



The Cathedral of St. Andrew - Honolulu

Sermon: Year B – Advent 4 – December 24, 2017: Christmas Eve

Imagine the shepherds in the fields two thousand years ago, waiting in the darkness and the cold, waiting for warmth, waiting for light, waiting for hope.

Shepherds' work isn't very nice. I know. I've been around sheep. My father used to raise them on his farm in Oregon. It's dirty, filthy, awful, smelly work. When sheep push up against you, they rub their manure-covered wool onto whatever you happen to be wearing and then you stink, just like them. That was the life of the shepherds in the fields. And on top of that, they lived in constant fear of the Roman authorities who occupied their land and did awful things, awful things like nailing people to crosses.

Imagine then—the shepherds, waiting for a sign of hope, any sign of hope, and then the angel appears and tells them the Good News.

To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior.

Several years ago, when I was the chaplain at Seabury Hall in Makawao, Maui, I took a group of kids to work on Kaho'olawe for three days and nights, working from sunup to sundown planting a'ali'i bushes on the island's slopes in an effort to hold the soil and prevent it from washing into the sea and choking the coral reefs.

It was dirty, filthy, backbreaking work. And by the end of the three days, my clothes were so soiled, that I didn't even bother to pack them up to take home and wash. Instead I simply wadded them up and threw them in the trash. I was, if you will, a modern island-boy shepherd in the field.

And on the morning of our last day on Kaho'olawe, the rangers got the kids and me up extra early, like at 4:30, and put us in pickup trucks and drove us out to the field. We were cold. We were tired. We were filthy. We were grumpy. We were spent.

But like the shepherds, we had a job to do and we weren't done yet. We had one more day. And when we got to our work site, we all stopped for a moment, huddled together, shivered, and tried to keep each other warm—when the most amazing thing happened to us.

A spot of orange appeared on the horizon to the east. The sun began to rise and I could see it coming over the outline of Mauna Kea, the mountain whose slopes house my family home up in Ahualoa on the Hamakua Coast. A vision of hope appeared to me from my home, the source of who I am and where I'm from.

And then the sky got bright, the kids and I began to warm up, and we felt grounded in goodness. We basked in warm light. We were ready to face our last day on Kaho'olawe. We continued to work hard, and we did something good for the land, for God's creation.

I look at our Advent wreath tonight, and I love how the centerpiece is the paschal candle, the Christian symbol of the Easter resurrection of Jesus Christ that we light at a vigil service on Saturday night, right before Easter Sunday.

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During Advent, four weeks before Christmas, we take the wreath and light one candle a week as we await the birth of Christ and finally tonight, the last candle, the paschal candle, is lit as we face the darkness of this Christmas Eve and the Easter light of Christ emerges from the shadows to appear in our lives and make itself known in the form of a young child in a manger at Christmastime. This is the night.

Think back with me two thousand years. What was it like in that manger, that cave, that cave where the light, the Christ child was born?

I've been around farm animals. I've been around hay. I've been around cows. I've been around sheep. They're anything but clean and pure.

What is that cave in Bethlehem really like? It's probably dark. It's probably damp. It's probably smelly. It's probably noisy. It's probably frenetic—the shepherds from the fields running in and seeing the baby lying in the manger.

They were probably sweaty, dirty, and out of control. Out of control – their mouths going ninety miles an hour telling the worn-out Joseph and the recuperating Mary that some angel tells them that divine salvation has come into the world. It's frantic, hectic, feverish, chaotic, wild. Words flying out of the mouths of the shepherds like popcorn flying out of a popcorn machine. And all Mary and Joseph want to do is sleep!

But who can blame the shepherds? They're despised for the filthy work they do, scorned for the foul conditions in which they live. Their lives are lives of dirt, their lives are lives of stench, their lives are lives of dung, lives of compost, lives of manure. The shepherds are scorned. The shepherds are ridiculed. The shepherds live on the margins where they're made to feel shame.

So, if I were a shepherd, I'd be excited. Especially if I live an oppressed, miserable, dismal life - and then hope comes. Especially if I live under an oppressive, tyrannical, autocratic regime - and then freedom comes. Especially if I live in the margins, isolated, lonely - and then the angel comes to me, a shepherd, comes to me to deliver the Good News that the Word became flesh to live among us.

This is the night. In that cave, two thousand years ago, this is the night. Interestingly enough, we also say that at the Easter Vigil, during the Exultet, as we wait for the light of Christ to emerge from the tomb, reminding us tonight, on Christmas Eve, that in the Christian faith, Christmas has no meaning without Easter and Easter has no meaning without Christmas. They are intertwined, and that's why the paschal candle of the Easter Vigil sits as the primary flame in the middle of the wreath at Advent as we wait for the light, the Word, the child, the Christ.

All things come full circle, this is the night, and we know, we celebrate, we rejoice that hope and salvation aren't a one-time, two thousand year ago thing. Hope and salvation happen over and over and over again for us every day in our God-filled lives.

When we've wronged another and we are forgiven, the Christ child arrives in our hearts and we have hope and salvation. When we exchange the Peace during the Eucharist, the Christ child arrives in our hearts and we have hope and salvation. When we gather together as a family at Christmastime, the Christ child arrives in our hearts and we have hope and salvation. When we take food to a homeless shelter so that others can eat a hot meal, the Christ child arrives in our hearts and we have hope and salvation. When we visit a friend or loved one in the hospital, when we give a hug or hold a hand or lend a sympathetic ear, when we reach out, when someone reaches out to us, when we say our prayers, when we offer our gifts to God, when we

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come to the table for the bread and the wine, the Christ child arrives in our hearts and we have hope and salvation.

Rest assured of that fact as we cast out the darkness of our lives and live in the light that appears before all of us in the flame of the Easter Vigil's paschal candle, housed in the center of the Advent wreath, showing all of us, no matter who we are or what our station in life, God is with us because we are worthy, we are valued, we are loved, and we are saved. And tonight, the knowledge of that one simple fact, might just be the greatest Christmas gift of all.

And so tonight this is the night and I ask you to join me in embracing the words of the Exultet that we sing at the Easter Vigil. Embrace the Easter words at Christmastime, at the birth of God's son, God's son who arrives in our midst, lands on our hearts, and saves us. The Exultet says this:

This is the night, when you brought our fathers, the children of Israel, out of bondage in Egypt, and led them through the Red Sea on dry land.

This is the night, when all who believe in Christ are delivered from the gloom of sin, and are restored to grace and holiness of life.

How wonderful and beyond our knowing, O God, is your mercy and loving-kindness to us, that to redeem a slave, you gave a Son.

How holy is this night, when wickedness is put to flight, and sin is washed away. It restores innocence to the fallen, and joy to those who mourn. It casts out pride and hatred, and brings peace and concord.

How blessed is this night, when earth and heaven are joined and man is reconciled to God.

Holy Father, accept our evening sacrifice, the offering of this candle in your honor. May it shine continually to drive away all darkness. May Christ, the Morning Star who knows no setting, find it ever burning—he who gives his light to all creation, and who lives and reigns for ever and ever.

This is the night.

Amen.