Title: Amos, the Shepherd from Bethlehem (South Dakota)

Date: 12/14/25

Subject: We can have peace.

Scripture:

During this advent season, we're using stories to communicate four themes found in the Christmas story. Last week was hope as seen in the story Angel #5. This morning's story is about peace.

Virginia, I'm hope you don't mind me being blunt. Your young friends don't know as much as they think they do. They've been affected by a culture which elevates confidently expressed opinion to the same status level as fact. The fact is no one knows everything - not even AI, Alexis or Google.

So, yes, Virginia, Bethlehem, South Dakota is real and real shepherds live near it. The Post Office delivered your letter addressed to "Any shepherd, Bethlehem, South Dakota" to me. It helps that I'm the closest shepherd to Bethlehem. You wrote that you sent letters to other places in the United States named Bethlehem. I hope you get good responses from them as well. I'm always glad to help young, inquisitive minds. I don't get many letters these days and since you wrote an actual letter, it's only right I should write a letter back to you.

Happy to help you with your Christmas project by answering your numerous questions. Not sure if I'll be able to answer all of them or in the order you asked. Also, not sure if your project is for school or if it has a personal purpose. I suspect the latter as I sense your questions go deeper than merely seeking material for a report.

I suppose I should introduce myself and tell you a little bit about myself since you didn't know who was going to receive your letter. The names Amos. I've been a shepherd as long as I can remember. My daddy was a shepherd and his daddy was a shepherd. You could say it runs in the family. I'm proud to be one.

What's Bethlehem like? There's little left of what it used to be. And then I don't think there was much to Bethlehem way back in the early days. If you Google Bethlehem, South Dakota, you'll find a pin on a map at the end of a desolate, dead end dirt road called Bethlehem Rd. Just a few scattered buildings. The closest places with any actual population are Tilford, Nemo and Piedmont. Not exactly major metropolitan areas like Rapid City or Sioux Falls.

People don't make it a point to go to Bethlehem even though it's not that far off the beaten path. It's just West of the Interstate that goes from Rapid City to Sturgis. While hundreds of thousands of people roar past Bethlehem on their motorcycles to the Sturgis rally or in their SUV's to see the Black Hills and Mount Rushmore, few people even know Bethlehem exists, technically. I'm sure it was that way for the original Bethlehem too as it was a little village and considered to be unimportant. We'll get back to that in a moment.

We have a tourist attraction close to Bethlehem. You can't really get there from here, at least very easily, unless you can fly like a crow. Though Bethlehem is closer, it has a Nemo address. It's the Wonderland Cave. According to its website, it's "Great for families, single travelers, friends, and anyone who wants to explore an

underground world. Escape the heat, the cold, or the madness of the Sturgis Motorcycle Rally!" It boasts "stalactites, stalagmites, columns, several varieties of crystals and even helictites" – whatever they are.

Bethlehem does get occasional adventurers who like to wander through the rugged hills, maybe do some rock climbing or hunting.

You asked, "Do you attach any significance to the name Bethlehem? If so, what?"

You bet I draw lots of significance from the name Bethlehem. It's named for the place where my Lord and Savior was born. I count it a tremendous privilege to have an occupation which is the same as that of the people who were the first ones to hear about the good news of what happened in a manger in the original Bethlehem in ancient Israel. I consider myself to be a brother with those shepherds who heard the angels speak about peace coming to earth to men that God chooses.

I know the idyllic and pastoral scenes portrayed on Christmas cards - everything is quiet, still, serene, at peace. They create all sorts of "aaaaaah" moments. I think it was far from quiet and peaceful when Mary was giving birth. I have no reason to think it was different from the usual pains and groans of other deliveries.

"What's it like being a shepherd?" There aren't too many people where we raise sheep in South Dakota, or for that matter, any place in South Dakota. We can spend a long time out with the flock, even camping out among them for lengthy periods. These old bones are finding that harder to do all the time. Good thing we can use 4 wheelers to move the flock.

The days are long. The nights are even longer. They provide plenty of opportunity to look up at the stars and contemplate life. Most nights are quiet and occasionally you can hear the strumming of a guitar and a shepherd singing at the campfire. When I join in, some of the other shepherds tease me that I'm part coyote or wolf. The songs of the real coyotes and wolves are otherworldly and cause a different response among we shepherds, one that sends chills down our spines and unnerves the flocks.

