

# **ADDENDUM**



## **PRESBYTERY MEETING**

### **NINETY-FIFTH STATED MEETING**

### **February 9, 2013**

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Hickory, North Carolina**

# ADDENDUM B-6

## THE PRESBYTERY OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA STATED CLERK'S REPORT

**William A. (Bert) Sigmon, Stated Clerk**  
**February 9, 2013**

The Stated Clerk presents the following:

### RECOMMENDATIONS:

- |    |   |
|----|---|
| CA | <p>1. <b>THAT the Presbytery celebrate the lives and service of the following Elders who died during the year of 2012, and that their names become a part of the permanent record:</b></p> <p><u>Love's Chapel</u><br/>Herbert Isles</p> <p><u>Saluda</u><br/>Margaret Peggy Moffat</p> <p><u>Siloam</u><br/>Nancy Catherine Greenlee<br/>Lucille Stubbs Morgan</p> |
| CA | <p>7. <b>THAT the minutes of the installation of the following be placed into the record of Presbytery:</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Rev. Kim Justice</b></p>  |

### FOR YOUR INFORMATION:

23. **THAT the following dates have been set for 2013 and 2014 Presbytery Meetings:**

#### 2013

January 26, 2013 ~ First Presbyterian Church, Hickory

April 30, 2013 ~ Montreat Conference Center

July 30, 2013 ~ Grandfather Home for Children

*October 26, 2013 ~ Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church, Asheville*

#### 2014

January 25, 2014 (Snow Date - February 1 or 8) ~ TBA

April 29, 2014 ~ TBA

July 29, 2014 ~ TBA

October 24-25, 2014 ~ TBA

# **ADDENDUM D-5**

## **THE PRESBYTERY OF WESTERN NORTH CAROLINA COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY REV. MARK RAMSEY, CHAIR FEBRUARY 9, 2013**

### **FIRST SECTION**

#### ***RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE COMMITTEE ON MINISTRY, AN ADMINISTRATIVE COMMISSION, OR A TASK FORCE THAT REQUIRE ACTION BY PRESBYTERY:***

#### **I. RECOMMEND TO PRESBYTERY FOR EXAMINATION AND ORDINATION (continued):**

##### **A. ADDITION TO ORIGINAL RECOMMENDATION:**

According to the new policy/process, the Committee on Preparation for Ministry is now responsible for hearing the sermon for a candidate under their care. They are then responsible for giving feedback and making a recommendation to the Committee on Ministry. (See and COM Attachments 6 and 7 for CPM Recommendations and COM Attachments 8 and 9 for Sermons.)

# COM ADDENDUM ATTACHMENT 6

Committee on Preparation for Ministry  
Presbytery of Western North Carolina

CPM Preaching Report  
for Marshall J. Nord

At its regular meeting on Wednesday, January 16, 2013 the CPM met at First Presbyterian Church, Morganton, NC to consider candidate Marshall Nord's preaching. This was done in accord with the Presbytery's new policy regarding candidates under our care who will be ordained in the Presbytery of Western North Carolina.

Because scheduling conflicts did not allow the CPM to hear Marshall preach in person, we heard him though an online video link to a recent sermon. The scripture text was from Psalm 23 and the sermon Marshall was the one that had been prepared for the CPM. A manuscript of the sermon is included the Presbytery packet.

Marshall demonstrated competence in biblical exegesis, the ability to draw relevant meaning from the texts, and a strong aptitude for preaching. After some of discussion, the Committee unanimously passed a motion to approve Marshall's preaching and sermon and to commend him to the Presbytery for ordination.

Respectfully submitted,



Rev. Mark Burnham  
CPM Moderator

# COM ADDENDUM ATTACHMENT 7

Committee on Preparation for Ministry  
Presbytery of Western North Carolina

Preaching Commission Report  
December 10, 2012

Commission members in attendance: Rev. Mark Burnham, Rev. David Nash, and Rev. Bob Tuttle with Rev. Margaret LaMotte Torrence from the Examination Committee.

