

# Essential Workers

Scripture text: Luke 2:(1-14,) 15-20  
The Rev. Matthew McCaffrey  
Center Church on the Green, December 24, 2020



Blessings and Christ's peace to you on this quiet evening. It is my pleasure and delight to be with you as we are able this evening.

I can recall a time in the distant past...let's say, April...when it seemed like a miracle to see your faces and hear your voices through speakers and screens. This evening, sitting in front of this tree and being with you through the medium of the Internet does not seem so novel to me, and with the passage of 287 days, it might seem a little more routine to you, too.

But don't let the means by which we are gathered lull you. This night is not like other nights. The story that brings us together this evening is not routine. The circumstances to which it points are not ordinary at all.

Our time together cannot ignore those circumstances. We are not rooted in our everyday lives this Christmas Eve. And Luke's Gospel reminds us we need to be looking beyond great cathedrals and gilded robes, beyond cherub choirs and sweeping boughs of evergreen garland...beyond all those things that us humans do, we

need to listen to Luke's story if we want to know why it matters that we have gathered.

Luke tells us of a young couple gravid with new life, still expected to report to a central location for enumeration. He tells us of their reception, of an innkeeper's frazzled pity, and of a stable where the couple beds down as her labor has already begun.

And, Luke tells us of invisible, essential workers who keep everything going.

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That last detail has been sitting with me in these days of Advent expectation. There is a part of our community that has gone underground during these 41 weeks of upheaval and grief. We are not accustomed to overlooking the medical community, but its ranks have been so engaged in keeping us alive and healthy that they have faded from our view.

Everyone from doctors and nurses, to the orderlies who clean and change and move supplies and people, to the administrators who scrounge for supplies and equipment and enough money to keep everything going...they have become lost from our view unless we show symptoms or have an unrelated illness or injury that needs urgent attention. They have become traumatically invisible, working for 12 hours, sometimes sleeping in separate

quarters, and then working for another 12 hours, over and over again.

A photographer and a writer documented the work at a small hospital in Italy this past summer. They described caregivers who were so surrounded by suffering and death without respite that they looked like they had just left a battlefield at the end of their shifts. Their determination to help, their frustration at how swiftly events overtook their patients, their despair at having to make inevitable pronouncements in quick succession...all of this has been leaving its marks and scars on their souls. Even as the evening cheers from balconies and doorways have subsided, they have gone on with their work.

And they are tired. And they are grieving. And they are mystified that no one outside their corridors sees the need to follow simple hygiene and protection rules. They feel invisible.

And yet, they remain on the job. And they carry out their duties and ministrations in the middle of the night.

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Even as our hearts break for these essential workers, we see an echo of their experience in another story, from another time. Now, I have to confess I'm not a fan of preachers who speak to us like we are children and explain **JUST HOW HARD AND DANGEROUS**

the shepherds' work really was. Honestly, I can live the rest of my life without hearing that again, because it misses the point.

We know the shepherds' work was hard. We know it was dangerous. We know it was mostly boring.

But I think there are two things we miss about this group of workers sitting in the dark, listening for signs of danger or distress.

One of those things is pretty big: Shepherds were not just protecting sheep. Shepherds were making it possible for Israel to observe the Passover feast every year...the meal required by Yahweh's direct order to Moses, the meal that required as its centerpiece an unblemished roasted lamb. No shepherds, no sheep. No sheep, no lambs. No lambs, no Passover. And the people would be lost.

The shepherds were essential workers. The spiritual health of the nation depended on their work. The shepherds were on the front line for their country.

The other thing is pretty understandable: No one saw the shepherds, up close. The shepherds by their occupation were very attached to their flocks, and there is no such thing as a sheep latrine, or a sheep shower, or even nice little sheep-wipes. So: out all night, with the sheep all day, and out all the next night. If one of the shepherds went down to the village for supplies...well, let's just

say their aura preceded them. In short, the aroma of sheep and sheep by-products clung closely to a shepherd, and no one wanted to hang out with one.

So, there they were: doing some of the most essential work needed by the nation. Always away from the general population who didn't really understand what they were doing or welcome them when a shepherd happened to wander into their midst.

These invisible, and perhaps shunned, essential workers were on duty, carrying out their vital tasks, when the terrifying thrilling news arrived on angels' wings. The lights, the booming voice, the horns...broke in on the most unlikely audience imaginable.

And in that moment, God's intention of peace and goodwill was entrusted to the invisible ones who were caring for their nation. In that moment, the invisible ones were dispatched from their hillside, with the stench of their work still emanating from their bodies, to witness the arrival of salvation and to confirm the commission given to Mary and Joseph.

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On this Christmas Eve, we are challenged to stand with the invisible ones who are caring for us in this pandemic.

We hear and sing Christmas songs. We hear and tell Christmas stories. We see and create Christmas imagery. Many of our songs

and stories and imagery feature shepherds. Shepherds are essential to the work of the Christmas story, but essential workers will always be the first to tell you: their story is not about them, but about the work they do.

God chooses to bring the news of salvation through essential workers...through the dutiful, the invisible, the traumatized workers who nevertheless continue to put one sandaled or bootied foot in front of the other. God chooses to lay that burden on those already burdened because they can be counted upon to deliver it...and then pick up their jobs again.

In this season of light and beauty we need to become mindful of those essential workers. In the moments when we become impatient with precautions and restrictions, we need to give them the gift of staying isolated from the virus. In the moments when we just want to break free, we need to remember that help is coming and we need to be patient. And in the moments when we think applause and public displays of appreciation are enough, we need to remember that the bigger gift to our essential workers is simply staying healthy.

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On this Christmas Eve, we are grateful for God's message of salvation, for God's gift of God-self through the birth of Jesus. We

are especially thankful for the gift of that message brought through essential workers, then and now.

May your heart be softened and your spirit quicken to the invitation of the angel: Peace on earth, and goodwill to all people.

Amen.