The weather can be atrocious. Late winter snowstorms or maybe I should call them early spring storms, wreak havoc on the flock, especially the new lambs. I remember blizzards with 30 inches of snow and drifts over 15 feet high when I was just a kid... Sorry, I got off track.

My sheep ranch is just out of the foothills where the grass is plentiful. One of the things I like most about being a shepherd is there can be lots of alone time. I guess you could call me a loner. It's peaceful and quiet. I like the peace. It's one of my favorite aspects of the Christmas season.

Sometimes it can be a little hard to get peace, even out in our setting. There are occasions when one of shepherds wants to get a little shut eye and the others are a little wound up around the campfire, so he hollers, "Hey guys. I've had a rough day. I could really use some peace and quiet."

One of the rowdies settles down to say, "I'll be quiet" quickly followed by another who says, "I'll be peace." So much for the peace and quiet as another round of laughter echoes through the night.

I've studied what it means to be at peace with God. It's more than a psychological state of mind, a subjective feeling. Some people can be at peace, have a false peace, even when they do things that are wrong.

I like this note I found in my Bible. It describes peace as "the profound well-being of soul that flows from the experience of God's grace" (NIV study Bible note on Jude 2). I'm at peace with God because Jesus died so my sins could be forgiven (Romans 5:1). I'm no longer his enemy. We're on the same side. I'm in a right relationship with him. I'm in harmony with him. It's an objective status, a fact.

This peace with God leads to having peace of mind and heart, tranquility of spirit. Most often this peace is noted in the middle of a storm or difficulty. People can have peace in spite of what's going on around them. It can be illustrated by a mother bird sitting in her nest on her baby chicks while the rain is pouring, the wind is blowing and the tree branches are swaying. The mama bird is unstirred, unflappable, at peace in the midst of the storm.

You'll have to forgive me for getting a little preachy. I do that from time to time. My fellow shepherds good naturedly tease me by calling me Amos, the not quite so famous prophet.

You asked if I had a favorite Bible verse. It's not one but several. They're probably familiar. They come from Psalm 23. You probably guessed a shepherd would pick verses that include a shepherd in them.

Over the years I've tried to make a Christmas version of Psalm 23. It's a work in progress, just like life. Here's what I have so far: "Because the Lord is my shepherd, I don't need presents or people's expressions of goodwill. He helps me sleep at night though not everything is done on my list. He provides peaceful opportunities during my hectic day. He refreshes my inner being better than cocoa and cookies (in my case, it takes a lot to outdo them). He helps me keep him front and center amid all the commercialization of the season. Even when things go dark, like after the sun sets or the difficulties of life, I won't be afraid because he's close beside me, holding my hand. The food my shepherd provides is better than any Christmas brunch even though I'm surrounded by those who hate me. His goodness and love are with me before Christmas, during Christmas and after Christmas. The best thing is knowing that I'll spend an eternity of Christmases with him."

Virginia, did you know that many of the prophecies about Christ's birth were given during difficult times? They were intended to instill confidence that God was still at work and was able to give peace. My favorite foretelling, as you might expect, concerns the original Bethlehem: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times" (Micah 5:2). That's as far as most people go. The following verses speak about Israel being abandoned and the birth of one who: "will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, and the majesty of the name of the Lord his God... And he will be their peace (5:4, 5).

There are other prophecies I'm drawn to, many by the prophet Isaiah: "Therefore, the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel...The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; and on those living in the land of the deep darkness a light has dawned...For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...He tends his flock like a shepherd: he gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart" (Isa 7:14; 9:2, 6, 7; 40:11).

It's totally amazing to think about - the one the prophets spoke about, the one who was born in the manger in Bethlehem, the town for which my town was named, is the Prince of Peace. He himself is peace and offers peace to all people (Eph 2:14, 17). He's able to reconcile all things to himself by making peace through his blood which was shed on the cross (Col 1:20). Back to Isaiah: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; The punishment that brought us peace was upon him (53:5). Oops. There I go again doing more preaching. I better get back to your questions before I develop serious hand cramps.

Another question you asked, "What's your favorite Bible story … if you have one?"

I have one. It's the one Jesus tells about the lost sheep. A shepherd has 100 sheep, 99 are safe in the fold. One sheep has wandered off and gotten himself lost. The shepherd counts and notices there is a missing sheep. He leaves the 99 to go look for the one that's lost.