On Monday, December 10, 2012 the Commission met in the Campbell Chapel at First Presbyterian Church, Asheville, NC to hear candidate Merriam (Merri) Steinhoff Alexander preach in accord with the Presbytery policy regarding candidates under our care who will be ordained in the Presbytery of Western North Carolina.

Merri presented an Order of Worship and our meeting opened with the call to worship. The scripture text was from Luke 2:1-20 and the sermon title was "Fear Not...A Great Joy" based on the Matthew passage. The manuscript of the sermon, including context and suggested worship elements, is attached.

Merri demonstrated competence in biblical exegesis, the ability to draw relevant meaning from the texts, and the aptitude in preaching. After a few minutes of discussion, the Commission unanimously passed a motion to approve Merri's preaching and sermon and to commend her to the Presbytery for ordination.

Respectfully submitted,



Rev. Mark Burnham

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Marshall Nord  
Reverence Pictures Media  
Sermon on Psalm 23: "A Bleatin' Sheep!"

What type of animal best describes you? Really, how do you see yourself? If you had to design your personal flag or family crest or what about to describe yourself with an image that creates the impression you want to leave with others?

I have always been partial to the Bald Eagle – I love its focus. I delight in seeing it soar and I admire how it can provide for itself by making impressive nests and catching more impressive prey with eagle eyes and ominous talons. I achieved the rank of Eagle in the Boy Scouts of America (not an easy task) and I am an American. The symbol of America is the Bald Eagle – mighty and strong. You might say I have Eagle envy.

However, I was dismayed the day I learned that Benjamin Franklin argued that America should not have the Eagle as its icon. I always liked that guy, but now I am not so sure. You see, he argued that the Eagle is not the appropriate symbol for our great nation, because it will flee and even abandon its nest, eggs and all when an Osprey attacks. The Osprey; a fierce bird with strength, presence and power – GOOGLE it sometime... it will impress you. Maybe Ben Franklin was acting as a prophet predicting that our great country might fall one day when an Osprey attacks or worse one arises from within America's own nest when we no longer adhere to "In God We Trust." You see we don't like weakness – do we? We like strength and we often encourage each other saying, "Live strong, be tough, and find your inner strength

As such, our founding fathers wanted a fierce and powerful national icon one that gives flight to people and ideas of democracy. We are proud to have the leader of our country stand next to an image of power and strength. And if an Eagle is fit for a president, then surely it is fit for a king. If so, then why in this world would an ancient king victorious in battle and ruler of a powerful nation choose to the image of a sheep to describe himself? That makes no sense...

I couldn't believe it when I read this in Psalm 23 – David – King David, God's chosen leader, says he is a sheep! How weak is that... or is it? What did a successful ruler of that known world understand that we as Christian American's might miss?

What is it about seeing himself as a sheep that gave David comfort and security? It is hard to believe that a weak, simple and vulnerable piece of livestock taught David to grow closer to God and to trust in the Christ?

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Reverence Pictures Media  
Sermon on Psalm 23: "A Bleatin' Sheep!"

Is it possible that believers today could learn to know Jesus Christ in a personal trust relationship that promises his care and protection from a simple poem about a bleepin' sheep? What does King David the psalmist of Psalm 23 want to convey to us? Here let's explore Psalm 23 together. Go ahead and open your Bibles to Psalm 23.

What looks after a sheep?

David, the sheep, says, "the Lord my his Shepherd, I shall not want." In the Bible, he chose to share this sentiment in poetic form – a Psalm; considered a sacred song. A good thing about poetry is that it can say twice as much than prose in half the time. The downside of this advantage is that if you don't give this type of literature your complete attention, then it appears to say half as much in twice the time as noted by poet Christopher Frye.

The difference between poetry and prose is primarily in the form – think of a "screen door that separates the two and not a brick wall." Poetry is not read much anymore by the masses. Music is the closest thing to poetry that most people come in contact with these days. Given Psalm 23's style David, most likely, shared it with his people through music as well. I say this considering his background as a singer and harpist.

