

Christmas Eve and Day 2025: "Crows, Drones, Shepherds, and the Holy Child"
Luke 2:1-20
December 24-25, 2025
Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

Last Friday the picture on the front page of the paper looked like Halloween, not nearly-Christmas. The photo was of a hulking black building, silhouetted against a twilit sky. It looked like the building had yellow teeth instead of windows, until I looked closer and saw that what I thought were windows were actually the letters KODA. The dateline for the article was Rochester, NY, so I figured out the letters were supposed to spell Kodak but the final K had burnt out. The headline made the whole thing more Christmas-y, sort of: "3 French Hens, 2 Turtle Doves, and 20,000 Crows." In place of "a partridge in a pear tree," Rochester has massive clouds of crows at this time of year, seeking the city's warmth and light in the cold and dark of winter. We have geese police here at the Shore, and in Rochester they pay bird experts \$9,000/year to control the messy and loud influx of crows as best they can with laser lights, fireworks and other loud noises. The photo caption read, "Getting rid of them is murder."¹ (That was a hidden Easter egg for those who know a flock of crows is **called** a murder! Other fun facts: a group of puffins is called a circus, a flock of larks is an exaltation, a gathering of owls is a parliament, and a grouping of goldfinches is a charm.)

Every year we sing:

The first Noel the angels did say
Was to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay.
In fields where they lay, keeping their sheep,
On a cold winter's night that was so deep....
They lookéd up and saw a -----

Star! Well, it's supposed to be "a star" but in Rochester it could be a cloud of crows and in NJ it could be: **drones!** I'm guessing this many residents of the Garden State haven't scanned the skies

this closely for a long time. Some hopeful folks watched carefully to see the aurora borealis, the Northern Lights, in their rare appearance this far south this summer. I've sometimes gone outside at night to track a predicted meteor shower, that cool "super blue moon" in summer of '23, and eclipses. But for over a month more people than ever, all over the state, have been looking up more and more frequently as news reports have multiplied about drones in great numbers and large sizes (as big as a VW Beetle??) hovering overhead. One of our very own church friends was on the phone with the FBI about it this last week!

If the shepherds in our Christmas Gospel lived in the 21st century, would they have reported the mass appearance of angels in the sky to Homeland Security? After all, St. Luke tells us that they weren't just afraid, "*they were terrified.*" (Luke 2:9) I always picture them focused on the heavens, star-gazing, maybe passing time watching for shooting stars, but Luke says, "*An angel of the Lord **stood** before them....*" (Luke 2:9) The angel had to land and get their attention before the celestial concert could begin. The Word had to be spoken before the song rang out. When the Christmas Gospel is read about the Good News of great joy that the angel brings, I hear Linus' voice announcing:

"... to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."
(Luke 2:11)

There are a million artistic renderings of the Nativity, right? Sometimes just the Baby wrapped carefully in His swaddling clothes, peacefully sleeping on His cushion of hay in the glow of His halo; sometimes the focus is on the blissful Mother and Child; sometimes St. Joseph elbows his way into the lineup, too; often the Magi are depicted marching in regally, even though that timeline is way off (they came later). But my very **favorite** are the paintings of the shepherds adoring the Child. Their faces are always so interesting.... And of course, with the shepherds come the lambs, which is pretty fun.

It was all writ large at the Sunday School Advent Pageant on Sunday. At Holy Trinity we pride ourselves on having a live baby for the pageant, and this year was no different: Baby Austin, born in September, just made his way-off-Broadway debut as Baby Jesus. He was so quiet through the procession down the aisle, hubbub of children coming and going, sound of the organ playing and the congregation singing, I thought, "The little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes." He was buried pretty deep in the tulle filling his carriage, but from the pews we saw little feet kicking and little fingers flexing, and we saw Finley, the little lamb next to him, watching him very, very carefully, and very, very wide-eyed. The whole time, with lots of other commotion to watch, her eyes were trained on the Baby. I'm not sure, but I think the little lamb's focus on the Baby may have been what attracted the attention of one of the shepherds. A few minutes into the pageant he turned his back on the congregation so he could face the Baby. He didn't just look, he bent toward the Baby, he smiled, and except that he's old enough to stay in character, I think he would have reached out to touch and even hold the Baby. If our little lamb Finley was fascinated, our little shepherd Noah was **enchanted**.

