

## Christmas Vigil Mass

December 24, 2012, 4:00 pm

In the spirit of Caesar Augustus I would like to take up a census this afternoon. How many of you have ever taken part in a Christmas pageant? How many of you were Jesus? (Started at the top, right)? How many were Mary? Joseph? The Wise Men? Now, how about the shepherds? And the angels?

These last two roles have always struck me as great “catch-all” categories. There’s only room for one Jesus, one Mary, one Joseph, three wise men, but you can have dozens of shepherds and angels. There’s no mention of how many shepherds were out in that field. And while one of the angels gets a nice little speech, a multitude of the heavenly host leaves room for... well, a multitude.

In the past I must confess to not giving too much thought to the shepherds and the angels except as a backdrop for the main action – necessary but not all that interesting. But recently I have begun to reassess their importance. As a matter of fact, I would propose that, if God were putting out an ad in Craigslist, it might very well be for shepherds and angels.

Consider the shepherds. They are described as “living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock.” The phrase “living in the fields” struck me. “Keeping night watch” tells us they were doing their job, making sure none of the sheep was sick or had wandered off and that a wolf didn’t get into the sheepfold. The work of shepherds was to give full attention to the care of the sheep. And the image of the shepherd was used for the king, going back to David, the shepherd-king. The prophet Ezekiel used the image of a shepherd first to castigate the leaders of Israel for their failure to care for the people, then spoke of God as taking up the shepherding of his people. And one of the most beloved of all psalms begins with the words: “The Lord is my shepherd...”

God still needs shepherds, good pastors (in Latin meaning “shepherd”) to care for God’s people, and especially to care for the least: the poor, the weak, the defenseless. Shepherds in our parish include all of you. Shepherds are needed to minister to God’s people, to serve their needs. Dedicated parishioners are needed to help lead this community of faith more deeply into the mystery of Jesus Christ, to help the community recognize that “the grace of God has truly appeared, saving all.” Prophetic voices are in demand to continue the work of “training us to reject godless ways and worldly desires and to live temperately, justly, and devoutly in this age.” We need the voice of shepherds who know their sheep, who call them by name, who lead them to green pastures and guide them along the right path. So the need for shepherds has to do with the care of God’s people, a project no longer limited to the priest, as in the past.

The Christmas story is meant to challenge and change us, not just make us feel good. It does more than direct our attention to the lovely manger scene in our church. The Christmas story contains a call to action and a challenge to change. The Christmas message is a story that can change the world if we let it in. It is about the God who continues to make new our world, who continues to love the world into new life. That infant born and laid in an animal feeder continues to nourish the world with his Body and Blood.

Paul A. Magnano

Pastor