The Psalmist shares more on an emotional level with hyperbole and metaphor, rather than intending to make logical connections. And this critical to understand as it can really mess up those who want absolutes and application every time they open the Bible. It might be why you don't hear Psalms preached very often. This lyric poetry is brief and structured using concrete images with intense emotions.

Since most psalms are short, they are not designed to give complete answers to questions. Like proverbs, the Psalms may as it is said, "flirt with heresy" (heresy is something opposed to right Christian thinking). "My God, my God, why have your forsaken me?" (from Psalm 22:1) is the voice of a believer crying out because he or she is surrounded by enemies. This is not a teaching aid for the "problem of evil" or is it meant to say, "God does not care." These types of literature join with our experience and force us to contemplate by examining our selves.

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Sermon on Psalm 23: "A Bleatin' Sheep!"

Hebrew poetry was not intended for speed-readers or those who skim the Scriptures, but for those who slow down to catch the immense depths and differing shades of an idea, image or emotion God's Word presents to us. The Psalmist wants to "show" you and not "tell" you. This poetry is not the time for us to say, "This is true and this is false" (known as proposition), but to experience it and reflect. This joins with our experience and helps turn our lives rightly toward God.

Psalm 23 is arranged in the Psalter with Psalm 22 and Psalm 24. Each Psalm can show a different relationship that we have with Christ.

Psalm 22 is a picture of Jesus and his death on the cross. This is the "Good Shepherd" who lays his life down for the flock (John 10:11). Psalm 23 is that of the "Great Shepherd." One who is resurrected for the sheep (Hebrews 13:20). Psalm 24 is the "Chief Shepherd." Who will return to reward those who take care of the sheep (1 Peter 5:4).

The challenge may be that those who put their trust in Jesus from Psalm 22 and look forward to his return as the Almighty King in Psalm 24 might not trust in him to experience his work as Psalm 23 describes. It is difficult to understand the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm unless we see that David wrote it from the perspective of a sheep. The entire Psalm is "unlocked" in the opening sentence.

The Lord is MY shepherd; I shall not want (i.e. I don't need anything). When David sang of the Christ as his shepherd, he was giving praise to the living God who was with him in daily life and providing for his deepest needs.

I was told once that if I could believe that the things I don't like may be part of what God planned for me, then I would begin to experience joy in His will. By embracing this I have come to realize that God is not going to lead me somewhere just to hurt me or leave me there alone. I heard a preacher, Haddon Robison, tell of a little girl who quoted this verse saying, "The Lord is my Shepherd; He's all I want!" Though she got it wrong, she got it really right. The Psalmist goes on to show us how to...Trust God

What could David be remembering while writing this poetry that would make him think of himself as a sheep?

David remembered how the Lord cares for his own in every way. Imagine David, older and well seasoned, walking through his royal grounds trying get poetic



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Sermon on Psalm 23: "A Bleatin' Sheep!"

inspiration in the middle of his kingdom thinking through his life and remembering how the Lord was with him in every instance even back to the beginning in the fields with the sheep.

Then it hits him... Sheep; The imagery of the sheep being kept is the best image for this poetic expression. After saying, "The Lord is my Shepherd; I shall not want". He says, "He makes me lie down in green pastures; he leads me beside the still waters; he restores my soul." David says, "I see myself as a sheep – God's sheep, because he cares for me when I stray - as I did!"

Imagine David having a sheep named Ruah. It means spirit or wind in Hebrew and he has this little sheep that would wander off every time the wind blew it seemed. Any shepherd will tell you that sheep will wander off easily and because shepherds know their sheep by name imagine David named this undisciplined one Ruah. One tasty piece of grass led to another and then Ruah was lost - again.

As a good shepherd David would go after it again and again – And then came time for the lesson. David broke its leg. How harsh? How cruel? What seems harsh and cruel makes sense once you understand the motive of the shepherd. What's cruel is kind, because the motive is restoration. David takes little Ruah and puts a splint on its leg and carries it until it starts to heal.

