

“Certain Poor Shepherds”

Luke 2:8-20

*The first Noel, the angel did say,
Was to certain poor shepherds
In fields as they lay.*

We will sing that Christmas hymn tonight. And the writer of that English Carol observed a truth found in the Gospels – that of all the people in the world, of all the classes of the nations, God chose his angelic messengers to declare his glorious coming *to certain poor shepherds*.

This Christmas story has become so known to us that the news of this declaration no longer takes us aback. We are not shocked, as might have been the 1st century reader.

We are not particularly shocked, of course, that God would have a heavenly host singing above – That’s the kind of thing we expect at Christmas: Stars, Angels, miracles – just whatever God has up his heavenly sleeve. But to get the full effect of this story and to capture its full theological significance we need to be shocked again – not by the performers, but by the audience. That of all the people with which God would share the Divine News – the incredible incarnational miracle that would set into motion God’s work among humanity – that of all the people and powers that be – God had it told, indeed had harmoniously sung to Shepherds!

Now, when we think of Shepherds, we think of pastoral, loving people who cared for those beautiful white animals. They are as romanticized as perhaps the Cowboy in the western America. . . . I can remember as a boy dressing up in my cowboy garb – with boots, hat, sheriff’s badge pinned to my shirt and a play six-shooter on my side. Most every boy wants to be a cowboy – sleep out on the prairie. Eat beef jerky – the works. And we have romanticized it.

But then the truth rings true in terms of worldly reputation with the incising voice of Willie Nelson: *Mammas, don’t let your babies grow up to be cowboys!* And we might as well alternate that role with “shepherd” here as well. For shepherds were not romanticized in the first century. Very few people, in fact, were more lowly than the shepherd.

Indeed the Talmud, sort of the Rule Book for Jews, prohibited shepherds from appearing in the courts as witnesses – for they had little public reputation on which to base the truth.

In earlier centuries, the job of keeping sheep was delegated to the youngest of children, because they were the youngest also in public stature. And so when Samuel came to the house of Jesse to anoint a king as successor to Saul, he reviewed Jesse’s seven sons, but none received divine approval. Asking if there were any more children, Samuel was told, “There is still the youngest, but he is tending the sheep.” (I Sam. 16:11)

Even so, God's message of the arrival of his son to earth came to certain poor shepherds. Why did God give this high privilege to such lowly people? Leslie Flynn observed that Bethlehem was filled with throngs of people – many of them joining with family reunions and merriment. Government officials were busy recording census data. King Herod would not tolerate some baby assuming a rival title or throne. The Scribes looked for a Messiah who would come in glory to liberate them from Roman bondage. The religious leaders were too obsessed with prestige and ceremonies to have interest in the birth of a baby. – And so God bypassed the important in this world and spoke instead to the ignorant.

And this theme would continue in the gospels. It would be the simple people who were not caught up in the world or themselves who would follow Jesus. Jesus once thanked God the Father that spiritual truths had been revealed unto “babes” and hidden from “the wise and prudent.” - Paul was to discover that not many who are “wise by human standards; not many [who were] influential; not many [who were] of noble birth” would follow God. Instead, Paul says, it is to the “foolish”, the “weak,” and the “despised” that the Kingdom would be revealed (I Cor. 1).

And the Gospel would continue in this pattern. The second century historian Celsus described Christians of his day as “wool-workers, cobblers, leather dressers, and the most clownish of [people].” And mission work still today in the far regions of the world finds the greatest gospel hearing among the lower castes of society.

Look at how the shepherds even responded to God's heralds. As they were “keeping watch over their flocks by night.” God's work and proclamation begins in a small and gentle way: Shepherds resting on a Judean hillside, napping and watching. But suddenly the episode spills beyond the edges of imagination's canvas: The night sky is flooded by the light of glory.

First there is one angel, then another and another, until finally there is a heavenly host, putting on an angelic display so terrifyingly spectacular that the King James Bible seems deeply understated when it reports that the shepherds “were sore afraid.”

But what is interesting about all of this is that the focus is not so much on the heavenly host. The objective reality of God's supernatural spectacle is not given nearly as much space as the subjective response on the part of those hooded boys in the fields.

An angel pronounces to them:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for ALL the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

And with the mixture of wonder, fear and amazement beyond what we today can comprehend, these ordinary people responded immediately. Notice that they did not say: “Let's go and see IF this thing has come to pass,” but instead “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

The simple respond in faith. Just like Mary's beautiful response to Gabriel and later in her Magnificat, which we heard sung by the choir so beautifully this morning. The simple people respond simply. Whereas, says Flynn, the "more sophisticated [person] might have sneered or explained the angelic visit in scientific jargon."

My friends, if you are here this morning as one who can explain all this away, who believes little about the Christmas story, perhaps you are here only because of your children – if that's is your answer – then you are missing out on Christmas. Because the miracle of Christmas is that God came to *you*, to *us*, all of us.

As we gaze upon the surprised faces of those simple shepherds, Luke wants us to find our *own* faces reflected there – to find ourselves once again filled with wonder, to ponder these things in *our* hearts, and to contemplate the possibility that *we*, too, might glorify and praise God this Christmas Eve, for all that we have experienced because of the life of the Christ child born that night.

It is, as New Testament scholar Raymond Brown states it, that the shepherds "are the forerunners . . . of future believers who will glorify God for what they have heard and will praise God for what they have seen." And so, we are not as much called to observe the angelic height of this story, but instead Luke invites us to explore for ourselves its depth.

Tom Long tells the story of a Christmas pageant at a small church in which the part of the innkeeper at Bethlehem was played by a middle school student. He was a quiet, polite boy, but was the kind of boy for whom the word "awkward" was an apt description – awkward in manner, awkward in social relationships, even awkward in size, his growing frame always pushing at the limits of his clothing. His peers like him well enough, but he was the sort of person who was easy to overlook, to exclude from the center of things.

When Joseph and Mary appeared at the inn, he stood . . . awkwardly . . . in the doorway, slumping a bit toward the couple as they made their request for lodging. He then dutifully recited his one line, "There is no room in the inn."

But as Mary and Joseph turn and walked wearily away toward the cattle stall where they would spend the night, the boy continued to watch them with eyes filled with compassion.

Suddenly, responding to a grace, which, though not a part of the script, filled the moment, he startled himself, the holy couple, and the audience by calling: "Wait a minute. Don't go! You can have my room!"

And when all is said and done, we learn that the meaning of Christmas does not follow the script of this world, but breaks in and begs, indeed implores for our continued response.

Is there room in your heart for the Christ child? Do not go believing that you are undeserving for such a life. For God demonstrated his love, a love which is for all of us, by appearing the lowest of the low. And God confronts you today – regardless of your station in life, regardless of your life choices and past, and God proclaims the good news: *For unto YOU a child is born. For unto You a Savior is given.*

And all you need to do is respond in faith, regardless of how awkwardly. All you need to do is make room for God.

Our text says that having found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger, the shepherds went and “spread the word concerning what they had been told about this child.” And they returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard.

Let this Christmas be for you just the same. Let this Christmas be a time of response and heartfelt praise to God for the great gift of his Son. Make room for him in your heart and let him work in your life, regardless of how ordinary you may feel. God comes to us again on *this* cold winter’s night that is so deep.

Nowell, Nowell, Nowell. Born is the King of Israel.

Amen.

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