



St. Luke's East Hampton

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

December 24, 2025; **Christmas Eve**, Luke 2:1-20

“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.” Glad tidings of great joy. Comfort and joy. Joy is intimately tied to Christmas and to the experience of the shepherds that first Christmas Eve night. But what is it? For this I asked Dr. Google and his new friend AI. The first thing that became clear is that happiness and joy are not the same thing. Happiness is contextual. Happiness comes from external factors, things happening around you. Happiness is temporary. It comes and goes with circumstances. Neurochemically, it activates the brain’s reward system and is linked to dopamine. Joy is different. Joy comes from an internal sense of meaning, purpose and values. It is long-lasting and stable. Independent of circumstances, joy can coexist with pain, grief or hardship. It is described as an attitude, a state of being and inner peace. Neurochemically, joy activates regions tied to emotional regulation, meaning and purpose. While happiness is something that happens to you, joy is a choice you make. Happiness is about the gifts under the tree. Joy is about the love those gifts represent.

Comfort. I am sure those shepherds enjoyed the comfort that comes from sitting by a warm fire wrapped in a wool blanket, eating a bowl of hardy lamb stew and drinking a couple glasses of Galilean wine. The shepherds would have appreciated comfort. Comfort, however, was not what they were given on that first Christmas Eve. That night they received joy. From the angel, the shepherds learned that the God who could have come to earth in any form, had chosen to come as one of them. The baby born in the manger would be known as a rabbi and a teacher and as a physician and healer, but he would most be known as a shepherd. Talk about honoring the trades. That night, the shepherds knew that they were valued and seen and loved and respected by God. Consider for a moment what the shepherds were actually doing. The shepherds weren’t just raising sheep just to provide food for Roman soldiers to eat and wool for the grandmothers of Bethlehem to knit into ugly Christmas sweaters. The shepherds were also raising sheep to be sacrificed in the temple of Jerusalem. They were raising sheep to help people repair their relationships with God and with their neighbors. They were raising sheep to help people experience things like reconciliation and forgiveness and healing and hope. My thoughts about this comes from a seemingly insignificant detail in the text, a comment that the baby Jesus was wrapped in “bands of cloth” and laid in a manger.

The older translation said that Jesus was wrapped in “swaddling clothes.” What are swaddling clothes? A hint: Swaddling clothes are not diapers! Swaddling clothes are wrappings put on baby lambs to keep them clean so they would be unblemished when presented at the temple. You can still see them in use at State Fairs, where show animals are often covered to keep them clean before judging. Shepherds would have immediately recognized the meaning of those bands of cloth. The angel’s mention of swaddling clothes would have told them the baby born in the manger was not just the Good Shepherd but also the Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. Those tiny words would have confirmed what the shepherds already knew in their hearts, that in their work they were participating in something far bigger than themselves, that in their work they were joining in the mission of God. On that first Christmas Eve, the shepherds learned that their lives had meaning and purpose, that the way they lived was in alignment with their core values, and that their work was seen and valued and appreciated by God. Suddenly it didn’t matter how cold the night was or how uncomfortable things were around them. It didn’t matter how threatening or oppressed they felt by the Romans or how many personal struggles they were going through at home. Suddenly, with the message from the angels, the shepherds experienced joy. On this Christmas Eve night, my prayer is that what happened to the shepherds will happen to you. On this Christmas Eve night, my hope is that you will also play the role of the angel, and give the same glad tidings of great joy to others.

When Shari and I were first married, we spent four summers leading a mission trip to the Arapaho people on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Over time we built relationships with some of the tribal elders who told us stories. One of these was the story of a great warrior who fell in love with a beautiful princess. She died in a tragic accident and was taken away from him into heaven. He spent eternity riding his horse through the sky, punching holes in the darkness so her light could shine through. That, the elder said, is where the stars come from.

Like that warrior, our job is to punch holes in the darkness and let the light – God’s light – shine through. As we know from the first verses of the Gospel of John, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot and will not overcome it. Like the shepherds, we live in a world full of challenges. Like the shepherds, we can move forward, knowing that God sees us and values us, that our lives have meaning and purpose, and that in our own quiet way, each of us are part of God’s plan to save humanity itself. Like the shepherds, we can go to the manger and make his mission our own, punching holes in the darkness every step of the way. On this Christmas Eve, may you have happiness. May you have comfort. May you also have joy.