



From the Pulpit: December 12, 2021

Third Sunday of Advent, What Sweeter Music from John Rutter

The Reverend Dr. William A. Evertsberg

John 10:11–15; Luke 2:8; Matthew 1:20–21

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, III: The Trifecta of Semi-Sacred Symbols

This Advent and Christmastide we're preaching a sermon series called "Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season". Today there is a trifecta of symbols.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

These semi-sacred symbols of the season I've been talking about this Advent and Christmastide all started out as something else. That's the thing about Christianity: it is both flexible and greedy; Christian iconography will vacuum up secular objects which belong to other realms of life and claim them for itself and turn them from secular to sacred purpose.

Christmas trees, for instance, came from pagan Anglo-Saxon nature worship. Candles were—well, candles were just candles, a way of seeing in the dark, the Advent Wreath made them stand for Christ the Light of the World.



This is what candy canes looked like in the beginning. They were just straight white sugar sticks. A candy-maker handed them out for free at an exhibition in Massachusetts in 1837.



Later someone added the red and white stripes—red for the saving blood of Christ and white for the innocence and purity of the Christ Child. Then someone bent this straight white sugar stick at one end to give it a hook. Then someone added peppermint flavor to the sugar.

It's such a simple, silly little thing, but in fact the candy cane is the trifecta of semi-sacred symbols of the season. This is the hat trick. This is the triple play.

If you hold it like this, it's a shepherd's staff, because his first worshipful congregation at that stable were shepherds who'd been keeping watch over their flocks by night, and because he himself grew up to become The Good Shepherd who is willing to give up his life for his flock.

If you hold it like this, it is a 'J' for 'Jesus,' the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, which means "God is my salvation." "You will call his name 'Jesus', said an angel to Carpenter Joseph in a dream. "You will call him 'Jesus,' for he will save his people from their sins." He came to set us free. He came to give us life, life in all its abundance, pressed down, shaken together, running over.



And there's a third way the candy cane is a semi-sacred symbol for the season. In Greenwich, there is a tranquil cemetery with the rolling landscape, granite ledges, and towering white oaks of Connecticut. I buried dozens of my friends in that final resting place. It was also ten acres of open space, and thus a great place to walk Dudley, my golden retriever. While he was investigating all the places that intrigued the canine mind, I would wander aimlessly among the tombstones checking out the names and dates and tributes.

“The Christ Child came to Bethlehem that first Christmas because of God’s large, long, lavish, lasting, limitless love for his little lambs—you and me and all the rest.”

They never knew her as a personality, yet still they come, twenty years later, presumably every Christmastide, to decorate her grave with that candy cane heart. Now it's been 35 years since she died, and I'll bet if I ever returned with Doogie, I would find that candy cane heart on that grave.

So that's why a candy cane is the trifecta, the hattrick, the triple play, of semi-sacred symbols of the season. When you see them this Christmastide, you might see a shepherd's staff, and remember

the Good Shepherd.

Or you might see a 'J', and remember that he is our salvation, our freedom, our grace, our abundant life.

Or you might see a heart and remember the most famous verse in the Bible: “For God so **loved** the world that God gave God's only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but gain everlasting life.” The Gospel of John doesn't have a story of the birth of Jesus, but in that beloved text, John 3:16, John gives us the whole reason for the season—The Christ Child came to Bethlehem that first Christmas because of God's large, long, lavish, lasting, limitless love for his little lambs—you and me and all the rest.

All three symbols—staff, Jesus, heart—are especially important to me this Christmas, because of all the loss I see as a parish pastor—pastor which is related to 'pastoral' and 'pasture' and means 'shepherd.' The virus has stolen five million lives. “The Emperor of All Maladies takes my friends away at the zenith of their power and potential.”

Ministers get lots of Christmas cards. I've served six congregations in my career—in State College, Philadelphia, Grand Rapids, Northport, Greenwich, and Kenilworth. It's a great job; I have over 8,000 friends. Or had. Many of them are gone now.



One day a fairly large headstone caught my eye. It was a few days before Christmas. On the grave stood two large plastic candy canes about three feet tall, with their staffs planted in the earth and their hooks touching so that they formed the shape of a heart.

I'd never seen that configuration before. I don't know where I've been; maybe this is all over the place. The name on the headstone was Jaelyn Noelle. I caught my breath for a second, because it was almost Christmas.

And then the dates: February 13, 1986-May 1, 1986. Which means, of course, that she was ten weeks old when she died.

Her parents never really got to know her as a personality. She was only ten weeks old. Who knows what happened to her. But her parents obviously loved Christmas. They gave her the name Noelle, which means Christmas. Literally: Noelle is a contraction of the Latin phrase for “The Birthday of Our Lord.” And then of course those imposing candy canes in the shape of a heart.

Can I make a confession? I read my Christmas cards in February. Kathy reads them in December when we get them, and then she saves them for me in a basket, a little shrine next to the Christmas tree, so I can attend to them when the holiday rush is past.

