

Keeping Watch

When I was a kid growing up in Memphis, obviously a very long time ago now, from the time I was an early teenager all through my high school years, I had a paper route, a morning paper route meaning that I got up every morning—every morning as in 365 days a year—a little before 4 o'clock, quickly threw on my clothes and headed out the door to go pick up my papers and deliver them. Back in those days nearly everyone subscribed to the morning paper in Memphis, so I delivered a paper to almost every single house along my route which meant it was very compact and so didn't take me long to cover, even walking. So unless there was a problem of some sort, I was usually done and back home in bed no later than 5:30 or so, enjoying a couple of more hours of sleep before having to get up again and head off to school. The next day, I'd get up and do it all over again. Every single day.

I don't know whether it's simply that I'm peculiar, which is certainly a possibility, or whether a paper route was just very nearly the perfect job for me, but I didn't mind it at all. In fact, I really liked it. Of course, I didn't particularly like getting up at 4 o'clock in the morning, especially if I'd been up late the night before, but once I was up, as long as it wasn't raining or too terribly cold, I really liked being up at that hour of day. I loved watching the sky gradually get brighter, going from pitch black to all the shades of pink and blue just before dawn. I loved seeing the sun come up every day; in fact, to this day, if I don't see the sun come up, I feel like I've missed out on the best part of the day. But most of all, I just loved being out and about pretty much all alone, as if for an hour or so, I had that little piece of the world all to myself.

I have something of that same feeling coming here tonight, which is no small part of why I love coming to this service, something of that same feeling of keeping watch over the world while everyone else is asleep, not unlike the shepherds of old keeping watch over their flock on that long winter's night so many years ago. Perhaps we should even call this the shepherds' service, since like them we, too, are keeping watch, like them waiting, waiting and hoping to hear the angels' song. Waiting to hear the good news of a savior's birth, waiting to hear of the promise of peace on earth and good will to all God's people. Keeping watch, and waiting patiently and hopefully for the final verse of that glorious song we'll all sing, when at long last there really is peace on earth.

It's Luke, of course, who tells us that the shepherds were out there keeping watch over their flock by night when the angel of the Lord and a multitude of the heavenly host appeared to them praising God and singing, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors." Why were the shepherds there that night in the fields outside of Bethlehem? Did they somehow know that it was going to be a special night? Had someone told them that it was going to be that very night when the promised Messiah would be born, amazingly enough right there in Bethlehem? Had they gotten a sign of some sort? No, they didn't know that night was going to be anything special. They were out there to hear the angels' song because they were

there every night, keeping watch over their flocks night after night. That's what I'd like us to think about tonight, what it means to keep watch, not just for a night or two, but night after night after night. To keep watch, as long as it takes.

Of course, the shepherds weren't out there looking at the stars on the chance that there might be some heavenly sign. They weren't keeping watch over the heavens at all. No, they were keeping watch over their flock of sheep. The word that's translated here as "keeping watch" doesn't mean just looking at something; it means guarding or protecting something, means keeping an eye on something in order to keep it safe or preserve it. In much the same way, we're not here tonight just to sing the carols that we all love so much, or to draw comfort from the candle-lit beauty of this church, or even to cherish the memories of so many other Christmas Eves spent here in this place with those we love. No, we're here to keep watch, to preserve the message that angels sang to the shepherds on that night long ago. We're here to keep alive the hope of peace on earth. We're here to affirm the faith that the word became flesh and dwelled among us, full of grace and truth, and to preserve that faith for those who will come after us.

I don't know that there's ever been a time when that message, that hope, that faith was any more needed than it is today. We live in a world that is torn apart by so much hatred and conflict of every kind, racial conflict, religious conflict, ethnic conflict, that it desperately needs to hear a word of peace, a word of comfort, a word of hope. But the volume, and I mean literally the *volume* of information that is available everywhere one turns today is now so great as to have all but drowned out the voice of the church in its efforts to proclaim the gospel, a once strong voice that in too many places has now been reduced to little more than a whisper. Sadly, much of what is heard today is a tragic distortion of the true meaning of Christmas, a distortion that all too often only adds to the suspicion and mistrust that is poisoning human society in so many places.

Which is why we keep coming here year after year, why we keep coming in the middle of the night long after everyone else has gone to bed, why we keep telling the story about a child born in Bethlehem, and keep affirming the faith that the word became flesh and dwelled among us. Because we're keeping watch, keeping watch just like those shepherds in the fields to whom angels appeared on this night now so long ago. For the song that they sang is a light shining in the darkness, and we have a part to play in insuring that the darkness never overcomes that light. Which is why nothing we've done in this holy season is as important as simply the fact that we're here tonight, and God willing, that you'll be here next year, too. Still keeping watch. Just like the shepherds.