

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2010, Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20
Faithfulness with Our Feet

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This time, as I have thought about the wonderful story of Christmas, I have found myself especially delighted by the shepherds in the story, the way they joyfully spring into action and dash off to see the Christ Child. The angel had not clearly commanded them to do so. They rather put their heads together and came up with their lovely plan on their own. “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass...” Then they hastened off to draw near to that little One who had been described by the angel as being their Saviour. So, here is my text for this evening’s sermon. Notice the sense of energy in the shepherds:

¹⁵And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶*And they came with haste*, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. (Luke 2:15-16, KJV)

And so it is that these shepherds showed their faithfulness, with their feet¹. They set themselves in motion. They had heard about the Christ Child and straightway they were off to see him. They hit the road. No moss grew under their feet. Their faith took wing and off they flew. At least, they flew as fast as lowly shepherds picking their way over the nighttime countryside could fly.

Back home, that one who had won the shepherd’s heart, Mrs. Shepherd, had she known of her husband’s adventures that night, she could have sighed with satisfaction that she had recently mended his sandals and insisted that he take a good heavy cloak with him. “The dear old man!” I imagine her saying, “He’d forget his head if it weren’t attached to his body. I’m glad I checked him over before he went out. Glad I filled his sack with dried figs, olives, raisins, cheese and bread. I made sure his clay flask was filled with water, that he wasn’t forgetting either his rod or his staff.”²

You see, some shepherds had fairly nine-to-five jobs. They were the *village* shepherds. Families throughout the village entrusted the family sheep or goat to the shepherd. In the morning, he’d gather them all together from the various families, take care of them during the day, and in early evening bring them back to

¹ “Feet, it seems, can be indicators of faithfulness.” Stephen Farris in *The Lectionary Commentary: The Gospels* (William B. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2001), page 296.

² Details on the shepherd’s equipment come from Erich H. Kiehl, *Everyday Life in Bible Times, Third Edition* (Concordia Publishing House: Saint Louis, 1995) pages 22-23.

their owners.

But these shepherds in the Christmas story seem not to have been village shepherds. They were not safe and sound at home, enjoying supper and getting ready for bed. Instead, they were out in the fields, working in the nighttime:

⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock *by night*. (Luke 2:8, KJV)

They might have been far from home, having brought their flock to good pasture wherever they could find it. And since they were far from home, they needed to be pretty well supplied so that they could labor both day and night. So, good for Mrs. Shepherd for having equipped and cared for her husband. For this night, this particular night, her husband has something important to do, somewhere important to go, Someone important to see, and he doesn't need to be delayed by broken sandals or scarce food and drink.

Did you catch what the angel said? He spoke of a "Saviour."

¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For *unto you* is born this day in the city of David a *Saviour*, which is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11, KJV)

I wonder whether the angel was being a bit reckless here, a bit extravagant. I mean, the angel was not addressing a bunch of saints. This was not a monastery, with the angels addressing people who loved the Lord so much that they had dedicated themselves to the monastic life of prayer. This was not a theological seminary, with the angel addressing seminarians preparing the Holy Ministry. And this was not a college of cardinals or a holy synod of bishops. No, the angel is addressing lowly shepherds, and he says that "unto you" is born this day "a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord."

It is a strange group to be the first to hear the news of the Saviour. Not saints, not monks, not bishops, but rather lowly folk who tended to be regarded with suspicion by other good people. Shepherds were poor, and the demands of their job prevented them from fulfilling the demands of the law concerning sacrifices and feast days and pilgrimages. Furthermore, some landowners looked askance at shepherds because the shepherds were not overly particular about trespassing and property boundaries. They tended to take their sheep wherever they could find good pasture. And shepherds were seldom well-educated or up-to-date on current events because their companions tended to be sheep or other shepherds as lowly as themselves. Nothing special about shepherds in terms of wealth or power, learning or piety. They were just everyday working people. But to them the Christmas angel appeared and to them and for them, they announced that a Savior had been born.

Now we reach the part I like: these shepherds *hastened* off to see this young Saviour. They put their feet to moving. Their faith took the good, old-fashioned method of drawing near to their Savior.

It is the same with us all these centuries later. Our feet will always have something to do with our faith.

When we pray the Lord's Prayer, for example, and we reach the petitions about trespasses and temptation -- "and forgive us our trespasses" and "lead us not into temptation" -- we are acknowledging that there is some territory in which *we do not belong*. And we ought to get out of there! We ought to get our feet moving. If we have been straying to the pub too much, for example, so that we threaten to wreck our lives and jobs and families with drunkenness, then we can have all the fine theories about it we want, but none of our ideas is as good as putting our feet in motion and getting out of the pub while we still have our wits about us. And if in the wee hours, we find ourselves meandering toward some shady side of town, then put those feet in reverse and get out of there. And if we are off to some corrupt business meeting, in which injustice is planned, then "walk the talk" of our faith and walk away. If anger overwhelms us and tempts us to strike with cruel fist, turn and walk away. Do not play with fire. Do not draw near to vice. Instead, put your heel to the sidewalk and walk away from that which would hurt your neighbor and drag you down.

And more positively, let us always do as these shepherds did: let us hasten on toward Jesus. We do not need to be saints or geniuses, as little as the shepherds were saints or geniuses. We just need to know that this Babe who lies in the arms of Mary desires to be our Saviour and we should make it our business to walk toward him day by day.

Years later, when this Babe of Bethlehem grows up and becomes a preacher, he becomes articulate about the pattern of the dear shepherds from his infancy:

²⁸Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (Matthew 11:28-30, KJV)

Such is always his appeal. To all of you who labor and heavy-laden, he invites you to come to him. You might be a shepherd abiding in the field by night. You might be a fisherman casting your nets along the shore, or a tax collector sitting at your booth. You might be a learned despiser of the church, as was St. Paul when he was young, or a rich young nobleman, as was St. Francis, before he gave away his fancy clothes to a beggar. You might be a trespasser who has traveled long and hard in forbidden territory, or you might be a poor widow who is so dejected that she imagines the only thing left to her is prepare one last meal for her son and herself and then to die. You might be an adulterer or a leper and a denizen of the dregs of society. No matter! It is the property of this Saviour lying in a manger

that he invites you to come to him, to sin no more, and to let him make something grand of you.

And now we come to the final scene in which the shepherds show their faithfulness with their feet: I mean, that good scene in which they hasten home to tell their families and loved ones what has transpired:

¹⁷And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. (Luke 2:17, KJV)

There is no hint here that they stopped being shepherds, nor that they let their sheep stray while they built themselves a church or a monastery. No, you get the feeling that they simply went back home and told folks the stupendous news concerning the Babe of Bethlehem. For the shepherds had seen something marvelous, and they were not so miserly as to keep it to themselves, but they came home and shared the news with the people God had entrusted to them.

So too is the pattern for you. When you come to Christ, he will always send you back home. He will send you to that one who won your heart so long ago. He will send you to those little ones for whom you are their savior, for whom you are their world, while they are so little. He will send you to your neighbors, for some of them are weary and heavy-laden, and their lives would be improved if you would share with them what you yourself have come to know. And one day, the Bible's blessing on those who publish glad tidings will come upon you and upon your feet. Aye, and it will be said of you:

How beautiful upon the mountains are *the feet* of him who brings good tidings, who publishes peace, who brings good tidings of good, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns." (Isaiah 52:7, RSV)

Let your feet carry your faith, to the benefit of your neighbors and to the glory of the Babe of Bethlehem, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.