

## Running for Joy

*A sermon preached by the Rev. Jay Sidebotham on Christmas Eve,  
December 24, 2007 at The Church of the Holy Spirit, Lake Forest, Illinois*

Two years ago, I stood up here  
And tried in verse to learn  
a bit about the innkeeper.  
Tonight, it's shepherds' turn.

I grant you rhyming sermons  
May seem a cheesy ploy  
But think with me of shepherds  
And how they run for joy

If I could meet those shepherds,  
Perhaps just talk with one,  
The thing I'd want to know from them  
what was it made them run.

King James hath said that they made haste,  
That's written in his version.  
Which causes me to wonder  
What caused their quick dispersion?

Did they really run for joy?  
Or did they run from fear?  
Or was it actually bits of both?  
The answer's why we're here

Luke's gospel tells us little about  
What went through their heads.  
So I sat and had a chat with them.  
Here is what they said:

It started out a quiet night,  
the shepherd boss confessed.  
Another sheep. Another buck.  
An evening like the rest.

The sky was black. The moon was thin.  
The sheep began to snooze.  
Some guys were playing poker.  
One shepherd read the news.

One shepherd fixed a midnight meal.  
Another tried to sleep.  
(Apparently it didn't help  
suggesting he count sheep).

Then dazzling light. A voice was heard

only to be greeted  
by shepherds who were heard to utter  
expletives deleted.

The shepherds looked up at the sky  
then looked at one another  
then looked around to find a place  
where they could run for cover.

The glory of the Lord appeared,  
as James the King hath said.  
James also wrote correctly that  
these boys were sore afraid.

And from this light a voice declared  
"Fear not!" That speech begun,  
The shepherds thinking to themselves  
that's easier said than done.

Who's talking to us from the sky?  
Okay. Who's up there, really?  
Is this some collective dream?  
What was in that chili?

The sheep ignore what's happening  
They slumber through the night.  
Which goes to prove it sometimes pays  
to be just shy of bright.

I asked: Was it a U.F.O.?  
This numinous event. It  
could have been a Spielberg film  
If film had been invented.

Before they've got the time to run,  
sprinting from their fear  
a million angels praising God  
suddenly appear.

"Glory be to God on high"  
The angel's rhapsody is.  
The only sound from shepherds though  
is knocking of the knees.

While shepherds watched their flocks by  
 night  
 all seated on the ground  
 the angel of the Lord came down.  
 and scared them into town

The angel tells them "Hit the road"  
 and hit the road they do.  
 Like keystone cops they scatter.  
 But where are they headed to?

I'd like to meet those shepherds.  
 Sit down, boys, let's discuss.  
 What was passing through your minds  
 'Cause you're a lot like us.

Our lives are like the shepherds  
 We go from day to day,  
 We wake up, wash up, go to work  
 Routinely make our way.

Allow me to digress a bit  
 as pastor of a flock  
 I think we're also like the sheep.  
 Now that may make you balk.

But sometimes we are sleepy.  
 We may not realize.  
 That in our deep and dreamless sleep  
 angels fill our skies.

But coming back to shepherds,  
 We're like them, running fast  
 we may not know which way to go  
 but we won't get there last.

Lake Foresters are known to run  
 We're dashing here and there  
 To train. To school. To paddle.  
 To Midway. To O'Hare.

We're running to the office  
 We're running to the mall.  
 We're running just to stay in place  
 the hardest run of all.

The treadmill is a metaphor  
 To which our lives compare  
 We sure can work up quite a sweat  
 And not get anywhere

We sometimes even run to church.  
 On Christmas Eve, at least  
 It seems you have to set up camp  
 Just to get a seat.

And the only folks assured of seating  
 seem to be the priests.

Fear can really motivate.  
 The fear we won't succeed.  
 A fear that we won't measure up  
 Can make us pick up speed

We maybe fear abandonment  
 We may fear life alone  
 We may fear precious secrets  
 Exposed as lights go on.

We're running for approval,  
 For sanction or permission  
 From bosses, parents, children, and  
 Of course college admissions.

Our lives are marked by terror  
 It's daily in the news  
 It's part of airport travel  
 And politicians' views

We're not unlike those shepherds,  
 Running from our fear.  
 We maybe even run from God  
 It's scary when God's near.

God's presence, like those angels,  
 might make us run. It seems  
 to throw new light upon our lives  
 And changes our routines

Go home and look at Luke tonight,  
 at all the folks described  
 to whom God's messengers' appear.  
 They're always terrified.

It's true throughout the Bible  
 when God comes very near,  
 The uniform reaction is to  
 run away in fear.

But praise to God, there's more to say,  
 That's not the final word,  
 because this is the gospel

God's good news is heard.

Rejoice! We're like the shepherds!  
We gather here tonight,  
running to that straw lined crib.  
It's there we see the sight

Of God the great creator  
God who made us all  
God, the Lord omnipotent  
A baby in a stall.

Wonderful and Mighty God.  
Isaiah's prince of peace.  
Could make us fear if not for love  
that makes our joy increase.

So let's rejoin the shepherds as they  
run through streets at night.  
But wait. Who's staying with the sheep?  
Who cares? Now hang a right.

As they round the corner  
arrive at hotel door  
the owner comes out front.  
He knows what they're here for.

The owner points around the back.  
"The folks you've come to see  
aren't staying in my place tonight.  
We have no vacancy."

"Who are those people anyway?"  
The owner wants to know.  
"And by the way, above my barn  
What's that funny glow?"

The shepherds run like teenagers  
though they have had no sleep.  
They enter breathless to that room.  
Guess what, it smells like sheep.

They find a baby in that room.  
A mother sits there with him.  
The dad is looking slightly dazed.  
He's not sure what has hit him.

The mother holds the baby up.  
Says "Don't you think he's great!"

The shepherds nod. Smiles break out.  
Terror dissipates.

That mother knew that bouncing boy  
would draw from far and near.  
She seemed to be expecting guests.  
She's happy they are here.

The shepherds stay there for a while.  
They stand long, silently.  
And then they leave in reverence  
and they leave differently.

They walk away first quietly  
and then begin to run  
But this time they are hurrying  
To tell to everyone

Good news of joy to all the world,  
good news sent from above  
Fear not. Rejoice. God's here to help.  
God's here to show us love

A scary thing it could be  
This word "Immanuel"  
Its meaning: "God is with us"  
Might leave us terror-filled.

But when we lay eyes on that child  
like shepherds who came close,  
terror isn't on our minds  
but love of God with us.

Our hearts are restless, running  
at times from fear not joy  
until we find our rest in God  
until we see that boy.

So let us call a halt tonight  
to running out of fear  
and let us run for joy instead.  
Good news. Our God is here.