

Isaiah 40:1-11

Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins. A voice cries out: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'

A voice says, 'Cry out!' And I said, 'What shall I cry?' All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it; surely the people are grass. The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, 'Here is your God!' See, the Lord God comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

John 1:1-5

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

Luke 2:8-15

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

“The Gift of the Shepherd Girl”**December 13, 2009****Rev. Charles Schuster**

Carl ____ was a Baptist preacher/theologian. He told the story many times about a Quaker farmer who owned a particularly ill-tempered cow. One morning as he was giving the cow some feed prior to milking her, he stood too close to the cow and she bit

him. A little bit later, as he adjusted his milking stool, she swatted him with her tail, and finally, after he had finished milking, he turned away for a few seconds and she kicked over the bucket of milk. That was it. This Quaker pacifist farmer comes around in front of the cow, looks her straight in the eye, and says, "Cow, thou tryest my patience. Thou has hurt me and angered me. Thou knowest well the principles of my faith keep me from harming thee. What thou dost not know, however, is that I'm going to sell thee to a Methodist." "Life," and we could add, some of us, "life, you try our patience, you are aware of the fact that there is no way for us to retaliate, but Christmas is coming, and we want you to know, some of us are thinking of becoming Jehovah's Witnesses." The chaos of Christmas makes us cranky, just not in the spirit of the season. I don't know about you, maybe it's all the deaths in the congregation. Maybe it's the cold weather. Maybe it's the church staff. Maybe it's the fact that my purple stole, the one that actually fits, was stolen. So I have this, and this is the only robe where it doesn't ride up on your neck. I don't know. I don't know. Just not in the spirit this year. No lights up on our house.

And then there's the topic, sermon, I selected, "The Gift of the Shepherd Girl," all week long I've been pondering the gift of the shepherd girl. You know that there were shepherds in the field with their flock, and some angel of the Lord saying to them, "Glory to God in the highest," and you know they went to see the Christ child in Bethlehem with Mary, his mother, and his father Joseph, and you might speculate that there were shepherds who stayed behind tending the flock while the lucky shepherd, in an act of complete irresponsibility, left the flock for religious purposes. That being a possibility, you can imagine a 13-year-old girl hearing what the shepherds had to say when they returned. You could speculate how she might have disobeyed her father because he wouldn't want her to go out in the dark, would have gone out into the night to see this thing which had come to pass. She was a teenager. She disobeyed her father. That's what some of them do. And you could think that she took a gift to the Christ child, you could think that. What might she have taken? What was the gift of the shepherd girl? I've thought about his all week, and I've come to the conclusion - I don't know. And furthermore, I don't care.

Not much in the mood for Christmas. Went shopping, hit the big bookstore, a good bit of my Christmas gifts involves books. The young man totaling my bill must have missed the class on sensitivity training. Basically, as I looked at him, a nerve ending who spoke first and then thought, maybe, doesn't take much to run up a large bill at the bookstore, had a library full of books to pay for on the desk beside the cash register, over \$200, this young man behind the desk picks up my receipt and wags it in the air and says to everyone in the store, "Hey, look everyone, this guy just bought over \$200 worth of books." And I said to him, "What's your job?" And he said to me, "Customer service." I said to him, "How do you think you're doing?" And he said to me, "How about buying me a book?" My first thought was to say to him, "I would if I thought you could read." My second thought to say to him was, "Do you have a book on customer service here?" What I said to him was, "I would buy you a book, but as you can guess, having totaled up my bill and wagged the receipt around for everybody to see, that I'm out of money." If I'd had the Christmas spirit, I would have said to him, "It would be my pleasure, Sir, to buy you a book. By all means, go pick one out."

