“Shepherds Why This Jubilee?”

Luke 2:1-20
(“Living in the Moment” – Part VI of VI)

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From the Pulpit
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A Communion Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016, dedicated to the memory of my father, Dr. Herman Conrad Ahrens, Jr. and always to the glory of God!

"Shepherds Why This Jubilee?"
(Part VI of VI Part Series, "Living In the Moment")
Luke 2:1-20

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

Darkness had descended upon the fields in the hills outside Bethlehem. Cold was coming. Terrible coldness. I was hungry. I reached in my sack and pulled out the last piece of bread I had. I took it to my teeth and tore into it and it was in my gut but I was aching for more. Then I noticed my friend, another shepherd a few feet away ready to throw away the crust he didn't want. I yelled, "Elijah, throw me the crust." And he did and it sailed right into the mud between us where the sheep
had mucked up the earth. I grabbed the bread anyway before the sheep got it and stuffed it in my mouth, mud and all. And as I did I saw myself as a desperate man who was not much different from the sheep I tended.

**Do you understand? Can you see what I mean?**

I thought, "Who is this man who eats muddy bread? Do I know him? What has become of the stargazing dreamer who used to shepherd this flock?" But, in that bread with mud I tasted life! So I shouted out to my friends, "Hey, this bread is good!" And they laughed and shouted back that I was a fool, a poor, muddy mouthed fool. But, in their hungry, frozen state, they saw what I meant!

**We saw everything that night. Everything! Everything, I say!**

How can I make you understand? ......I wonder. Have you ever had this happen to you? You have been working hard all day. You're bone tired. Dog-tired. So you quit. You drop down to the ground, under a tree, or something. You just sit there. In a daze. It might be ten minutes or a million years. You don't know. Nothing is in focus. Your eyes are glassy. They don't focus. You could be dead for all you know.
Then, little by little you come to . . . You realize you have been looking at something the whole time. You realize what you see is one of your sheep with a foot caught under a rock, or you see a hole in the cloud which has been burned by the moon. Or maybe you see one of your children at play or your partner at work like you have never seen them before. They were there the whole time - but you never really saw them before, until now.

That's what happened to me that night. You call it Christmas, I call it the night I first realized I was alive! ... I was coming to from this dazed, exhausted state when I saw things I had never seen before! They came out of nowhere and everything came into focus for me! Everything! It was as if they had always been there, these angels of the Lord! But, that night, I saw them. They filled the air with brightness. Everywhere. They were the gifts of God to all of us - gifts by starlight! They were dipping and whirling like a flock of heavenly birds. And what I always thought was silence stopped being silence and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them! Not just wings - but voices - high and wild, like trumpets and like sopranos hitting notes I never imagined existed! I could not remember their words - But they were singing about God and God's goodness and a gift, a baby. What they told US was the
unthinkable - leave the sheep and head to Bethlehem. But, they certainly were compelling! We got up and we ran to the town!

We were a sorry sight running into town in the middle of the night! There was the one who complained of sore feet, the sawed-off one who could out swear a Roman soldier, the young one who blushed like a teenager on his first date, the crazy drunken one who scared the sheep with his wild-eyed looks. We all tore off across the fields - splashing through a sea of mud and a sea of angels' wings, and silvery wool of the sheep.

When we got to town, the Innkeeper leaned out the window and told us to keep down the noise or he would call on the Roman guard. We didn't want that since most of us had jail records! But, he directed us to the stable, around the corner and there that we found a mother, a father, and their newborn baby. The mother held her finger to her lips, signaling us to be silent.

And we became silent . . .

I told you I saw everything that night. Yes, everything includes God! I saw the face of God that night. It was the face of that baby.
At the eye of the storm, you know there is no wind, no movement of air. Nothing moves. Nothing breathes. Even silence keeps silent. So, hush now. Hush. There he is. You see him? DO you see him?

One of your Christmas songs asks, “Shepherds Why this Jubilee?” Do you even know what you are singing? The jubilee year is the year of the coming of our Savior! He comes to liberate us all. Why the jubilee? Because on that night, on this night, the face of God is right before me. I behold the face of God and I rejoice in the one who comes to save us!

I am a man who eats muddy bread crusts and dances for the newborn King!

Who are you? Who do you sing and dance for?

In the name of Almighty God, brothers and sisters, open your eyes! Awake from your dazed state and witness the birth of a miracle! A gift by starlight. Amen.

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* This sermon is drawn from "The Shepherd" by Fredrick Buechner. It has been adapted for use in this service only. "The
Shepherd" can be found in The Magnificent Defeat, Harper and Row, 1966, pp.71-73.

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