what his plan was. God's plan was for Jesus to give his life for us, just as the shepherds would have done for their sheep. The angels announced Jesus' birth to those who exemplified this mission.

Or maybe this announcement came to these lowly shepherds because God despises our smugness, prejudice, and pride. The shepherds were people who were despised and rejected, just as Jesus would soon be. The announcing of Jesus' birth to some of the lowest of the low reminds us that we all sin and fall short of the glory of God, and yet Jesus stooped down to our level to pay the ultimate price... for us and for our salvation.

Or maybe this birth announcement comes to the shepherds because God longs to reach the unreachable. The shepherds witting out that dark night watching their sheep in the moonlight were exactly who Jesus came to save. Sinners -- the group that the "righteous" had shunned -- are the very people Jesus came to save. Sinners like shepherds. Sinners like you and me.

I believe the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds (of all people) for all of these reasons. It's a humbling announcement, reminding us that these shepherds had a significant role. And their role is too meaningful to miss, especially when we reflect on the Nativity Story itself. It was to the poor shepherds, not the rich kings and queens of the world, that the angel of the Lord appeared and proclaimed the birth of the long-awaited Savior in the city of David. They were the first people to hear the good news of great joy that will be for all the people, and to see the Messiah in the flesh, an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And it was these lowly shepherds, who navigated the dark streets of Bethlehem to find the newborn baby, that were among the first to worship Jesus, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

As we too journey to the nativity scene, may we worship the Christ child, glorifying and praising God for all we've heard and seen, not only during this Advent and Christmas season, but every single day of the year. May we live into the mission of the Great Shepherd, may we practice humility and compassion, and may we give thanks and praise to God for the One who came into the world and saved us all. Amen.

Hymn of the Day | *The First Noel* v. 1, 2, 4 ELW 300

*The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay;  
In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep, on a cold winter's night that was so deep.  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel! Born is the King of Israel.*

*They looked up and saw... a star shining in... the east... beyond... them far;  
And to the earth it gave... great light, and... so it continued both day and night.  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel! Born is the King of Israel.*

*This star drew near to the... northwest, o'er... Bethlehem... it took... its rest;  
And there it did both stop... and stay right... over the place where Jesus lay.  
Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel! Born is the King of Israel.*

#### Advent Creed

We believe in God the Father, creator of heaven and earth. The one who is full of patience, who is not afraid of silence, who does not need to fill each moment with activity and noise. The one who is beyond bluster and flurry, and who does not jostle for attention.

We believe in God the Son, Savior of creation, who slipped into Bethlehem one night, mostly unnoticed, who lived thirty years without headlines or hurry, who frequently took

time alone with his patient Father, who waited for the right time to become the suffering servant, who stood quietly before the noise of his accusers, whose silence overpowered their words, who died, then rose again on a quiet Sunday morning.

We believe in God the Holy Spirit, who strengthens, empowers, renews and refreshes, sometimes arriving with obvious power, sometimes with the quiet breath of a whisper.

We believe in one God who patiently waits for us, and who longs for us to do the same. Amen.

#### Prayer of the Day + Lord's Prayer

**Beloved Savior, at your birth, heaven and earth were reconciled; since you came from heaven to earth on that day, you forgave our sin and wiped away our guilt. You gave us so many gifts: spiritual light for those that are blind; the cup of salvation for the thirsty, the bread of life for the hungry. May we, like the shepherds, bear witness to these gifts and to your presence in our lives. We ask this in your holy and precious name. Amen.**

Lord, remember us in your kingdom and teach us to pray: **Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us, and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.**

#### Sending Hymn | *Go Tell It on the Mountain*

ELW 290

*Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and ev'rywhere;  
Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!*

*While shepherds kept their watching o'er silent flocks by night,  
Behold, throughout the heavens there shone a holy light.  
Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and ev'rywhere;  
Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!*

*The shepherds feared and trembled when, lo, above the earth  
Rang out the angel chorus that hailed our Savior's birth.  
Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and ev'rywhere;  
Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!*

*Down in a lonely manger the humble Christ was born;  
And God sent us salvation that blessed Christmas morn.  
Go tell it on the mountain, over the hills and ev'rywhere;  
Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ is born!*

Blessing + Dismissal

O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. Go with us now into the world. We can begin again!  
Everything is about to change. So make everything new. Make us new. Reveal your glory  
in our lives and in the rhythms of our lives, so that nothing will get in the way of your  
coming. **Amen.**

Go in peace to prepare the way of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**