





## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

1611 E Main St., Watertown, WI 53094

(920)261-2570

A Stephen Ministry Congregation

[www.goodshepherdwi.org](http://www.goodshepherdwi.org)

---

**Fourth Sunday in Advent**

**December 18, 2016**

---

### **“Holy Ground”**

*(Luke 2:15-16)*

Rev. David K. Groth

“When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us. And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger’ (Lk. 2:15-16).

“Adoration of the Shepherds” Hugo Van der Goes  
(1440-1482)

**Collect of the Day:** Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

---

Please pull out your bulletin cover and let's have a look at this painting. It's entitled "The Adoration of the Shepherds" and was done in 1471-72 by a Flemish artist, Hugo Van der Goes. He painted it in Bruges. It was for a church connected to a hospital in Florence. Today it hangs in a Florence museum.

First, let's get our bearings. Joseph is on the left in red with a couple of angels above and below him. Mary is in her traditional color, blue, and a couple of angel's next to her in lighter blue. Three shepherds are next to them and a number of angels above and below them. If you look closely in the upper right hand corner, you can see the angels announcing the news to these same shepherds sometime earlier. This is a common little trick used throughout art history to show a progression in a story.

Looking a little closer, between Joseph and Mary, in the dark shadows you can see the ox and the ass are looking on, as they often do in manger scenes. Isaiah 1:3 says, "the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand." That is, this is a busy picture with all those angels, and the holy family, and the shepherds. But the presence of the ox and ass remind us of those who are not there. For centuries, God's ancient people were supposed to have been preparing for the coming of the Messiah. They knew his birth would take place in Bethlehem; that much had been revealed. And yet when the birth actually came about, they completely missed it. They were not expecting it or anticipating it. Think about it, the only ones who didn't miss it were Joseph, Mary, the wise men and the shepherds, to whom God revealed this information in ways they could not dismiss. For example, with the shepherds, suddenly, the quiet darkness of the night was shattered by the glory of the Lord and the singing of the angels. They couldn't overlook that. So the only ones who didn't miss it were spoon fed the information by God and his angels. But here, as in much ancient art, at least the ox and the ass are adoring the infant Jesus. They stand in for all creation, and for all those that

should be there but are not.

Usually when we look at a painting our eyes go first to the very center and then start working their way around the edges. The center of this painting would be the hands of Mary. We look up to her face and her gaze leads, as always, to Jesus, as if to say, "I'm not the big deal here. He is. Though small, he's the big deal." I think that's important to remember this season. He might figure small in your plans for Christmas, but he's the big deal.

This last year we went over to Holy Hill and hiked some of those beautiful trails and walked into the Basilica. It's an inspiring building, right, in a stunning part of Wisconsin. It's a shrine dedicated to Mary. It's also an attraction for tourists. Many of those walking around were from the Far East, presumably China. And I thought to myself if I had scant knowledge of the Christian faith or contact with it, a tour of Holy Hill would tell me it's mostly about a woman named Mary. And though God did set her apart for this very special role to serve as mother of our Lord, it wasn't Mary who redeemed us from sin and death and the devil. That wasn't Mary's battle. The most she could do at the foot of the cross was to be still and know that he is God. So I like how, in the painting, Mary's gaze leads, as it always does, to Jesus.

But before going to him, let's consider those shepherds in the upper right. They are painted in earthly tones. There's nothing idealized about their faces. They are rustic and authentic. My guess is the leader is the one in front with the closely cropped beard. The one standing behind him with open mouth seems confused. The wheels are grinding . . . slowly. Shepherds were, of course, held in low regard in Jesus' day. No one really aspired to be a shepherd; it's what you did if nothing else panned out. So by choosing to reveal it to the shepherds but also the magi, God is reminding us this birth is for all people, for the rich and the poor, the wise and the simple. It's not just for the elites dressed in their finery. It's for those wearing t-shirts and dirty jeans. Remember what the angel said? "Fear not, for

behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. (No exceptions.) For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” This birth is for the common man as much as it is for anyone else.

Now, let’s go to the real center of the painting, the reason for the season. We find him, surprisingly on the ground. That’s what pulled me into this painting. He’s not in Mary’s lap. He’s not at her breast. He’s not nuzzled in her arms. He’s not in a manger filled with straw. He’s not even wrapped in swaddling cloths. He’s naked and lying on a stone cold floor. And everyone’s keeping their distance. Joseph particularly is almost out of the picture. The obvious question is: what’s Jesus doing on the ground? And why all the space around him?

