



## **St. Luke's East Hampton**

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Benjamin Shambaugh

December 25, 2025; Christmas Day: John 1:1-13

Last night I talked about how the shepherds were raising sheep, not to be sold for their meat or their wool, but for the temple in Jerusalem. In other words, the shepherds were raising sheep to be sacrificed for the forgiveness of sins, to get people back into right relationship with God and their neighbor, and to give all of us a fresh start in this life and the life to come. The temple rituals in Jerusalem were highly developed and impressive. Their efficacy, however, wasn't all that clear. The shepherds could see that despite everything they did, people around them were still suffering and alienated from God and one another. It just wasn't working. In fact, it was getting worse. The angels came to the shepherds on that first Christmas Eve to tell them that everything was about to change. From the angels, the shepherds learned that the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes was the Lamb of God, the great high priest, and the new temple all wrapped up in one -- and that through him forgiveness and new life would finally become reality. The shepherds realized that, with that baby in the manger, their job was done, that their sins were finally forgiven, once and for all, forever.

While they might have served the temple, the shepherds spent their time in the fields. They were used to finding God in the gritty realities of daily life. Knowing that the baby's name was also "Emmanuel" -- "God with us," they would have understood why the church's name for this day is not "Christ's mass" but rather "The Feast of the Incarnation." Shepherds were used to looking up into the starry sky and wondering at the vastness of the universe. That night they learned that the God was not up there somewhere but right there with them. That night they learned the great sacramental principle of Anglicanism, that physical things can become holy things. That night they learned the great truths of Incarnational Theology that God loves us just we are and things like little babies, like bread and wine, and like you and me are places where we can experience God the most.

As I have said in previous Christmas sermons, the incarnation teaches us that

Christmas is not about presents; it is about presence,

God's presence, that is with us every day... and every time we gather around this altar together. Experienced in communion and community, Christmas is not a day but is an incarnational way of life.

Is that true for you? Do you have a shepherd's long-term perspective? Can you, like the shepherds, receive the healing of relationships that comes from knowing that God loves you, that forgiveness is real and that Christmas is fulfilled in the new life of Easter? Can you, like the shepherds, live incarnationally and celebrate with great joy the good news that God is present in your life and the world around you? Tonight I invite you to follow in the shepherds' steps and make your own journey to the manger. If you can do this, you may just discover that the meaning of Christmas in the simple words of a skeptical English poet.

The poet's name is John Betjeman, a man who in his wondering hit on the greatest truth of all. I end with words from his poem *Christmas*:

*And is it true, and is it true,  
This most tremendous tale of all,  
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,  
A Baby in an ox's stall,  
The Maker of the stars and sea,  
Become a Child on earth for me?*

*And is it true? For if it is,  
No loving fingers tying strings.  
Around those issued fripperies,  
The sweet and silly Christmas things.  
Bath salts and inexpensive scent  
And hideous tie so kindly meant,  
No love that in a family dwells,  
No caroling in frosty air,  
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells  
Can with this single Truth compare -  
That God was man in Palestine  
And lives today in Bread and Wine*

*Amen.*