

## About those Shepherds: A Semonette

Amanda Udis-Kessler, High Plains Church Unitarian Universalist, Christmas Eve, 2010

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” The shepherds make for a nice presence, don’t they, both in this story and in countless nativity pageants the world over. In Luke’s version of the nativity story, the shepherds are the first to receive the good news of Jesus’ birth.

The shepherds matter to my understanding of Jesus because of where they stood in the social hierarchy of their day. That’s what happens when a sociologist goes to seminary, right? So who were the shepherds? Peasants at best, and therefore marginal figures. There is some possibility they even belonged to the outcaste class. They were not people with power or status. Who would they be in our time? Poor kids who are lucky to get fast food jobs, maybe. If they really were outcasts, perhaps undocumented immigrants. We have plenty of shepherds today. And we know who they are.

What would constitute “good tidings of great joy” for the shepherds of Judea, circa 4 BCE? Maybe the announcement of a particular birth, the birth of a man who would as an adult go into the synagogue and say that God had anointed him to bring good news to the poor. And especially in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus had a lot of good news for the poor. He said they were blessed. He said the Kingdom of God was theirs. He ate with them and healed them and invited them to walk with him along the way. What an incredible experience that would have been, to be a marginal figure in society and suddenly to find oneself in relationship with a God-intoxicated prophet and teacher.

Why did Jesus do these things? Because he encountered God as utterly compassionate, welcoming and loving, and he brought this message of God’s nature to the people in his world, who tended to be, like him, on the lower end of the economic spectrum. In a sense, it doesn’t matter what season Jesus was born in, or whether there were actually shepherds there. The shepherds are part of the truth that transcends fact: If the holy is recklessly and wildly compassionate and inclusive, who better to get the good news first than a bunch of poor people?

What would constitute “good tidings of great joy” for today’s shepherds, for the destitute or the devalued among us? I can think of two things: utter inclusion in the meaning systems of our society, and the resources to thrive and live joyously. And I think the good news for today’s shepherds is that all of us could make a commitment to supporting such a program. UU minister and singer/songwriter Amy Carol Webb has said, “God has no hands but ours.” It’s easy to treat Jesus as a kind of miracle if we take him seriously at all. It’s much harder to *be* Jesus, but that is the miracle that is given to us to carry out today: to feed the hungry, heal the sick, bless the poor, and then build a society in which no one is hungry, no one is sick due to poverty, and no one is poor. Jesus is gone. If there is to be a Kingdom of God or a Commonwealth of Humanity now, who can bring it if not us?

The beautiful carol “In the Bleak Midwinter” includes the lines, “What, then, shall I bring him, empty as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.” We, and all people, are the sons and

daughters of the holy. It is our turn to bring lambs to the shepherds, to acknowledge our human connection with the poor and despised among us and then to bless their lives in all the ways we know how.

The shepherds were also the first evangelists, according to Luke, for they “made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.” May our lives be our own liberal religious evangelism today. May our deeds shine our light brightly and widely, bringing peace and good will to all. Amen, and blessed be.