

## **Who Wants to be the Shepherd? - A Christmas Eve Message**

Once upon a time in those days after Thanksgiving when Rt. 9 is transformed from its normal craziness into something like a hornet's nest after you poke it with a stick,  
There was a minister, a pastor, who thought it was a good idea to pick his children up from school and take them to Shopper's World.

Earlier that day he had been planning with his staff team  
All those worship services in December, including two children's pageants,  
one Quaker service, a sermon on the four kinds of prayer (oops, please, thanks and wow!),  
a Music Sunday last week in which the choir was singing things about  
The Christian God that this minister knows  
many of them have at least some doubts (which is maybe why Joe had them singing in German),  
And, last but not least, this Christmas Eve worship.

So, as this minister, this pastor  
(a title which references this role as shepherd, as guide)  
Drove into the parking lot of Shopper's World  
It is fair to say that his mind was  
Full of religious thoughts and images and stories and songs,

One of which was the story we told  
In the living nativity pageant  
That happened here two hours ago,  
during which this minister got to ask:  
*Who wants to be an angel? Who wants to be Caesar?*  
*Who wants to be the three wise people?*  
*Who wants to be Mary in what will be certainly*  
*The shortest and least painful childbirth ever?*  
*Who wants to be Joseph?*  
*Who wants to be the star? Who wants to be the Shepherd?*

Getting out of the car,  
draping an arm over each child to protect them from the  
cars circling around us for parking spots ,  
and then leading them toward the sparkling, crowded,  
upbeat Barnes and Noble,  
This minister knows that this time of year can appear so varnished and  
perfect and sentimentally sweet like that egg-nog you  
Sip from cups shaped like reindeer's antlers or Santa's face  
that it can be hard...it can be hard, can't it?... just to be who are –  
be that merry or depressed, thrilled or bored,  
joyful or sad,  
and still love each other and ourselves anyway.  
Right?

This minister also knows that these characters in the Jesus story  
have become so familiar,

So domesticated and – how sad – so polarizing depending on what we say we believe or don't believe that we can't really see ourselves or our 2012 lives in this story hardly at all.

Bible? Whatever....

2000 year old stories? Whatever....

Though it is worth noting that if Jesus had an i-Phone

He could still fit his main message – *love the Spirit,*

*And love your neighbor as yourself* – in a text or a tweet,

Because it's only 43 characters long.

I'm just saying.....

Okay, back to the store, back to the minister,

Which is, of course, me –

And the reason I referred to myself there in the third person is

because it helps remind me to observe myself and others,

because there are stories and angels and little streaming lights of peace

Breaking out all around us,

if only we took the time to really notice.

Try it sometime, try noticing what you notice,

And you just might be amazed.

Doors open. There are books and Nooks everywhere!

The line is herding like an impatient flock of sheep around the diaries and calendars and pens placed there to tempt us toward an unplanned purchase.

Remember the line Corrine shared with us earlier,

The one about shepherds living in the fields,

keeping watch over their flocks by night?

Well, that's how it was for me...  
only this time the fields are not fields,  
but instead are the rows and rows of books in the Barnes and Noble store;  
and this time the stars are not stars,  
but instead those bright florescent bulbs beaming down;  
and this time the staff is not a staff,  
but instead the super-large Venti Starbucks coffee I now have in my hand;  
and this time the flock are not sheep,  
but instead they are my children,  
and in the chaos of the store and the times I keep them close.  
Friends, remember this is weeks before Newtown, CT.  
And so now, with you, I keep them even closer,  
And my children are your children,  
And your children are my children.

And with our children close this is when -  
There in the Barnes and Noble turned Bethlehem -  
That I see him, his open face and wide eyes,  
His arms close to his sides, fingers fidgeting,  
His legs crossed the way kids do when they're feeling shy  
Or scared.

*"Dad, says one of mine, this is new "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" book I want!  
Can I get it for Christmas?"*

*"Dad, says the other of mine, this is new 'Mysterious Benedict Society'  
book I want!"*

*Can I get it for Christmas?*

In this age of screens and memes and texts and tweets,

I have a new philosophy of parenthood: I never say no to books.

Just then a woman's voice, you might think of her as an angel heard on high,

Beams out from the ceiling speakers:

*“Customers, can I have your attention?*

*Would the mother of Benjamin please go immediately*

*To the Children's Section located near the Starbucks café?*

I am still watching this little boy – I'm guessing aged 7 –

And when the name 'Benjamin' is heard from on high I see

His eyes look up and look around, as if he has suddenly been noticed.