As the leg starts to mend he puts it down right beside him, but it doesn't wander away this time. Why? Every river, ever hill, every "obstacle" seems overwhelming to the broken sheep. Ruah learned to stay close to its shepherd and though it might limp - it learned to trust the one who leads for his purposes and not the sheep's desires. David would have remembered in his mid-forties having had an affair with a young married woman named Bathsheba.

It was harmless - until she became pregnant. Her husband, Uriah, was a fine military soldier and when David fixed it so he could quickly return from battle and be with his wife to cover things up, Uriah didn't comply out of respect for his suffering troops. David was undone and arranged Uriah's murder to make things right (How mixed-up we become when we mix-in wrong doing).

Heaven shook – and God sent Nathan to confront the king. David repented, cried out for mercy and begged God to forgive him (Read about it in Psalm 51). God did forgive him. But David understood that it was God, as a Great Shepherd, who

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sought him even before he repented. And like his lamb, David had sort of a limp for the rest of his life. The child from Bathsheba died, his sons rebelled, and his family fell to pieces.

Forgiveness didn't necessarily wipe out the consequences of his sin. The book of Hebrews says, "Don't despise the chastening of the Lord, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him; for whom the Lord loves, He chastens" (12:5-6). And "if" you are one of God's flock - then you will experience this disciplining (chastening) as well. David's life, like ours, was filled with rough water - Who am I kidding? We are in raging rapids at times! David, like all shepherds, knew that sheep have a fear of moving water, because they know that if they fall in and their coats get wet - they will drown.

Imagine a young David taking care of his sheep in the blistering heat of the desert and he leads them to some moving cool water, but they refuse to drink or even come near it. What is he supposed to do? These animals are terrified, but they will die without re-hydration. As a well-trained and caring shepherd he dams off part of the rapid flow with large rocks to make the water pool and "still" the water so that the sheep can drink. Fear kept them from being refreshed, but the as a good shepherd he makes a way just like the living God did with him during the torrents of his life - through the turbulent times God found a way to make his follower refreshed. God does "still" the waters for his people and he will cause them to rest (to lie down in green pastures) to prepare for a long journey or to learn to stay close to Him.

David was a man of courage and he knew that true courage was to trust in his personal Shepherd - his savior God. Right in the middle of Psalm 23 the pronouns change from talking "about" the Shepherd into talking "to" the Shepherd. "Though I walk through the darkest valley (a shadow of death); I will fear no evil, for you are with me." Poetic praise has turned to prayer. "Your rod and your staff they comfort me. You prepare a table before me in the middle of my enemies. You anoint my head with oil. My cup runs over."

See what David might have remembered. He sees how the Great Shepherd's rod is like the round-headed club he once whittled from the knot of a tree branch. He would have pounded sharp pieces of metal or stone into it and used it to fend off a lion that was attacking his flock. The sheep would be grazing and hear the sound of a predator close by - look for the shepherd who had the rod in hand - and go back to eating saying, "Yeah, my shepherd's got this..." Or the staff (like a

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crook) bent at one end that he used to rescue Ruah when it fell into a hole or one started down the wrong path.

These instruments gave comfort to the sheep as protection and the Great Shepherd's rod and staff comforts David. David could have thought about that time he entered a new field with his flock to graze. Doing what shepherds in Israel did for hundreds of years he enters the field alone looking for grass that could poison the flock or for holes from where vipers could strike. These tiny adders would pop out of the ground and bite the noses of the sheep injecting venom to cause inflammation or death. How many times, David could have thought, has he raked over the tall grass to find a viper's hole and then taking the oil from his belt pour it around the opening? The snake's body could not move through the oil and get the sheep. Just to make sure he might have dabbed the nose of the sheep with oil as an additional repellent.

Yes, the perfect poetic image of the Great Shepherd who protects David like a sheep that "literally" grazes in the presence of its enemies. The cup running over part loses me, as I don't find much sympathy for David. He is a king with servants and has everything he could possibly want – of course his cup is overflowing. But then I leave my sin of envy and I listen to the poetic Scripture from a man who knew great sorrow.