Last Sunday in the blizzard, I was the only one in the church. It was early, 6:00. The custodian's out shoveling snow. The phone rings, I pick up the receiver. The voice on the other end says, "Oh, I was hoping for a machine." I said, "I am a machine, lean and mean. What can I do for you?" Person said, "For your Christmas Eve services in the past, you had to have tickets to attend. Could you give me a ticket?" I thought about our budget for 2010, and considered saying, "I'll sell you a ticket for \$100." But I said, "No, we don't have tickets any more. We finally got the fire marshal in here, and he told us we really don't need tickets. She said, "Can non-members attend your service?" and I said, "We love non-members here. Matter of fact, we treat non-members better than we treat our members." A little later, another guy called. He said he was given our number that we were an escort service and he wanted to purchase a date for the evening. You think I make this up? I gave him the phone number for Christ United Methodist Church. I expect I'll hear from Reverend Boswell.

As far as Christmas and how it goes, I'm not there yet. Just not there yet. I remember a couple of years ago, before the candle-lighting service was to begin here in the sanctuary, I was standing up and visiting with people as they came into the service, before the service started. There was this one young woman, about four rows back, about where Thelma and Warren are sitting back there, and she's got her gloves and coat and stuff, saving a place for family members, I guess, or friends, I don't know. But we made eye contact, and she yawned a really big yawn, really big, gaping yawn...I have to say it's discouraging to see people yawning before the service begins... and I said to her, "Wake up." And she looked at me and said, "You can't make me." During the sermon I kept my eye on her, and she was absolutely right.

What did the shepherd girl give to the Christ child? I don't know and I don't care. I'm not ready for Christmas, and I'm not the only one. Leo Buscaglia's favorite Christmas pageant was the one he directed when he first was hired at the school. Since he was the latest one hired, it was his job to do the pageant. You've probably read this story, or heard him tell it. A group of seventh and eighth graders, the Biblical story, the script developed, the parts were picked, and the kid selected to be Joseph was the biggest and strangest kid in the school. His name was Matthew. They called him Big Matthew. He was hyperactive, he couldn't sit still, reading and math were a mystery to him, but he did pretty well with the script in the play, he did pretty well. Mostly, however, you just sort of stand there if you're Joseph, which is what he was. Joseph doesn't have a lot to say in the pageant. The night of the performance, the angel appeared, the angel of the Lord put the child in the manger in the straw at Mary and Joseph's feet. And it came to pass... Caesar Augustus... wrapped in swaddling clothes...laid him in a manger. Big Matthew sprang into action, looked down in surprise, discovered the child at Mary's feet. Something kicked in, he got into Christmas, and to everyone's surprise, he shook Mary by the shoulder roughly and said "Mary, Mary, wake up and see what you had last night." Wake up and see.. and that's what we want to do, wake up and see.

Some time with some people it has happened, they wake up, and maybe you have, and maybe I will, wake up and see what we have. The harmony of the holiday... The

harmony of the holiday warms our hearts. When the word became flesh and dwelt among us, things changed, Leonard Sweet said. I suspect that the incarnation of God was a watershed event in the aesthetic history, David Wang said. We will not agree with comedian George Burns, who said happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city. Marilyn Oden, she believes that. Marilyn is a writer. She agrees with George, but not in the way he meant. She tells about a very hard Christmas they spent. Her husband Bill is a United Methodist bishop, their daughter Valerie is a pastor at the church in Arvada.

