

The Soul Felt Its Worth

Part of the "The Thrill of Hope" Advent Sermon Series

Isaiah 40:1-11

Rev. Jenny McDevitt

December 24, 2021 — Christmas Eve

When shepherds and sheep show up on Christmas Eve, it's usually because they are in their fields, abiding, and keeping watch by night, when all of a sudden all the angels of heaven show up with bright lights and loud voices, which is why both King James and the Peanuts Christmas Special conclude that they were "sore afraid."

We had one shepherd and a plethora of sheep up here at 4 o'clock today, as our children acted out the Christmas story. Some of those shepherds and sheep were indeed sore afraid, while others were remarkably confident, some of them astonishingly loud, at least one of them proved to be ticklish, and one sweet lamb fell asleep in my lap before everything was said and done. The shepherd Isaiah speaks of, though, gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart. We carry things close to our hearts when we are protecting them, and when we are holding them dear.

When I was a child, I had a stuffed dog (this is no surprise to those of you who know me) I had a stuffed dog that was my comfort object, and that poor creature went everywhere with me, and it was not uncommon for me to hold it close to my heart. Two of my friends adopted a baby recently. When they hold her, they hold her in much the same way — close to their hearts. The shepherd Isaiah speaks of holds the lambs close to his heart because he loves them.

There are about a million different ways a Christmas sermon could go this night, a billion different things clamoring for your attention this night, but if you hang on to only

one thing, let it be this: the baby that is born and held in his mother's arms will grow up to be the shepherd who holds you in his.

Christmas comes because of who God is and how God loves, but the **reason** Christmas comes ... is you.

We've been following the hymn *O Holy Night* a bit this Advent season. You'll hear Jennifer/Yasmin sing it later tonight: *O holy night! The stars are brightly shining / It is the night of our dear Savior's birth / Long lay the world in sin and error pining / **Till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.***

Without a doubt, the Christian faith is always and often about love of neighbor and welcoming the stranger and doing for others. Tonight, remember it is also about knowing you are loved — that you are worth everything to the creator of the sun and moon and stars of night. Isaiah's shepherd is the same one who will go out looking for you when you are lost, who will search high and low until you are found, who will not rest until you are in his arms, and who will carry you home once you are.

Nick Haddad is a professor of Zoology at North Carolina State University. In the early 2000s, shortly after being appointed to his first academic post, he was sitting in his new office when the phone rang. On the other end of the line was someone from Fort Bragg. And the officer says to the professor, "There is an endangered butterfly on our base. And we need your help to save it." Haddad says his first thought was, "I'm a conversationalist, not a butterfly guy," but that was quickly replaced by,

“Why on earth does the army care about this one butterfly?”

It turns out this butterfly can't be found anywhere else. Fort Bragg is its only known habitat in the entire world. And since it's listed as endangered, and since it's the US Army, and since the Endangered Species Act is a law, saving the butterfly was not up for discussion. It was going to receive full military might.

And despite all the efforts, for the first five years, the population of the Saint Francis Satyr continued to decrease, precipitously. Eventually, Haddad discovers it was partially due to flooding. The butterflies' habitat was among swampy grasses, and beavers were building dams that were created flooding that were drowning the caterpillars.

Enter Brian Ball, an army biologist, who became known as the department's beaver liaison. First, Brian destroyed a few beaver dams. That didn't work. So they began evicting the beavers, driving them to other locations. That kept the beavers away, but the butterflies didn't return. In 2011, only 75 Saint Francis' satyrs could be counted. In Haddad's own words, he was supposed to save the butterfly, but instead he felt he was letting down the entire planet.

But then he learned that a few years before he ever set foot on the army base, a few butterflies had been seen on the artillery testing range, an area of the base that was closed off to civilians, without exception. Usually, Haddad made clear to the officers in charge that this was the last hope for the butterfly to survive. He couldn't be sure it was even in that area anymore, but every other option had been exhausted. So an exception was made and an academic zoologist, armed with nothing more than a butterfly net, was granted access to an incredibly dangerous military training ground.

He said, when he first entered the area, lines of soldiers were pointing their guns. Soldiers were parachuting out of planes. Bombs

were detonating. He was asked, “Are you sure you want to do this?” He nodded, and so, within minutes, the entire base was given a cease fire order. Haddad was accompanied by Tracy Johnson, an explosive expert whose only job that day was to ensure he didn't step on any landmines. She said, “My eyes were watching the ground, but his were up in the air, looking for butterflies.”

And — because I'm using this as a Christmas story, maybe you could see this coming — he found them. He found dozens of them. And while they are still listed as endangered, there are now at least 1,000 estimated to be found on Fort Bragg these days. All because the US Army decided it was worth the survival of a species to make a phone call to a novice zoologist who would spend 20 years seeking answers. In interviews, Haddad has often said, “I am always asked, ‘Was it worth it? Was all that time and energy and expense displacing beavers and defusing bombs, really worth it, for just one species of butterfly?’ “Of course it was worth it,” he says. “Of course it was.”

Of course the Saint Francis Satyr was worth it to Nick Haddad. And how much more so are you worth to God? I know, stories about butterflies and bombs don't seem very holy. Of course, neither were barns and babies, until they were.

That's the thing about Christmas, and the entire story of God's history, really — God never waits until everything is perfect to show up. God never waits for the engraved invitation, the formal attire, or the fancy dinner. God never waits until we've got our act together. In Isaiah's day, God didn't wait until the nations had everything all sorted out. In Mary and Joseph's day, God didn't wait until there was room in the inn and the birthing suite was sanitized. God just showed up.

And it is the same today as it was so many years ago — God appeared, and the soul felt its worth.

We proclaim joy to the world tonight. And when we do, every time you say or sing those words, know this: you are the joy of God's world. You bear God's image. You matter. And the birth of Jesus means that being born, being human, matters, too. Your humanity, your existence, matters deeply to God. Your uniqueness, your quirks and particularities, your second, and seventh, and 77th tries at something, everything that makes you, you — matters. And through your life, God's glory is known.

I hope with my entire heart that you are hearing this tonight and thinking, "No kidding." I hope you are hearing this and thinking, "I have known this my entire life." It's just that I know too many people, Christian and non-Christian alike, who have been told differently, and who have come to believe differently.

God comes to earth in the person of Jesus Christ because **you are worth it**. He appeared and the soul felt its worth. Not, the soul *earned* its worth. Or the soul *demonstrated* its worth. Or the soul *justified* its worth. The soul **felt** its worth — the soul felt what had always been true since before the beginning of time — that you, me, every one of us, is worth everything to God. In this moment. Just the way you are, right now.

God isn't aloof, or apart, or separate from us. Tonight we rejoice that God has come close, close enough to share our breath, to inspire our hopes and dreams, to awaken us and call us to life all over again, to gather us in his arms like a shepherd and carry us close to his heart, so that we come to know our inherent worth as children of God.

Someone who knows their worth and lives like it is one of the greatest reflections of God's glory we can experience, at least in this lifetime. And when we give ourselves to that beautiful truth? Well, then for all sorts of reasons, yonder breaks a new and glorious morn. For us, and for the world.