His two sons, Absalom and Adonijah, turned against him and tried to steal his throne. One of David's trusted advisor, and his army chief deserted him. David lived as "public enemy number one" for many years. And that is just the movie trailer to get you to buy a ticket to this troubled life. Does the cup just overflow when life is good or does it go deeper than the obvious? David is not talking about liquid running onto the table from his cup, but rather how a caring shepherd provides for the flock in all circumstances.

There might have been that time where David came across a well that was free to draw water. He would take a leather bucket and rope to draw from deep down in the well about three gallons of water at a time. Laborious work repeatedly dropped the bucket over and over to water a thirsty flock. Imagine 50 sheep – that would have taken hours! He would have seen how a hired hand would partially fill the stone cups that surrounded the well and then moved the sheep along before they had their fill of the cup. The hired hand doesn't take the care as someone who has ownership, because the bad shepherd just wants to

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finish the work and go rest – he doesn't take ownership in his task. But a good shepherd would fill the cups until they seemed to overflow – meaning each sheep gets its fill and then chooses to move on instead of being forced away by the shepherd. David's great shepherd is a great giver. Oh, how David would have realized that his Lord had given to him abundantly in every stage of life – providing for all his needs.

David sees God metaphorically as Shepherd who leads. He is a caretaker who leads his followers in this life and the next. God's leading us is not first for a vocation or even to get us to a location. But rather he leads us to a right life and a mature godly character.

Get that and you will get all He has for you – don't miss it. I don't know anywhere in the Bible that it will tell you whether or not to take the promotion or who to marry or even where to live. But the Bible clearly reveals God's plan for you. "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing and in everything give thanks. For this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus (1 Thess. 5:18). His will is for your sanctification. A fancy word for – being set apart for His purposes.

David knew that if a "shepherd led he also fed" those who followed. God does not fail and in the case of believers who follow him - his reputation is at stake – Just like the shepherd's. Just like you would spread the word on your mechanic, physician, CPA, trainer, dentist – their business depends on you succeeding.

God's business depends on you succeeding and he will care for you – in this life and the next. He will not lose a follower who trusts in him. There is eternity at stake – His and ours. God's leading is not primarily to a certain place or to a certain job or even a certain human relationship, but rather God is leading you to a right life. A life that is mature and godly in character. His thoughts will be your thoughts. And when this happens you will know what it is to...Trust God; For cares in this life...

The short time I served as a hospital chaplain, the most often requested Bible passage for me to read was Psalm 23. Why is Psalm 23 craved by those who know God personally and those who don't?

Psalm 23 expresses the truth of a loving God who is good and merciful promising security in this life and the next - for those who will trust Him. When David says,

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"Surely, goodness and mercy will follow me all the days of my life" he is saying for all who trust that God will extend his grace.

Goodness and mercy will follow all the days of our lives in the sense of the Hebrew word "Hesed," which can be translated "loving kindness," "loyal love," or in NT terms "grace." I say, "Can be," because in Hebrew the context and placement of the a given word conveys its meaning. The same word can intend various things in Hebrew, so it is the context of the subjects and the predicates that form the "meaning." This grace – hesed- is given to men and women who do not deserve it.

Psalm 23 shows how David talks (sings) of his personal intimate relationship with God himself. David was not talking specifically of where he would be in the future (i.e. a new palace or in heaven), but rather with "whom" he would be.

Psalm 23 begins and ends with the Lord. The Lord is my Shepherd in the beginning. I will dwell in the house of the Lord at the end. Christianity begins and ends with the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians who develop the courage to trust in their good savior, Jesus, will satisfy a need - they might not even know they have.

When we don't trust in God's goodness "our souls get thin." We can wither on the inside even though our outside may appear fine. This trusting process works together to mold us into the people the God wants us to be (Quote Romans 8:28). Don't miss it – It is not a destination or a possession, but a development that will result in a life with God now and forever. Heaven will be heaven because we are with Christ in a place that he wants us to be having become the people he wants us to become.

