

## ***A HASTY CHRISTMAS***

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Lamington Presbyterian Church

December 23, 2018; 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Advent; Non-lectionary sermon

Luke 2:8-20

***“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,  
and the child lying in the manger.”***

– Luke 2:16-2a

The shepherds “went *with haste*.” I never thought much about that line, as many times as I’ve heard it read in worship services, and even read it myself. It’s always seemed a mere transitional line, a segue. If the Christmas story were a play, it could be a stage direction — a humble instruction that gets the characters from one scene to another. “Shepherds exit hastily, stage left.”

That reminds me of a play I saw many years ago, back when I was a college student. I was on my Junior Year Abroad, at Oxford University. It was an open-air production of Shakespeare’s *A Winter’s Tale*, presented in one of the historic college quadrangles.

Lots of us in the audience, sitting there on our folding chairs, were curious to see how the director would handle Shakespeare’s most famous stage direction, which is part of *A Winter’s Tale*. The stage direction is: “Exit, pursued by a bear.”

It’s a hard enough thing to stage in a conventional theater — but, an open-air production, with no curtain, no scenery? Where were they going to hide the bear,

until it was time for his big entrance?

Sure enough, as the time for the famous exit drew near, a guy in a bear suit emerged from one of the nearby buildings, his bear head tucked under one arm. He strolled casually over to the edge of the lawn. There he stood for several minutes, like he was waiting for a bus. Then, at just the right moment, he donned his bear-head, entered full carnivorous mode, and chased the proper character off the quad.

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If we were going to get together and put on a stage play of the nativity story, I wonder how we'd handle that stage direction, "So they went with haste"? It's not the easiest question to answer. In order to decide how to stage it, you'd have to know what sort of haste motivated those shepherds.

Were they frightened of the angels? Fear would be a reasonable response to a sky full of angels. Luke refers to the angels who announced Jesus' birth as "the heavenly host." The word "host" means, literally, "army." When God announces the birth of Jesus, the proclamation's accompanied by a show of heavenly force such as no one on earth has ever seen.

So, it would make perfect sense for those shepherds to high-tail it off the exposed hilltop and seek shelter in the town below. That would mean their haste resulted from being pushed.

How's it been for you, this Advent? Have you felt *pushed* towards Christmas?

Lots of people do. We even have an expression to describe it: "the Christmas rush." We all know what that means. It's easy to get so caught up in holiday preparations that we transform the peaceful and reflective season of Advent into some maniacal footrace. There we are on Thanksgiving Day, crouched in the starting-blocks, ears cocked for the sound of the gun. As soon as we hear it, we're off and running, looking neither right nor left, eyes only on the goal. It's no wonder, by the time we round the curve into the home stretch, we're gasping for breath and aching from a stitch in the side!

Is this the sort of haste we're supposed to demonstrate, at Christmas? Are we really supposed to reach our goal so exhausted, that all we can do is stand there bent over double, hands on knees, fighting for breath?

So much of our lives, in our driven culture, is characterized by desperate haste. Those in the working world are working harder, it seems, than ever before. Our to-do lists grow longer, even as the hours of the day grow shorter. After awhile, haste can become a sort of habit: a mindless, headlong rush from one thing to the next, for no particular reason. How hard it can be to give ourselves permission to simply pause and rest!

So, maybe the shepherds are pushed to Bethlehem, like so many of us are...

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I think there's another possibility, though — and it's not too late, even two days before Christmas, to choose it. Sure, the shepherds have reason to run from those imposing angels, but there's also something in what the angels tell them that makes them eager to go to Bethlehem. “Good news of great joy,” the angel calls it. “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord!”

Do you have any idea how long those shepherds had been waiting to hear news of that baby's birth? They'd been waiting all their lives to hear that news!