I've had to do that too many times to count. For whatever reason, maybe the sheep has gone after greener grass, followed a butterfly, straggled behind the flock or whatever. It strayed away from the rest of the flock. Each sheep is important to me. That's how I make my living. I'm not saying they're my family, but I care for my sheep. Sometimes it takes a long time to try to find the wandering sheep. I may have to go through ravines or up into the hills or who knows where looking for the sheep, calling its name, till I find it so I can bring it home, back to a place of safety and peace.

What stands out to me in that story is I was the lost sheep. I had wandered away from God. I was lost, without hope of finding my way home. Then Jesus, the Good Shepherd, searched for me and found me. He rescued me just like it says in Psalm 23 … so I can be at peace with God.

You wanted to know my favorite Christmas song. I'll answer with a little shepherd humor. Do you know what a sheep's favorite Christmas song is? Fleece Navidad by Jose Fleece-iano. Feliz Navidad by Jose Feliciano. Sorry. Not really sorry.

An updated version (By Unspoken) adds a nice twist to the meaning before singing the standard song. "It's been a long year, a long road, and I'm thankful to be going home. As I head out to my own house, I got a fire burning in the stove. And my prayer is that no matter where you're at, you will find a hope that fills your soul, for the Prince of Peace is there wherever you go... As I look back I know that, you can't buy to satisfy your soul. So hear the heartbeat of the baby, sent down to save the world. And let's remember this December. The greatest gift you'll ever know, is the Savior born in a manger, pointing us home."

There's another song (*Somewhere in Your Silent Night* by Casting Crowns): "All is calm and all is bright, everywhere but in your heart tonight. They're singing carols of joy and peace. But you feel too far gone and too far out of reach. Somewhere in your silent night, heaven hears a song your broken heart has cried… From heaven's height to manger low, there is no distance the Prince of Peace won't go. From manger low to Calvary's hill. When your pain runs deep, his love runs deeper still. He has always loved you, child, and he always will."

I'll come back to your main question: "Do you believe in Christmas?" I think by now you know the answer, but I'll say it plainly. I believe in Christmas and the Christ of Christmas with every fiber of my being.

Virginia, if I read between the lines, it sounds like you're looking for some peace in your life. I believe you have the initial peace with God by coming to Christ for salvation. It seems like there are things happening in your life that attack peace. And the Christmas season can have potholes. The answer isn't what Maria sings in the song *My Favorite Things* from the Sound of Music: "When the dog bites, when the bee stings, when I'm feeling sad, I simply remember my favorite things, and I don't feel so bad." It doesn't go anywhere deep enough.

It's easy to have peace when things are going well, when the decorations hung by the chimney with care haven't fallen, when the turkey is tender and moist, when the boss gives the day off before Christmas, when your two year old hasn't turned off the furnace for the third time on a bitterly cold day, when the chorus around you is in tune - then it's easy to have peace.

Real peace is demonstrated when you're being pulled in 13 directions - when the turkey is burned; when relatives are noisily chattering away so there's no quiet spot; when rushing around amid the chaos of last minute shoppers who are trying to find the exact right present, getting to all the holiday functions, online shopping because there's a better selection and then having found the perfect item - at least one that will be acceptable - your browser stops browsing, the endless barrage of media about creating the perfect Hallmark Christmas, uncooperative weather. Phew. Peace is revealed in the middle of the storm.

Here's some unsolicited advice. Make sure you keep the right things in proper perspective. Keep Jesus at the center. My guy, the prophet Isaiah, wrote, he (God) will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in him" (Isaiah 26:3). The one who came as a baby in the manger so he could be our Savior put it this way, "Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid... I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 14:27, 16:33).

We can have peace with God. We can have the peace of God. And we can know that the God of peace will be with us. He provides quietness of soul.

Yes Virginia, there is a Bethlehem, South Dakota and other Bethlehems in the USA. More importantly there was a Bethlehem 2000 years ago. It's not the fact that there was a little town, but what happened in that sleepy village. A child was born. He was no ordinary child. He was the one of whom the angels sang. He was the one whom the heavens exalted. He is the child of peace, the man of peace, the Prince of Peace.

I hope you don't mind, I'd like to pray a blessing over you: The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace (Num 6:24-26). May the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way (2 Thess 3:16). May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back the from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb 13:20, 21).

Your friend, Amos the shepherd, Bethlehem, South Dakota.