

Rev. Ali Donohue
St. John's, Kula
Christmas Eve 2019 (4pm, 8pm, 10:30pm)

Like many other people upcountry these days, St. John's is having a *pig problem*. Pigs are arriving at night and shredding the lawn, and occasionally grunting, squeaking and snorting in such close proximity to the house that we are woken up by them. We like to think of ourselves at St. John's as a welcoming and inclusive community, but we draw the line at destruction of property and late night parties — and this policy holds for humans and well as animals.

So we did what everyone suggested: we called a hunter. And the hunter did what hunters do: he bought buckets upon buckets of Krispy Kreme donuts, and he laid them in traps all around the property. So far fourteen pigs have been caught. Three escaped as the hunter drew close, and because I feel really conflicted about all of this, I cheered for them as they ran away towards their home. Nine have been — to use my favorite new euphemism — *relocated*.

The new pig migration has made our otherwise quiet property livelier, and now our hunters and our neighbors often report back to us things they see and hear in the night. We got a text at dusk from one hunter camped out below who simply said, "There are about a hundred deer on your property right now. It's amazing." Another hunter once reported that as he drove in at nightfall to check the traps, his headlights illuminated the lawn, on which five pigs and twenty deer quietly grazed together. It's a veritable winter wonderland out there at night, as creatures pull themselves from their dens and take over. It is so peaceful that the most unsuccessful of the hunters still keeps coming, just for the experience of being here at twilight, calling it "self-care."

Darkness and quiet can turn a simple field into a place of great wonder.

This is the darkness and the quiet into which the angels descended on on the very first Christmas over 2000 years ago. The shepherds, keeping watch over their sheep, in darkened fields outside of Bethlehem, were suddenly surprised by incredible news delivered to them by incredible messengers.

This is the darkness into which Jesus is born. It is why his birth is celebrated in the coldest, darkest season of the year: because darkness can reveal mysteries we simply cannot see in the light of day. It is why we cannot tell the strength of a flashlight unless we turn off the lights. Darkness, simply put, reveals where the light is. Darkness is where God chose to become incarnate in a small tiny baby.

Everyone here, I know, has been in darkness. Some have seen more than our share, I would guess. Some of you might be feeling a bit on the darker side this year. Maybe you're distressed by the problems in our politics or in our warming oceans or whatever you read about last. Some of us carry within us the darkness of a loved one's declining health, or the emptiness of wishing for something that hasn't yet happened, or the darkness of disappointments big and small, of exhaustion. And what God is saying with this incredible birth of this incredible child is that darkness is God's holy ground. Darkness is where the story begins.

Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner has described our inner darkness not as a wound to cover up, but as a portal into something mysterious: "Don't be afraid of [the darkness or] the loneliness and isolation," he writes. "When you stand firm and don't flee...then you will suddenly become aware...that emptiness is a disguise for the intimacy of God... that God's silence, the eerie stillness, is filled by the word without words, by him who is above all names, by him who is everything in everything. And in this silence telling us that God is here. God is in the middle of your broken heart."

The shepherds, it is worth remembering, were among the most poorly paid members of society. This was a job with no status and no benefits. It was lonely and isolating. It didn't offer stability, and often shepherds lived outdoors with the sheep, their backs on the soil every night, their eyes gazing up at the darkened sky. *That the angels came to them* and not to other, more respected people with better jobs and higher status and good reputations *would have been almost as unbelievable* as the news itself.

This is where God comes to us also: not in the places we are most proud of ourselves, but in the places in ourselves we too don't respect, we wish we could get rid of, we wish other didn't see. There, in the middle of our darkened hearts, God sets up a tiny manger, and comes to life.

Christmas is placed in the middle of our coldest, darkest season precisely because it is the story of light shining in darkness, which darkness cannot overcome. Because the enduring truth of the Incarnation is that in the middle of our deepest loneliness, in the spaces of our heaviest burdens, birth happens. God, mysteriously, has chosen all that is dark and lonely and forgotten as the place He wants to reside.

The darkness is where destructive pigs dig up the grass. And the darkness is where the animal kingdom comes to life in wonder and beauty. Both are true. It is where shepherds toil on the margins with no recognition or respect, and it is where angels announce to them amazing news, thrusting them into the center of the world's greatest story. It is where Kula's hunters are awed by the very creatures they came to relocate.

So go looking. The angels appeared to the lonely shepherds and told them to get up and go, to wake up, to be alert. To go looking. Within each of us stubbornly lives a lonely shepherd who is longing to travel to this manger and greet this newborn child. Deep within each of us, written into our shared DNA, is the desire to join this story, to follow

the star, to see for ourselves God's radiant light shining in the darkness.

Friends, I hope your Christmas is full of light and good memories and great presents. But I also hope that when the darker moments come, that we let our inner shepherd guide us as we go looking for the light, for the baby in the barn, and *there* we wait in stillness, until we see with our own eyes the brilliant love of God.

Merry Christmas. Amen.