I saw a Facebook post from my cousin Greg, down on the Shore this past Friday afternoon, about a sight he'd been waiting a very long time to see. Here's what he wrote:

**“Ran into Red Bank to get a gift certificate for a client. I'm walking down the street and walking toward me is Bruce Springsteen....just strolling down the sidewalk by himself. Didn't want to bother him so I just threw my hand out in passing and said 'Merry Christmas' and he gave me a quick shake and a little shoulder bump and said 'you too, good seeing you' and we both just kept walking opposite ways as if we were two casual acquaintances who see each other often on the street. Merry Jersey Christmas!”**

Accompanying that post was a photo of the Boss' back, as he walked away

from Greg — who must have been pretty quick with the smartphone camera.

Folks in this State think Mr. Springsteen is quite a celebrity — and I do, too: I'm a fan — but his star pales in comparison to the celebrity-sighting those shepherds were so eager to experience.

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There's another kind of haste, besides the sort that pushes us. There's also the haste that pulls us. It's the same sort of haste grandparents feel, as they're waiting in an airport lounge to go visit their new grandchild for the first time. It's the sort of haste a young man feels, when he's off to pick up that special young lady to take to the prom. It's the sort of haste that says, "Come on, let's go — every minute we delay is a minute we won't be there!"

It's the sort of haste we've all come to know, when Christmas is at its very best. It's not the tyranny of the to-do list, then, but the joy of a churchful of people singing carols; the glow of the candlelight, passed from hand to hand during "Silent Night"; the swell of the organ, as we roll into that first stanza of "O Come, All Ye Faithful." It's the sort of haste that beckons us onward, that wins cold hearts over, that pulls us out of the December doldrums and sets us gently down in a holy place, a place of light and love and faith.

For a good many of us, the over-consumption habits of the world out there

have lost their luster. We've all heard the nightmare stories of Black Friday, that seem to get worse every year. The news agencies show videos of early-morning crowds, pressed up against the door of one store or another, waiting for the manager to unlock it so they can chase those "doorbuster specials."

What's the reason for their haste? Are those shoppers being pulled by the vision of something wondrous and holy? Or, is it more about being pushed by fear of scarcity: by a deep conviction that the world's supply of happiness is so limited, you've got to grab your grimy, pawed-over piece of it before someone else gets it?

I'll admit, there are some forms of happiness that *are* that fragile and scarce — but they have little to do with Christmas. The message of Christmas is not about happiness at all. The angels don't announce to the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great happiness." No, the tidings they deliver are of joy — and that's something very different.

Happiness can be a kind of addiction. Hunger for it can push us through this life, but only the promise of joy can pull us. Joy — not happiness — is what emanates from that humble dwelling in Bethlehem: "good news of great joy for all the people."

For *all* the people. Did you catch that? Not just King Herod in his elegantly-appointed palace. Not just the wealthy merchants who are having a very good year.

Not just the rich, the powerful, the beautiful, the famous — but a band of shepherds, who slept the last few nights with a stone for a pillow, and who haven't had a bath in a week.

Joy to them as well. Maybe, joy *especially* to them!

The celebration of that joy is almost here: and the good news is, there's nothing you need do but reach out and accept the gift. It's the gift of a baby, born to a poor family in rented lodgings and laid in manger. It's the gift of a savior, with the power to take a life mangled by selfishness and sin, and transform it into something beautiful. It's a gift you won't find in the department store, or the tavern, or the gambling casino, or the Oval Office, or even the United Nations. Search all the likely places, the places of pretension and grandeur, and you'll never find it there. Look, instead, in the humble place, the simple place, the place the world — in all its acquisitive hungers — scorns, and there you will find it.

Prepare yourself, for the day of coming to that humble place is almost here. On that night the message will be: come, with haste. Come to the manger where the savior of the world awaits!

Let us pray:

**Lord Jesus Christ,  
name above all names,  
you alone are God among us, holy and true.  
Everything else we idolize, everyone else we worship**

**is a denial, a distraction and a disappointment,  
a false trail and a false hope.  
Speak to our hearts in these waning hours of Advent:  
so we may, at the appointed time,  
journey in all holiness and haste  
to the humble place where you abide.  
Help us to cast aside every weight or hindrance  
that keeps us from that pilgrimage.  
Bring us to Bethlehem,  
to the manger,  
to the light that enlightens all the world. Amen.**

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