Last year I got a card from my friends Paul and Judy, who are in their 80's now. They became my friends when I was a seminary intern at the State College Presbyterian Church in State College, PA, right around the corner from Old Main at Penn State University. Paul was a biophysicist at Penn State, one of the smartest but also kindest people I've ever known. He sent biology experiments up on the Space Shuttle in the 80's. Getting their Christmas card every year reminded me about how daunting it was to preach to a congregation full of these brilliant scientists from Penn State.

Paul's wife Judy was the Director of Christian Education at the Church. We taught Sunday School and led the Youth Groups together. She was so kind and patient with a half-educated almost minister with his learner's permit. She taught me many things. I know that more now than I did when I was 24 and full of myself and didn't know what I didn't know.

I haven't seen Paul and Judy since 1984, but they still send us a Christmas card, and last year they informed people they love but maybe have lost touch with that their 52-year-old daughter Andrea had died suddenly of an undetected heart anomaly she'd been born with. She was in my youth group, and she was a treasure.

The other day, we received this year's Christmas card from Judy and Paul. Kathy read it right away and gave it to me because she thought I ought to see it before February. Turns out that this year Paul and Judy lost another child, their second son Dana, who died when his car was hit head on by another driver who'd fallen asleep on a country road in South Carolina. He was 58. We're not supposed to bury our children, and to do it not once, but twice??? "Our Christian faith sustains us daily," they said.

"Yea, though I **walk** through the **Valley** of the **Shadow** of **Death**, I will fear no evil, for thou art with me, **thy** rod and thy staff, **they** comfort me," wrote Shep-

herd Boy David, while he kept watch over his flock by night. If there is one too few around the Christmas tree in your home this year, think of that Shepherd Staff this Christmastide.

Did you ever wonder what became of the sheep those Bethlehem Shepherds abandoned when they raced off to the stable to see the newborn King? Heywood Broun, a New York journalist from the early years of the twentieth century, has an answer. One shepherd named Amos refused to follow his friends to Bethlehem. They were surprised and disappointed. "Amos, you heard the angel with your own ears. A Savior is born this night, in Bethlehem, two miles away! On this night of nights, we shall see new glories at the throne of God, and **you**, Amos, you will see sheep."

Amos just jabbed his shepherd's crook deeply into the turf and gripped it fiercely. "I have a hundred sheep," he said. "They need me. The angel scares the sheep. The angel shines too much. The sheep don't need an angel. They need a shepherd. God is busy in Bethlehem. He has no time for a hundred sheep. I'll stay here with my sheep."

When the other shepherds returned from Bethlehem the next morning, they told Amos about the manger and the wise men and the gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. They asked, "And what wonders did you see this night of nights, Amos?" Amos said, "Now my **hundred** are a **hundred and one**. And he showed them a little lamb, born just before dawn. "And for this birth, Amos, was there a great voice from heaven?" Amos said, "To my heart, there came a whisper."¹

Maybe this Christmas, you'll see fleeting phantasms of phosphorescence flashing among the stars in the night sky, and hear a choir of angels singing "Glory, Glory, Glory!" in voices even more celestial than Miya's and Alyssa's and Kelsey's. Or maybe you'll hear just a whisper. And maybe the whisper will be enough.

¹ Heywood Broun, *A Shepherd*, a pamphlet-sized book published privately in 1926. *The New York Times* reprinted the story on Christmas Eve, 1973.

—Prayers of the People—
By The Reverend Dr. Katie Snipes Lancaster

God our Advent hope, we await your Spirit made known in the Christ child, even as we see your ever-present spark spread across the start of this day. You are found infinite within the finite, unchanging within the urgency for change, giving birth as much as pouring forth. Be in solidarity with us in every joy and struggle. Unite with us in this time and place, so that we might know in a new way your peace that passes understanding, your joy revealed against the grain of this season. There is no other way; we can only find you within this life, within our lives, within the textured beauty and impossibility of earth-y existence. Show up for us. Let us know you. Heartbeat and breath reclaiming the rhythms of your presence.

Hear our prayer for those who witnessed tornado alley extending far beyond its conventional track on Friday night; sturdy trees snapping like twigs, night shift trapped beneath concrete, crumpled in the hands of the wind. We cannot understand and yet we know. Be with the haggard and hobbled, those who will for many months and years piecemeal and try to put their lives back together, all the pieces rearranged and missing. Lord hear our prayer.

And hear us within our own lives. Each of us seek from you something essential this day: a spirit of forgiveness when anguish is our fault or theirs, a decipherable mending of my heart or yours so that we might live anew in the gift of friendship and family, anchored by one another. We need each other O God. Let us reclaim the gift of company. Let us softly awaken to what is possible. Mend us. See us. Set your vision in our midst. Imagine for us the way of peace. Make straight in the desert a highway. Prepare a way through the wilderness. Advent us, O God. Wait within us. Prepare us. Awaken us. And hear the longings of our hearts as we offer up our own prayers in faith and in silence... .

And now let us gather our voices together praying, Our Father... .

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