Jesus calls us to himself (Matt. 11:28, Jn 3:16, Jn 1:12). We can know him as shepherd, understand him as shepherd, but it is only when we place our trust (confidence) in him personally as shepherd can we say (sing) with David, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." And when you trust in him you can "affirm with conviction" based on God's promise "I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long – Forever."

Trust God; For cares in this life and the next.

Would you watch this movie?

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A boy; born shepherd; destined to be king - A lover, a fighter, a felon - lived strong, failed big, succeeded better.... He served the greatest power in the universe - but despite all gain - in the end... he saw himself as a sheep.

Can you imagine yourself as a sheep?

When the one you love deserts you. When the job you have poured yourself into ends. When your physical body that has performed so well for so long fails. When the financial crisis hits. When the self-esteem crumbles...

Will you trust and be able to say?

The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures.  
He leads me beside the still waters.  
He restores my soul.  
He leads me in straight paths for his name's sake.  
Though I walk through the darkest valley  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me.  
Your rod and your staff they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the middle of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil.  
My cup runs over.  
Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days in my life.  
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.

Trust God; For cares in this life and the next

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### ***Fear Not....A Great Joy***

St. Simons Presbyterian Church—Women's Christmas luncheon  
December 5, 2012

I was invited to be the speaker for the St. Simons Presbyterian Church Presbyterian Women's Christmas luncheon on December 5, 2012, St. Simons Island, GA. The theme for the day was "Joy" and I was asked to speak on Luke 20:10 in particular. There were about 100 Presbyterian Women in attendance. They ranged in age from mid thirties to 93.

**Prayer for Illumination:** Please join me in prayer:

*Glorious God, in Jesus your grace appears,  
bringing joy and salvation to all.*

*Help us to ponder your words of love by the light of your Spirit,  
that we may proclaim glad tidings of peace  
and welcome Christ in our world. Amen*

In just a moment we are going to read and hear a very familiar passage of Scripture. It is the infancy narrative from the Gospel of Luke. As you know each of the gospel writers has faithfully presented his own story of the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Whereas Mark and John begin without any account of the birth of Jesus, Matthew opens with the genealogy and an account of Jesus birth in Bethlehem. Luke's gospel is distinctive, however, as it is the only gospel to report both the births of John and Jesus. Luke elevates the roles of Mary and Elizabeth, whereas Matthew's story is guided by Joseph's dreams. Luke gives us three "angelophanies" –or angel visitations surrounding the births of John and Jesus, which alert us to the fact that they are part of a larger story—the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel through the coming Messiah. In our passage this morning an angel of the Lord visits the shepherds. Let us hear the word of God.

### **Luke 2: 1-20**

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was*

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*governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*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: to you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. **The Word of the Lord.***

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When Susan Hartman first contacted me about speaking here today she reminded me this is the PW Christmas luncheon during which you would receive the Joy Gift offering, enjoy the musical gifts of some of your members, and elect your PW life member. She said she wanted the occasion to be uplifting and inspiring—joyful for everyone. So we decided that “Joy” would be our theme and we would look to the Luke passage, particularly the phrase, *“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

Joy and Christmas have gone together for me all my life. I remember as a child looking forward to singing “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!” That is my all time favorite Christmas hymn. Joy to the World! Luke tells us, “do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”

Joy. What is joy? “It is astonishing,” wrote theologian Karl Barth, “how many references there are in the Old and New Testaments to delight, joy, bliss, exultation, merry-making, and rejoicing, and how emphatically these are demanded from the Book of Psalms to the letter to the Philippians. From “Shout for joy to the Lord all the earth” in Psalm 100 to “Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again: Rejoice!” in Philippians and dozens of places in scripture we are urged to live joy-filled lives.