"For many years now, I've taken for granted, the magical celebration of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with family gathered and all the traditional trappings. One year, on the day before Christmas Eve, a severe winter storm stranded Bill and me mid-journey. We were caught between our home and our daughter's home in Colorado where the family had gathered, and we faced our first celebration of the holy day totally separated from our loved ones. It was Christmas stripped of tree and stocking and family rituals, that had evolved for us, as for many over the years. Since Bill and I had exchanged our gifts before leaving home, it was also the first time in our family where the two of us had no way to give somebody something on Christmas Day, not a single gift. Our gifts for the family, however, shouted at us from the heap in the corner of the motel room, which we had brought to give, but couldn't. Because of its place in our family tradition, I also brought along the family crèche, the old crèche, unwrapped each figure and set them down on the lampstand table in the motel room, behind the pile of unwrapped gifts. The simplicity of the stable sheltering Mary and Joseph, the manger smelling of hay where Jesus lay, the animals staring at the infant lying in the feed trough, the shepherds in awe, the Magi with their gifts, the light of the star, the essence of the story. On Christmas Eve, Bill and I attended a beautiful church and like Mary and Joseph, we were strangers in an unfamiliar community. Later on our son called us. He could tell from my voice that I was troubled, but he said to me, 'Mom, everyone in the family, wherever we are, we will be in church tonight. Everyone in the family, wherever we are, we will sing 'Joy to the World' and we will have heard the angel voices, 'Glory to God on high, and on earth, peace.' His words were comforting. Bill and I held hands at midnight in the church with our pew neighbors, as the congregation joined in 'Silent Night.' Even though our grown children and our small grandchildren were miles and miles away, I felt linked to them. They too were singing 'Joy to the World.' They too were hearing the Christmas story. It was a Christmas not lost in the trappings, but wrapped in the Christ. It was Christmas, it was Christ mass, and that I discovered," Marilyn said, "that I discovered is enough."

The harmony of the holiday warms our hearts. Happiness is having a large, loving, caring, close-knit family in another city on Christmas eve and realizing how we are linked by the spirit of Christmas. I met someone a week ago who was on crutches, a cast on her foot. I asked her what happened and she said she fell off a horse in a fox hunt. I recalled Dean Clellan, of the chapel at Duke University. He was asked to give a prayer before the fox hunt in North Carolina. But before he prayed, he told the assembled, "I think of a fox hunt as an activity in which the unspeakable goes in pursuit of the inedible." I think that was the last time they asked Dean Clellan to pray for the fox hunt. And Ashley Montague once described psychiatry as the search for the id by the odd. I

doubt if he was ever invited to a seminar symposium of psychiatrists. This week is the CSU basketball team's defeat of the University of Colorado men and women's basketball teams. Five thousand students remembering what happened at Folsom Stadium when the Rams beat the Buffalos in football. Five thousand CSU students speaking as one, just like football, just like football, and it was this week just like football, and our students got the spirit. The CU students are having a little trouble feeling the love. Some of us know exactly why it's a difficult time of year. Maybe it's an illness we have, or death, or maybe it's broken promises. You and I can imagine Tiger Woods and his family will not be having a great Christmas this year. That's so sad. Maybe it's money or the lack of it, or maybe it's the job or the threat of losing it. Or maybe there's no clear reason exactly why, but what did the shepherd girl give to the Christ child? I don't know. The gift of the shepherd girl, I put that question on the web page. One person in the congregation thought the shepherd girl would give the Christ child something that meant a lot to her. Maybe a morsel of food, given to the one who would spend his life feeding the masses. Another person in the congregation felt that the shepherd girl would have given the Christ child a blanket, maybe the one given by her mother to keep her warm. Or maybe it was the blanket given, the only gift from her mother, who died in childbirth. Another member of the church was sure the shepherd girl would give the Christ child a lamb. A lamb would have been used at the temple, for the sacrificial offering, and Mary and Joseph would have been told not to sacrifice the lamb, but the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. Jesus is the lamb. Or Jesus is the good shepherd, and the sheep know the good shepherd's voice.

I don't know what the shepherd girl gave the Christ child. I'm not even sure there was a shepherd girl. But several members of our church have been thinking about it, and they're more prepared for Christmas, and are in the spirit of the season, in the harmony of the holiday more than I, more than some of the rest of you, and if we listen to the choir sing "Glory to God in the Highest" then on Christmas day when Joseph says to Mary, "Wake up and see what you had last night," maybe we'll all be able to see it, the Christ child, when God came down to Earth, inviting us to look up. Or when Christmas comes and times are hard, and you wonder if somehow you can survive Christmas, only to realize Christmas is what makes the hard times survivable. Angel voices sing it, shepherds hear it. Choirs replicate it in places like this. I think if our choir and John Rudder can't get us into the spirit of Christmas, how sad. We may not make it this year. Joy to the World. We're going to sing it.