"Smells Like a Shepherd"
A Sermon delivered by Rev. John Balicki
St. Luke's Church, Wilton, Maine
Christmas Eve, Dec. 24, 2024

It's 22 miles west southwest of here if you turn right as you head out of Wilton and follow Route 2. In our two plus years here, Karen and I have only been there once on a return from a fall foliage trip. I don't ever recall any of you saying you ever go there. It's only 22 miles away but maybe there's nothing there you can't get here or in Farmington but maybe there's a little stigma associated also. The place is Mexico, Maine. The popular author Monica Wood grew up there and was nine before she realized that there was a large nation south of the US with a similar name. (speaking of Monica, time out for a minute. If you're sitting there in a complete panic because you just realized you forgot to get a gift for an important person in your life, maybe even the person sitting next to you right now, and if that person likes to read, you can't go wrong with Monica Wood's "How to Read A Book ", you can feign indigestion, head to the bathroom and have that book ordered online and be back here before we get to the heart of this sermon) Author Kerri Arsenault also grew up there and this is how she describes it:

It's a paper mill town where smokestacks poke holes in the smog they create. That's ***money coming out of those smokestacks****, my father used to say about the rotten-smelling upriver drafts that surfaced when the weather shifted. That smell loitered amid the high school softball games I played beneath those stacks and lingered on my father's shirtsleeves when he came home from work, allowing me to forgive the rank odor for what it provided.*

Then there are the odors that don't smell like money – coming from pig farms, manure spreading, seaweed washed up on the beach or a sewage treatment plant. Any folks that can afford it try to live far apart from these as possible.

Which is why it seems unusual that the shepherds were so close to the village of Bethlehem. in those days it was unusual for shepherds to tend large flocks near towns and villages. The odors of very large flocks fouled the air so badly that people could not breathe. So these large flocks were confined to areas far from the places where the general populace resided.

However, the village of Bethlehem was an exception. For thirty days, one time a year, an enormous flock of one year old lambs were allowed to graze near Bethlehem, and that time of year was the thirty days prior to the feast of Passover. These were the lambs to be sacrificed in the Temple for Passover.

Now the Jewish religion is fanatical about cleanliness. There are umpteen regulations about how to keep from being unclean. For the shepherds, this was impossible. They were rough-and-ready fellows who alternated between drinking strong wine and uttering colorful curses. They were never clean; it was impossible. They were constantly walking about in excrement and touching dead things, and both activities left them in a state of ritual impurity.

Because of their defiled conditions, shepherds were not allowed to go to the Temple, to offer sacrifices, or to go to the synagogues, so any religious experience a shepherd might enjoy had to be between himself, perhaps an occasional herself?, and God. But to a Jew of that time and especially the Temple authorities the idea of worshipping God apart from the Temple was thought to be anathema. True religion was not a personal thing in their eyes, it was corporate. So, for all these reasons, even the most pious shepherds were labeled as being unclean, and could not come into the presence of God.

And yet this is exactly whom the angels appeared to announce the good news. And the shepherds could not have been that far away from downtown Bethlehem – they went in haste, they saw, they believed. It could never happen that way today. No Labor and Delivery Room would allow these walking germ infestations in.

Yet they not only saw and believed for themselves but they shared the good news.

So what does all this have to do with us? We probably smell OK, we've put on our Christmas finery. But it tells three timeless truths about the good news.

First is that no one is excluded. In fact those we think who are most likely to be excluded are the first to be invited. Perhaps we might like to be excluded. I've done something that keeps me from a relationship with God. No luck. All are in the fold.

But are there folks we like to exclude? There are more than 400,000 students in American colleges right now without permananent legal status who are fearing deportation after the inauguration. And while we have made gains toward a more diverse and inclusive society, there are others working very hard to exclude someone who isn't the preferred race or gender.

And who do we listen to? If the shepherd or pig farmer shares the good news are we less likely to believe it?

Do you wonder what happened to those shepherds? From the moment they first felt the touch of angel wings to the moment they beheld the Holy One in the manger of Bethlehem, life was extraordinary. They, the riffraff of society, were the first recipients of the Good News; they were the ones commissioned to be the first witnesses of the

Savior's birth, the first to bend their knees in praise and to join their voices to the heavenly chorus. But what happened to them when they returned to their fields? Did they carry on as usual with their humdrum existence or were they changed in some way? Perhaps a great fire was lit within them, a burning desire to dwell in the presence of God. Perhaps they drank less, cursed less, told fewer jokes and spent the rest of their lives trying to remember in great detail all that had befallen them.

And what of our lives? Has this Christmas season awakened in us an insatiable hunger for the Holy, or is this service one more thing on the holiday to-do list? Would we notice if an angel flapped her wings in front of us or if we saw the great light. Perhaps we, like the shepherds, were blessed with angelic visitations but never awakened to behold the wonders in our midst. Smells like sheep we might say, let's turn in the other direction.