

25 December 2002
Christmas Day

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Mary’s Little Lamb”

Text: Luke 2:8-20

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

There is a children’s nursery rhyme that begins “*Mary had a little lamb.*” Well, that is, in fact, what we are celebrating today! For the virgin Mary has given birth to a lamb, the Lamb of God who has come to take away the sin of the world!

And so with that in mind, and speaking of lambs, I want to think a little this morning about the shepherds who came to visit Jesus. We usually don’t give them too much thought, even though we read their story last night and again this morning. But they have quite a remarkable story to tell. Because it does not seem to be the case that these were ordinary shepherds. For ordinary shepherds would not have been out in the fields at night. Ordinary shepherds would already have gathered their flocks into the sheepfold for the night. Ordinary shepherds would have gone home, so that they could get some rest, knowing that their sheep were safe in the fold. That’s what *ordinary* shepherds would have done. . . . But not *these* shepherds. Why? Why were they still out in the fields this night?

Well the answer (most probably) is that they were tending a very special flock of sheep, the Temple flocks. And belonging to the Temple, these flocks were looked after with the greatest of care. These were the sheep that were carefully bred to maintain a stock of pure and undefiled lambs for the Temple sacrifices, offered every morning and every evening. These sheep were never crammed into crowded sheepfolds where they might get injured or marred by bumping into walls or in a fight with another sheep, for then – no longer perfect – they could no longer be used for the sacrifices! These sheep were given the privilege of spending the nights in the open fields, in the lap of luxury (for a sheep!), while the shepherds had to work overtime, and stay awake and keep alert to make sure these special sheep were well taken care of! . . . No, these were no ordinary sheep, and no ordinary shepherds.

And it is to these shepherds that the angels appear, and bid them to go to Bethlehem – NOW! In the middle of the night, in the middle of the watch, in the middle of the

dangers of the dark. To leave their sheep, these special sheep, to go to Bethlehem, to see what God has done. And they are told the sign, ***“Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”*** . . . And wonder of wonders, they go! Now, God never does anything by accident, and so it was no accident that these shepherds were the first ones to go see the baby Jesus! It wasn't because they were the only ones available. And it wasn't because they were the ones that just happened to be working the night shift! It was because *Mary had a little lamb*, the Lamb of God, the Lamb who would **take the place** of all the other lambs that were now still out in the fields. The shepherds could leave those lambs because they were no longer necessary. . . . And so these special shepherds who tend to special sheep, come to see the most special lamb of all. The Lamb which would accomplish all that their lambs could not – for He was born to take away the sin of the world.

And so with that these shepherds are . . . really, in a sense, about to be retired! For since their sheep are no longer necessary, their job is no longer necessary! And so what do they do? What do they do after they had been to see Jesus, the Lamb in the manger? Well, they are given a new vocation – ***“And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. . . . And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”*** And so the message of the angels becomes their message. And just as this news is announced to them, they now announce it to others. And what did they say? *“Mary had a little lamb!”*

And that is the message that we also proclaim today, and that we are celebrating today! The world sees just a young girl holding a baby in a stable because she and Joseph didn't think to book a room far enough in advance! But the eyes of the shepherds, and our eyes of faith, see something much more profound. The mystery of God made flesh. The mystery of the Creator become a creature. The mystery of the Almighty becoming a helpless baby. The mystery of God's love for sinners like us, that He would come to be the Lamb to die for you and me.

And that is what we will again sing about this morning in the liturgy of Holy Communion. We sing about the mystery of Mary's little Lamb.

“O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us.”

And with that we are proclaiming the message of the shepherds, for as we gather around the altar of the Lamb to eat His flesh and drink His blood for the forgiveness of our sins, the Scriptures say, ***“as often as we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim the***

Lord's death until He comes."

"O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on us."

And with that we are proclaiming the message of the angels, for as you hear in this liturgy, we join with the *"angels, and archangels, and all the company of Heaven."* The very same company of Heaven that burst forth in song that night to shepherds! ***"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: 'Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!'"***

"O Christ, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world, grant us Your peace."

And as the angels proclaimed, we do have peace. Peace with God through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God for the forgiveness of our sins. And the best news of all is that that is no nursery rhyme or simply wishful thinking on our part! But the wonderful truth that we celebrate this day! That *"Mary had a little lamb"* – the Lamb who saved you and me!

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.