Sunday, December 20, 1992
THE SHEPHERD'S JOURNEY TO THE MANGER (No. 3 in a Series: Christmas Journeys)
Luke 2:8-20

Some of the journeys we take in life are not planned. They come up suddenly and are unexpected. You get a phone call in the middle of the night informing you that your mother, who yesterday seemed to be in good health, has suddenly died. You make quick travel arrangements and are on your way as soon as possible. Or as a grandparent, one of your children calls and says that their youngest child is very ill; could you come as soon as possible to help out with the other children? These journeys may be unexpected, but they must be taken as soon as possible.

Or here is a man who has an unexpected heart attack and is taken to the hospital. It's an unplanned journey, a surprise. Once the crisis is over, there's the longer journey back to good health.

Not all unplanned journeys come about because of bad news — there are many we make because of good news. A new granddaughter has been born three weeks ahead of schedule. You want to see this new miracle as soon as possible, and before you know it, you're on the road and can hardly wait to get there.

Like many of our journeys, the journey the shepherds made that first Christmas Eve was not on their schedule of things to do. Of all the journeys surrounding the birth of Jesus, it was the shortest in distance. And like many Biblical journeys, it came about because of a vision — a signal from God.

You remember the story: "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."

A signal, a vision from God, can be a scary event, especially until we hear what God wants to say to us. Why were they afraid? Would you have been fearful? The vision and the announcement were unexpected. It was like a telephone call at three in the morning. Who would be calling at this hour? Did someone have an accident? Did someone die? Some surprises bring good news, and others bring bad news. You receive an unexpected letter from the Internal Revenue Service. Fear! Does it mean an audit or a refund? You are almost afraid to open the envelope.

In the case of the shepherds, it was good news. "Do not be afraid," said the angel, "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."

And then an even bigger surprise: "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." God enters the world the way each one of us enters — not as a king, emperor, or dictator who arrives fully mature and ready to make Israel a strong military power again. The Savior of the world is not an arsenal of guns, bombs, or nuclear weapons. Surprise!

Another surprise! The announcement is not made to the so-called big shots of the world or those who think they are the important people. They believe in other kinds of saviors, and

maybe we do too. Thus, the angel didn't call a press conference in Rome or even in Jerusalem to announce the birth.

Perhaps the guests in the inn that night in Bethlehem, where there was no room, were discussing the glorious future of the Roman Empire. Maybe some were boasting, "Rome will last forever."

And while this was going on, while the important people made plans and thought they were dealing with eternal issues, God surprised the world in the birth of a baby, and the shepherds were the first to know and believe.

When the baby became an adult, there were even more surprises. Jesus taught that God sides with the oppressed of the world and redeems the world by means of the humble and lowly. And the world continues to be turned upside down. "For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called children of God. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." This is what Jesus taught.

That's in stark contrast to what we usually believe. We tend to think that those who are first will always be first — that those who are at the head tables at our banquets will be at the head table at God's banquet. But not so, said Jesus.

After the shepherds heard the message of good news, suddenly there was with the angel a whole choir of angels, and they sang, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those whom God favors."

Notice the order of the proclamation that the shepherds heard and reported. First priority: peace on earth. Christ is the bringer of peace. Give glory to God. To give praise to God is always the first priority.

What did the shepherds do? They said to each other, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." The angel's vision had not told them to visit the manger. It was their decision. "So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger." It was a short journey, no more than a two-hour walk, or maybe less. But you can be sure it was a journey these shepherds never forgot.

Think of it, according to Luke's gospel, the lowly shepherds were the first visitors to see the newborn baby. The baby was the promised Messiah. Certainly, Mary and Joseph must have been surprised to have visitors so soon. They wondered, how did the shepherds know about the baby? Luke tells us that when the shepherds saw the child, they told Mary and Joseph about the angel's vision and what had been told to them about the child and his future.

My favorite part of this story is Mary's response to what the shepherds reported: "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Not only did she think about their meaning, but she never forgot what the shepherds told her about the angel's message.

What did the shepherds do after seeing the baby and telling Mary and Joseph the story of their vision? "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."

What do you do when you have an overwhelming and life-changing spiritual experience? You go back to your everyday work and routines, but with a difference — you glorify and praise God.

What are we to do as the result of celebrating Christmas each year? Glorify and praise God. If your Christmas celebrations and your Christmas journeys do not have that effect on you, then something is missing.

The more I read this story of the shepherds' journey and think about it, the more I believe that Mary must have told it many times to Jesus as he was growing up. Jesus also came to know that the prophet Isaiah spoke of the Messiah being like a shepherd in the same way that God is like a shepherd in the 23rd Psalm. Isaiah had written, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

As a young boy and young man, surely Jesus heard that passage many times. I'm sure that he also knew the 23rd Psalm from memory. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside still waters, he restores my soul. He leads me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me. Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies, thou anointest my head with oil, my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever."

Thus, it is not surprising to find Jesus in his ministry using the metaphor of the shepherd in describing himself. "I am the good shepherd. I know my own, and my own know me ... and I have other sheep that are not of this fold, I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock, one shepherd."

Later, after the resurrection, Jesus asked Peter, "Do you love me?" When Peter replied that he did, Jesus used the metaphor of the shepherd again. He told Peter, "Feed my sheep." Church leaders are also to be like shepherds.

What then does the metaphor of God being a shepherd, as in the 23rd Psalm, and Jesus being the good shepherd, tell us about God's relationship with us?

First, just as a good shepherd knows each of his sheep by name, so God also knows us individually. Further, a good shepherd has intimate knowledge of each member of his flock. To the outside observer, the sheep are almost indistinguishable, but the shepherd knows them at a glance — their character, their idiosyncrasies. Since God knows each one of us, we are also able to know God. And as the sheep trust the shepherd, we trust that God has only our best interests at heart. God is with us even in the valley of the shadow of death.

Secondly, just as a good shepherd has infinite patience with his sheep — with their waywardness, their foolishness — so also God has infinite patience with us. No matter how often or how far we wander off, God always seeks out the lost sheep. And as a shepherd stays with his flock day and night, so God is always with us.

Jesus is the good shepherd, and as a good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep, so also Jesus did for us. The good shepherd daily risks his life for the well-being of the sheep.

The shepherd was entirely responsible for the flock. If a sheep was sick, he must tend it. If a sheep strayed, he must follow it. Even when the flock was gathered for the night within the fold, the shepherd's responsibility was not ended, and his watchfulness could not be relaxed. The fold might be a cave on the hillside. It might be an enclosure walled around with stones.

Whatever it was, it had one constant characteristic: it had an opening, but it had nothing to cover the opening, no door or gate. At night, the shepherd lay down across the opening, and thus no sheep could get out, and no foe could get in except over the shepherd's body. That is what Jesus was describing when he said, "I am the door." The body of the shepherd was literally the protecting door that kept the sheep safe.

Little did the shepherds know when they made their Christmas journey to see the baby Jesus that they were praising God for the gift of the good shepherd.

So this Christmas, when you sing of shepherds watching over their flocks by night, and shepherds hearing the angels sing, and shepherds glorifying and praising God, remember the Good Shepherd is none other than Jesus himself. With the Good Shepherd leading us, "Surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the presence of God forever." Amen.