The angel again:

*“Benjamin is wearing a blue sweater with red stripes,*

*And green sneakers. If this is your Benjamin please go the Children's*

*Section immediately.”*

The boy keeps his green sneakers crossed, his blue-with-red striped arms

Close to his side, his eyes looking down, looking up, looking around,

So scared, so alone.

*“Dad!”* a tug on my sleeve. *“Dad, look at this...”*

But I can't really pay attention. I'm watching, remember?

I'm observing, and to my amazement I'm watching as still no one comes.

Where is she? Where is Benjamin's mom?

You're sitting there wondering: *Nathan, this is going to turn out ok, right?*

*Nathan, how is this a Christmas story exactly?*

So stay with me, observe with me, watch with me  
As we see two clerks leave that herd of a line at the front of the store,  
Exasperating their flock,  
As they wend their way across through the isles and across the fields  
To Benjamin's side, who is now doing everything he can to keep  
The tears in his eyes from falling,  
his upper lip and bottom lip quivering.

Later in the Bible stories, much later,  
We hear Jesus tell about the shepherd who leaves his flock  
Of 99 to look after the single one who is lost,  
And in this story I am thinking of as each of these women,  
These strangers, kneel down to Benjamin, eye to eye, face to face,  
And put hands on his shoulders and speak to him in reassuring whispers.

Then each of them stand – tall as staffs – and putting him  
Between them, in the center,  
guide him out of the Children's Center, each of them an arm  
draped over his shoulder.  
Where are they going? We do not know.  
Will this turn out well? I'm sorry, still we do not know.  
Who wants to be a Shepherd? Well, this we do know.  
And the shepherds are clearly these two women, these strangers,  
who are, as Luke read earlier,  
Entertaining angels unawares,  
And angels are little boys named Benjamin in Barnes and Noble  
On Rt. 9 in early December.

I consider following them – I’m a pastor after all, and  
I want to be the back-up shepherd –  
But because one of my professional goals is to get out  
Of the way and let ministry happen,  
and because I have two of my own sheep  
there at my side, I do not.

And that is okay, that is really okay,  
Because as I walk toward the edge of the field of isles and books,  
Toward the door, wondering if there indeed will be a savior,  
Wondering if Benjamin’s mom will be found and all will be well,  
I hear a yelp – do you know what a yelp sounds like? Kind  
Of like ‘*Whoaa!!!*’ –  
I hear a yelp shoot out from behind one of the book stacks,  
Followed by high voice exclaim across the land:

*‘Benjamin. Benjamin. Benjamin! Where were you? I thought I lost you.  
Oh, my Benjamin.’*

Friends, over the years of giving these Christmas Eve homilies,  
And especially since Friday, December 14<sup>th</sup> at 9:30a.m. in CT,  
I have had people ask me how we can sing *Silent Night*  
And *Joy to the World* when there is so much in our world  
That seems lost, broken, dark –  
I have literally been asked this every day these last weeks –  
And my answer is very simple.  
My answer is that we must. We must.

Because who is Benjamin?

Benjamin is not just some boy you have never met.

Anytime we have been lost in our life, anytime we have been lost  
From someone who loved us, or lost from what feels true or right,  
Or lost our direction, or lost our hope,  
We have become Benjamin.

And who are the Shepherds? The shepherds are not just two women  
In the check-out lane who ask us if we have Barnes and Noble reward card.  
Anytime we have dropped what we we're doing,  
Rushed to the side of someone in need, put a hand on a shoulder,  
Guided someone or something toward love and justice,  
Been a rod, a staff of comfort,  
Then we have become shepherds.

And who is Benjamin's mother? Ben's mom is not just some woman  
Who lost her baby in the store and didn't hear the announcement from  
The angel on high,  
because maybe she was on the phone with her Husband,  
frantically asking what she should do.  
Anytime you have found what has been lost, and cradled  
In your arms what you love, love beyond even yourself  
Feeling the relief and the peace that comes in that moment,  
Feeling the power of selfless love,  
Then you have become Benjamin's mother.

And the point is this, not to put too fine a point on it:

There is such love in the world, so many shepherds,  
So many unheralded saviors,  
Such empathy, such beauty,  
such ample evidence to hope in spite of the state of the world.  
And the greatest sorrow in these times, among so many,  
May be that these little, holy moments  
Of being lost and then found,  
and full of worry, but then full of peace  
Don't get the press they sorely deserve.

But not at Christmas time.  
Not this year. Not now.  
Christmas is the halting of hate time.  
Christmas is the heralding of hope time.

*So let us look heavenward and speak the word aloud - Peace.*  
*And let us look at our world and speak the word aloud - Peace.*  
*And let us look at each other, then into ourselves*  
*And we say without shyness or apology or hesitation – Peace.*

Peace my brothers.  
Peace my sisters.  
Peace my soul.