Maybe that's why I love "the adoration of the shepherds" artwork best of all: the shepherds exude love and awe. When Joseph is included, he often appears to be on guard duty. The Magi are usually depicted swathed in silk, encrusted with jewels; they look very formal, dutiful, serious as they offer homage. But the shepherds are often shown chattering to each other, laughing, projecting honest eyes and loving hearts. They are lovely in their simplicity. They don't look off-puttingly pious. They know how to be present where their feet are. They didn't dress up for the occasion; they hastily, joyfully, came as they were, not standing on ceremony.

I found one of my very favorite Adoration of the Shepherds (Adorazione del pastori) at a museum in Milan (Pinacoteca di Brera). It was painted about 345 years ago by Italian artist

Giovan Battista Trotti. It's large, and it's a triple-decker. The top layer of the painting is a grouping of watchful angels, including a chorus line of cherubs in the golden background and a few others seated in the foreground, peering down from a cloud that looks like a puffy mattress laid on the roof of the stable. On ground level is the stable floor, with the Child and Mother crowded 'round by 5 shepherds, Francis of Assisi and his soul mate Claire. (Francis & Claire lived 1200 years after Jesus' birth, so that's a tip off there's artistic license going on here!) A wonderful cow seems to be licking Mary's hand as she holds up the cloth that was wrapped around her Son. A donkey has squeezed in between the cow and Mary, and gazes appreciatively at the Baby. It's a wonderful scene, but we can't help but notice that the shepherd closest to us is trussing a lamb's legs, binding them with rope, and that gives us pause.

A shepherd dressed in red is positioned right behind Mary. She attracts our eye because she's illumined in light. That shepherd is gazing and pointing upward, drawing our attention to the second tier of the painting in which the trussed lamb is draped over the shepherd's shoulder, another man lighting the way with a torch, ready to open a door so they can exit. To the left we see the rafters of the stable, which look like the cross....

When the Babe of Bethlehem grows up, John the Baptizer will call Him "*the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.*" (John 1:29) This particular Adoration of the Shepherds points us toward the crucifixion and reminds us of the beautiful words of "What Child Is This":

Nails and spear shall pierce him through,
The cross be born for me, for you.
Hail, hail, the Word made flesh,
The Babe, the son of Mary.

Someone has written, "The manger and the cross are never far apart for Luther. The birth... took place in squalor and under the shadow of terror. Bethlehem presaged Calvary."²

A week ago the FAA imposed restrictions on the flying of drones in 22 parts of NJ, for “special security reasons.” Perhaps in their continual scouting of the sky for drones our neighbors in the Garden State will see an especially bright star that will make them mindful of another star that shone and of an angel choir that sang to announce a holy Birth. Our true security lies in Him, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world.

News of the season isn’t just about crows and drones. Amazingly, the sale of Bibles spiked 22% between October ’23 and October ’24. Possible stated reasons include anxiety over the election, war in Ukraine and the Middle East, the climate crisis and a fleet of other issues that fuel the fire of worry. People are looking for peace, wisdom, insight, **centering** in the Word of God. That’s a very good thing. The further step is to be part of a community of faith, surrounded by people who live out the faith Scripture calls us to, and who support and challenge us to do the same. The shepherds went back to their flocks and lived out their vocations. We’re called to do the same, in the midst of and in the aftermath of our Christmas celebration. When troubles make it seem like a murder of crows is blocking out the sun, when the scary unknown or the frightening facts hover like a rogue drone over our consciousness, our Lord **doesn’t** say, “Your worries are silly!” No, He says:

“I’ve told you all this so that trusting me, you will be unshakable and assured, deeply at peace. In this godless world you will continue to experience difficulties. But take heart! I’ve conquered the world.” (John 16:33, *The Message*)

Because of God’s love in Christ, we can be sure, “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.” Amen

¹David Andreatta, “3 French Hens, 2 Turtle Doves and 20,000 Crows” (NY Times, Dec. 20, 2024, A1, A20), A1).

²Roland H. Bainton, *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1948, p. 12)