

Column

Over New Year's and Christmas in the late '90s I had the privilege of visiting Belgrade, Serbia. I put these two holidays in this order deliberately because the Serbs, following the older Julian Calendar, celebrate Christmas on Jan. 7.

On Christmas Eve bonfires stoked with oak branches burned outside churches. Also, there were children dressed in colorful costumes milling around waiting for their Christmas pageants. Among this cast of characters were Mary and Joseph and, of course, the quintessential shepherds with their tiny staffs.

Shepherds, I want to suggest, are more than window decorations in the story of the birth of the Christ child. They point us to the true shepherd of God's people. To understand how they fulfil this role, we must turn back to the Old Testament. There we discover that

“shepherd” was often used interchangeably for ‘king’. Perhaps this association came about because David, the great idealized King of Israel, began life as a shepherd boy.

Regardless, by the time of Ezekiel in the 6th century B.C., the practice of interchanging “king” and “shepherd” was firmly established. So, when the prophet thunders “Woe be to the shepherds of Israel” (Ezekiel 34:26), everyone knew about whom he was speaking.

What he goes on to say is that these shepherds have been thoroughly bad ones. They have fed themselves and not their flock (like some of our elected officials today!).

Ezekiel goes on to say that God is not happy and that He Himself is coming to be the Shepherd of His people. Speaking in God’s name Ezekiel writes: “Behold, I, even I, will both search my sheep and seek them out” (34:11) and “I will save my flock” (34:22).

But, towards the end of chapter 34, Ezekiel introduces something that must have been confusing to his first readers. He says that this deliverance will come about through some future member of King David's royal family. Ezekiel's first readers must have been left scratching their heads saying, "Which is it going to be? Is God coming to save us or will it be one of David's descendants?" *We*, of course, know the answer. The baby born in the stable of Bethlehem is both: He is from above – God incarnate – and He is a descendant of David.

Returning now to our manger scene, the shepherds – yes, even the wee ones in the pageants – point us to the Righteous King foretold by the prophets. Since shepherds and kings are so closely connected how appropriate that the message of a new King first came to the shepherds.

As we head toward another year, I am reminded of a shepherd story that speaks of God's care. It comes from the life of Ira D. Sankey, the musical associate of the 19th century evangelist Dwight L. Moody.

On Christmas Eve, 1875, Ira Sankey was travelling by steamboat up the Delaware River. The passengers were all on deck enjoying a starlit evening, when one asked the well-known music man to sing. As was his custom, he responded graciously. He stood up intending to sing a Christmas song, but as he breathed a silent prayer, he found himself almost against his will singing: "Saviour, like a shepherd lead us, / Much we need thy tender care."

He sang all four verses, and when he had finished a man came forward from the crowd and told him of the other time he had heard him sing that song. It seems that Sankey, who had been in the Union Army during the War Between the States, had been on picket duty one

night. As he stood at his post, the man addressing him, a Confederate soldier at the time, had raised his musket to shoot him when he heard Sankey singing: “We are thine, do thou befriend us, / Be the Guardian of our way.”

These words so stirred tender memories of childhood that his arms went limp at his side and no shot was fired. That night in the cold and dark, the Saviour had exercised the care of a shepherd over Sankey who trusted Him. May He exercise the same care over us as we enter 2025.

O Lord our God, whose eyes are always upon us from the beginning of the year even unto the end: We bring to thee our worship and praise, remembering thy goodness to us in the days that are past, and trusting ourselves to thy mercy for the days to come; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

The Rev. Victor H. Morgan is rector of St. Luke's Episcopal Church, Blue Ridge.