I took a copy of this painting around with me last week while making calls and asked my shut-ins about it. What do you make of it? One of them said, “Maybe it’s to show his life and death are for the earth too, for the whole creation. Could be. There’s a whole sermon in that, one which I tried to preach this last Wednesday.

Another said, “With all those strangers around, it surprises me Mary isn’t holding him close.” But this Jesus is as much for the stranger as he is for trusted friend.

Another said, “It makes me want to pick him up and swaddle him.” I suppose there’s an entire sermon there too. No one runs away from a baby in holy fear. Tragically, many may walk away from him, wander away, but no one runs from a baby as if their life was in imminent danger. Quite the opposite. Babies are magnets. They draw us in. We want to get close, and make eye contact, and maybe even coax a smile out of them. We do all kinds of crazy things to establish a bond with a baby. And maybe that’s the point. Any God who comes to us as a baby isn’t trying to scare us away. He’s trying to draw us in. Any God who comes to us as an infant isn’t trying to plant in us a seed of fear and loathing, but a seed of love and hope.

Notice also, everyone else is dressed for the weather. But the newborn infant doesn’t have a stitch of clothing on

him, and he's lying on stone cold pavement. He looks so small, vulnerable, exposed, helpless, weak, at risk even. Where else did Jesus look so small, vulnerable, exposed, helpless, and weak? [The cross.] Absolutely. I think the artist is reminding us there is genuine suffering ahead for this little one. And though he is fully God, he is also fully human, and therefore genuinely vulnerable and weak. Even as a man, he will get cold. He will hunger. He will thirst. He will cry. He will become desperately tired. He will suffer. And Jesus . . . fully God, fully man will also die. And Jesus, the God-man, would count us and our salvation well worth the cost. So it's kind of a somber painting, isn't it? No one is really smiling. And there's tension here too. The perspective is out of whack. The angels look way too small, and that's deliberate. It adds to the sense of unease and mystery and disorder and tension. That God should become so weak and vulnerable for us!

But I think there's something else going on here too. Notice again the space around Jesus. Why is everyone keeping their distance? The artist gives us a clue. Do you see it? It's the empty sandal in the lower left hand corner. It seems Joseph has taken his sandals off. Remember anyone else who took his sandals off in the presence of God? Exodus 3:5, "Do not come any closer" God said to Moses. "For the place where you are standing is holy ground." In this painting, Joseph too has taken a couple of steps back and kicked off his sandals. God is there on the ground, emitting rays of light. Holy ground.

By the way, look at all that extra fabric on Mary's cloak, and on the angels in light blue that are behind her. Could have made two cloaks with all that excess. And there's no good or practical reason for all that fabric, unless it was simply to cover their feet in a sign of reverence before God's holy presence. Remember in Isaiah six each of the seraphim had six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he flew and with two he covered his feet (v. 2). So also in this painting the angels show reverence before God's holy presence. This is the antithesis of pagan worship, such

as in Baalism, which featured illicit sexuality.

Wherever Jesus is, is sacred space. He promised, “Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them.” So this is holy ground. It is set apart for the Lord’s use.

Remember Jesus also promised, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (John 14:23). Where Jesus is, is holy ground. You therefore, are also set apart for the Lord’s service. You are baptized. You believe in his Word. Therefore, as Paul writes, “You are not your own. You were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body” (1 Cor. 6:19).

Wherever Jesus is, is holy ground. There’s a bundle of wheat at the very bottom of the painting, a classic symbol of the Lord’s Supper, where Jesus gives us his body and blood for the forgiveness of our sin. Where Jesus is, is holy ground, so this space here is particularly holy, because here God also gives himself to us in ways that we can receive him. We can even approach him, . . . this time not as a baby, but in a little piece of bread. So one early church father suggested when you receive the bread make out of your hands a little manger and remember it is the Lord Jesus Christ who comes to us in humble means.

There’s a lot going on in this painting, and even more than what we’ve talked about. It’s a busy scene. It’s a little chaotic sort of like this Christmas season for each one of us. But remember, Jesus remains the big deal for this season. So, clear a space in your calendar and in your heart for the Lord Jesus and invite him in. As Luther wrote in the hymn, “Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Make Thee a bed, soft, undefiled, Within my heart, that it may be. A quiet chamber kept for Thee.” Amen.