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And I ask again, what is joy? Is it happiness? Pleasure? Contentment? I would invite you in the coming weeks as you live in the anticipation of the Advent season to consider for yourself how you might define joy. I think joy is something quite different from happiness or pleasure. For me joy goes much deeper. First, I think joy is a gift. It is not something we can manufacture ourselves, or even a gift we can give ourselves. I believe joy is about God—about who God is, what God is up to in the world, and that God invites us to be a part of what God is doing in the world!

Let's look at the radicalness of this birth story as Luke tells us:

More than announcing a birth, Luke is announcing the arrival of a whole *new world*; a new time, a new reign of power for all the people. The story begins in real time—actually, in old time, chronological time, that is marked by who is in power: our text says Quirinius was governor of Syria. It is time marked by travel and taxes and business as usual and the accepted power structures of the day. Luke begins with language that clearly communicates the “old” when he says “In *those* days” as he establishes the context of his story.<sup>1</sup>

But (!) Luke quickly moves us from the old, tired, and hopeless way of life to something new—something new that has happened on **this day!** It is new and there is no reason to fear. A new time has entered the world—a new age has begun.

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<sup>1</sup> Campbell, Charles L., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C. Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox, 2009, p.117

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Salvation is here—**this day**! This new time is *kairos* time, or God’s time. It is not the kind of time we understand chronologically or even historically. It is a new kind of time that is shaped by the will and character and the intention of God. It has come in the birth of a baby who is the Messiah.

The arrival of this whole new age of living is announced in the song of angels with the declaration of good news, a great joy for all the people on **this day**. The old way of life in “those days” is gone. The new day is here because *to you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*.

Let’s pause here to consider these titles Luke gives this newborn baby. He is “a new *Savior*, a title formerly reserved for the emperor. [He] is a new *Messiah*, the royal anointed one who will liberate Israel from Roman occupation. And [he] is the *Lord*, who inaugurates this new [age].”<sup>2</sup> This is the only time in the New Testament these titles are strung together this way. And what is fascinating to me is—all of this is announced to shepherds—not in the halls of power but on the fields in the darkness of night. Shepherds were not respected people in those days. They were considered shiftless, dishonest people who often grazed their flocks on other people’s lands. They were not even regarded highly enough to participate in the census—they were tending their flocks—they had not gone to be counted in the

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<sup>2</sup> Campbell, Charles L., *Feasting on the Word*, Year C. Vol. 1, Westminster John Knox, 2009, p.119

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census that had drawn Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. They were peasants located toward the bottom of the scale of power and privilege. And yet, it to the *shepherds* that the angel appeared. *The shepherds!*

Let's look again at the story: the shepherds are watching their sheep during the night when *suddenly* the darkness was abruptly interrupted by the brilliance of heavenly light! The text says, "The glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." Well! I guess so! I think I would be terrified if I were walking on the beach at night, lit only by the light of the moon, even a full moon, and suddenly the skies were filled with great light. Our scripture says it was the "glory of the Lord" shining around them. You know what that means? That means *God* was there! Remember in Exodus when Moses went up on Mount Sinai and the "glory of the Lord settled on the mountain [with Moses there] for six days?"<sup>3</sup> So, here are our poor despised outcast shepherds—a bunch of nobodies—are being visited by the *glory of the Lord*. And yet they were afraid! The Greek actually says, "they feared with a great fear."

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.*" The angel assured the shepherds there is no reason to fear but there *is* reason to rejoice. The angel says, "I am bringing you good

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<sup>3</sup> Exodus 24:16

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news of great joy for all people.” That phrase “I am bringing you” is important to our understanding of the gospel narrative. Some translations have it as “I bring” but it is actually better translated as “I am bringing,” which suggests to us continuous action. It is not a one-time message. It is not a one-time gift. It is a continuous message. Every time we surrounded by the glory of the Lord—whether when we are in prayer, or in Bible Study, or in service to others, or in worship, or in gatherings such as this one—we can be confident that the angel of the Lord is saying to us, “do not be afraid; I am bringing you good news this day—this day!”

