



Rise Up & Follow



As I prepared for this service to celebrate the birth of Jesus, I was thinking particularly about the shepherds. They were visited by angels, with an amazing and holy message about the good and joyful news of our Savior's birth and they responded by **rising up** and going to Bethlehem to see the newborn baby. God sent us Jesus to change things, to touch the earth, and to touch each of us. If Christ was born and nothing ever changed on the earth, then he would not have been the Messiah. Clearly something was happening, and the shepherds recognized this and responded.

Shepherding was the province of the lowly, especially on the graveyard shift. The job was dangerous with wild animals that could attack at any time. The shepherds are not even included in the census. And yet, they are the ones that the angels appear to. God comes to us all, but God especially comes to the least and the lost.

We have the advantage of history. We know the babe in the manger grew up to lead the most amazing movement that ever existed and still exists. Like the shepherds, we've been taking care of our flocks, but are we going to listen to the angels' eternal message as they tell us that something miraculous is happening. How are we going to respond to Christ this Christmas? Are we going to **rise up & follow** him?



I love this picture that was doing the rounds on social media.¹ I think it is about 6 years old. This is the nativity set in the central square of a small town in the south of Brazil. And if we zoom into the manger, you'll see this stray dog (a shepherd dog) in the manger with Jesus. Sometimes, we just need the good sense of this dog to curl up with Jesus.

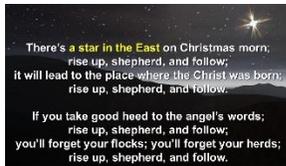


Here's a picture that a clergy friend posted of her daughter playing.² That's baby Jesus in an airplane with Mary and Jesus as passengers. Sometimes, we need to leave the comfort of what we know and **rise up** and go and join Jesus wherever he wants to pilot us. Maybe we'll end up in familiar territory, or maybe we will find ourselves **following** him and flying to somewhere that we have never been before.



¹ <http://taildom.com/blog/pictures/dog-stays-warm-in-jesus-manger/>

² Used with permission.



This phrase ‘**Rise up & Follow**’ is a key line in carol that maybe unfamiliar to you. The lyrics go:

*There's a star in the East on Christmas morn; rise up, shepherd, and follow;
it will lead to the place where the Christ was born; rise up, shepherd, and follow.
If you take good heed to the angel's words; rise up, shepherd, and follow;
you'll forget your flocks; you'll forget your herds; rise up, shepherd, and follow.*

This carol is an African American spiritual. It first appeared in print in the 1867 publication *Slave Songs of the United States* under the title of *A Christmas Plantation Song*. The tune most likely originated in the plantations of Georgia and North Carolina. The songs from this region were usually sung as a call and response with plenty of handclapping and foot tapping to hold down the rhythm. Since most slaves wouldn't have a printed Bible, they conveyed the Christmas story through their music. The leader would sing out, “There's a star in the East on Christmas morn,” and the people would respond, “Rise up, shepherd, and follow.” The next line of the story would be sung, and the refrain repeated. The song would continue until the full story had been told. There are numerous variations of this particular song.

Now if you were listening carefully to the scriptures that we have heard read this evening from the gospel of Luke, you might have noticed that there has not been a star mentioned. Angels, yes, but not a star. There is a star in our next scripture, but that is from the gospel of Matthew. So, there's a bit of creative license with the story telling in this spiritual song. But African American spirituals were also used as subversive songs with layers of meaning. On the face of it, they said one thing as far as the slave owners were concerned. Underneath, there was often a hidden message about the underground railroad and when and how to escape or a message of encouragement and hope. One of the purposes of this song was probably to remind the slaves to **follow** the star that would lead them to freedom.

There may have also been another reason for the star in the song. In the Christmas story, it is the wise men **following** the star. By replacing the kingly travelers with people of no status, the slaves were subtly creating a revolution in status for themselves, inverting the status quo as Jesus did in his ministry. As they sing “rise up, shepherd, and follow” the slaves became the wise seekers **following** the star to the place where salvation and freedom could be found.³

The slaves kneeling and bending over in the fields first had to find the strength to stand up and then they then had to go from standing still to moving in order to get closer to their salvation and freedom. We too, need to both **rise up and follow**.

³ Kory Wilcoxon. <https://revkory.wordpress.com/2010/12/05/this-weeks-sermon-rise-up-shepherd-and-follow/>



God sent us Jesus to bring salvation and to turn the world upside-down or right-side up. In Chapter 1 of Luke, Mary had been singing about this. Those promises are still true for us today. We live in a world where so much is wrong, and life makes no sense to us. This picture⁴ has not been photoshopped. The rock is real. The soil is real. The trees are real. It is hard to figure out how that large rock can stay suspended in midair. But if you take a moment and turn it upside-down, things become a lot clearer.

Jesus came to show us that the way we are looking at the world and the way we are living does not make sense. We are called to **rise up and follow** him in some counter-cultural ways, in the way of love, in the way of forgiveness, peace, justice and grace, in the way of kindness, compassion and generosity, in the way of loving our enemies and offering hospitality to the stranger, of feeding the hungry, and of loving all God's children. God came down to earth to turn our upside-down non-sensical world back the right way up. And he did it by sending us a tiny baby and first telling those on the margins the joyful, good news.



There's a baby in the manger. Yes, Jesus was born in the past, but God is here today birthing new things in the present 2000 years after Bethlehem. And that it is good and joyful news for us still today. So as rich and poor, the powerful and the oppressed, together, let's **rise up and follow!**

Thanks be to God,
Amen.

Let us pray ...

*God of light, you announced Your arrival among us to the poorest, the most humble. We celebrate your good news to each of us and to everyone. With the shepherds in the fields, let us **rise up** and go now to find Christ in our hearts, and in the world. Let us **follow** you and praise your holy name. May you kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.*

Resources

Powery, Luke A. *Rise Up Shepherd! Advent Reflections on the Spirituals*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2017.

Pritchard, Ray. "Rise Up Shepherd and Follow" in *Christianity Blogs*. December 14, 2015. <https://www.christianity.com/blogs/dr-ray-pritchard/rise-up-shepherd-and-follow.html>

Wilcoxon, Kory. "This Week's Sermon – Rise Up, Shepherd, and Follow" in Thoughts on God...and other stuff. December 5, 2010. <https://revkory.wordpress.com/2010/12/05/this-weeks-sermon-rise-up-shepherd-and-follow/>

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/pg/Allan-Passos-605693202902450/posts/> (December 2, 2018, 3:26 a.m.)