And the good news is *a great joy*! Again, the original Greek says, “I am bringing you good news, *a great joy*, which will be for all the people.” Here is where we get to the scandal of the Christmas story. The *scandal* is that *God* came into *human history*—as a vulnerable baby—to deliver God’s people from oppression and captivity and fear. Just as the darkness of the night’s sky was interrupted by the brilliance of heavenly light, God, in Jesus Christ, has interrupted the dark sorrow of our lives with the *brilliance* of divine joy. Just as God’s glory visited a group of rag-tag common hard-working distrusted shepherds who were going about their normal routine night-shift work, so is God inclined to visit you and me in the mundane, and even pain-filled, parts of our lives. You see God could have come in splendor and earthly power but instead God chose to enter human history, identifying with the

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powerless, the oppressed, the poor, the hopeless, and the homeless. Among *them* God could do this divine new work of the new world order—the world in which God is present among the people, bringing the good news of Jesus Christ into every circumstance—the good news of release to those of us who are captive to sin and pain, grief and sorrow, disease and death. You see even death is not the final word for us in Jesus Christ. No, resurrection—new life—is God’s final word for God’s people. Yes, God brings the hope of Christ into *every* circumstance of our lives.

Every circumstance...do we recognize the hand of God at work in the everyday, unnoticeable moments of our lives? It is helpful here for me to remember that Mary did not have to make this journey to Bethlehem because in that day women were not counted in the census. It is really quite unusual that she went with Joseph. He could have made the trip without her in much less time. Taking her with him slowed him down and increased the danger to the baby she was carrying. For some reason unknown to us, Joseph must have thought it less dangerous for Mary to travel with him than to remain in Nazareth. From whom did she flee? It was not the Romans. I wonder if it was her own people. The concern could have been that the religious of her town would have made an example of her and killed her and her baby for being pregnant out of wedlock. Joseph had to go to his family’s birthplace because of Rome’s occupation and the decree by Emperor Augustus. Mary may have had to go

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because of the judgmental, religious people in her own community. Do you think Mary and Joseph recognized the hand of God at work in all that? Would you have seen it? I don't know that I would have!

*Here* is the message of the Christmas miracle: *God is present!* God is present—**this day**—even in the inconvenient, harassing, unfair, very painful parts of our lives. God does not abandon us to the pain nor to the fear. No, God's presence in our lives *is* the divine joy that comes in the most unexpected ways; at the most unexpected times, often through the least expected people.

How do we know this? We know this divine presence because we know Jesus is born. Christ is Lord. The Messiah is here—*this day!* The new age has arrived. It is no longer the “days of old” but it is the *now* of the kingdom of God. Just as the night sky was filled with heavenly light, so our world is filled with divine joy—the joy that comes in the birth of a vulnerable baby whose very *presence* ushers in the new age of God.

My friends, God does not abandon you or me in the journey of life. No, quite the opposite. *God arrives!* God arrives in ways that *surprise* us; God arrives at times that *startle* us; and God arrives through people who *astonish* us. And, most importantly, we know that *God comes to us in Jesus Christ*. You see the declaration the angel made to the shepherds while Quirinius was governor of Syria is just as

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true for us today as it was then, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of **[a] great joy** for all the people: to you is born **this day** in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

May the glory of the Lord surround you this day and in all your days to come.

Amen.

# # #

Were I to preach this sermon on a Sunday morning I would suggest the following:

**Suggested hymns:**

*O Come all Ye Faithful*

*Angels We have Heard on High*

*Joy to the World*

**Call to worship:** Psalm 96 selected verses

**Affirmation of Faith:** *A Declaration of Faith*

God sent the promised deliverer to his people.

Jesus, the long expected Savior,  
came into the world as a child.

descended from David, conceived by the Holy Spirit,  
born of Mary, a virgin.

He lived as a Jew among Jews.

He announced to his people

the coming of God’s kingdom of justice and peace on earth.

The coming of Jesus was itself

the coming of God’s promised rule.

Through his birth, life, death, and resurrection,

he brings about the relationship between God and humanity  
that God always intended.