

December 23, 2007
Fourth Sunday in Advent
Spokane First Presbyterian Church

Expecting Jesus Like A Shepherd

Luke 2.8-20

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How many of you ever were cast as shepherds in a nativity play? For those of you who appeared on some stage, large or small, in this distinguished role, I have just one question... a costume one: bathrobe, burlap, or a sheet? Was your shepherd's costume based on a bathrobe, burlap or a sheet? And did a pillow case figure anywhere into the outfit? Possibly as headgear?

For many of us I would venture to guess, our most vivid images of the Christmas story are not images of what actually happened all those years ago, but rather images of church pageants past when Mrs. Johnson's boy tripped on the steps or little Jimmy

Greene forgot his line and stood there speechless in his dad's blue bathrobe.

Now these images are wonderful, but this morning they also present a bit of a problem. You see all these bathrobes and burlap might get between us and what God wants to say to us today. And so this morning I'd like for you to set aside your images of Christmas pageants past and any televised Christmas specials, and in their place picture a rocky hillside on the other side of the world.

For you see, years ago I got the chance to go to Bethlehem and the fields we are going to hear about in our very first verse this morning look nothing like the fields around here. I can't remember the last time I've seen more rocks and rugged terrain, and at least when I was there the tufts of grass were few and far between.

Also in the service of historic accuracy, I want you to picture not a wet or frozen winter night recent ones around here, but a bone dry night after a long hot day. You see our best guess at why the shepherds were out with their flocks at night was because that this night took place during a season when it would have been too hot to graze them during the day.



So picture night among the rocks and a few tufts of grass. Imagine licking your lips in the dry air. And listen for God's word to you in Luke chapter 2, beginning with verse 8.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly army, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Have you ever felt like an outsider looking in? Seeing what is going on but without any sense of being included?

For most of my adolescence—at least beyond the wall of the church where my dad was a pastor—I felt like an outsider. This was, it turns out, largely because my dad was a pastor and I didn’t openly rebel. And apparently this made people nervous. I didn’t get invited to parties or dances. No one pulled me aside Monday morning nearly the lockers to tell me the exploits of the weekend. Other kids kept their distance. And this hurt.

In Junior High this hurt became particularly poignant when I worked for two years developing pictures for the school yearbook. Each day I would spend an hour or two in the dark in the school basement near the boiler room printing pictures of the basketball stars and the cheerleaders, pictures of the class presidents and those in their good graces, pictures of those voted most likely to succeed or those with the best smile or the best hair or the best something.

During this time I had a crush on Michelle Kotila who showed up in many of the pictures I printed. She was a cheerleader, class officer, and one voted to have stunning chances of future success as well as great beauty.

She also barely knew I existed, and wouldn’t have known at all except that I forced my way into a friendship with her younger brother in the hopes of courting her. Brilliant strategy, that.



I’ve mentioned Michelle before in my series on Kevin’s Dating Disasters. What I don’t believe I’ve told you before was that during those darkroom years in Junior High I collected a secret file of with every picture of Michelle taken during those years only to have that file discovered by two guys who were her friends and did some work in the darkroom too. And to my shame and horror they told Michelle about me and my secret file—taking great delight in my humiliation.

But more than just humiliation, that experience summed up those years. It reminded me of my place. I was outside looking in. High school wasn’t much different. And even in college after I did find my way

into a few social circles that seemed significant, I couldn’t shake the feeling of being outside. Maybe you know this feeling too.

But as I have spent time with our story today, I realized my experiences of feeling outside pale in comparison to the experience of the shepherds sitting in the dark and watching their sheep on this dry hot night. Why these guys could probably win the championship round of ‘How Low Can You Go?’ if we disqualify the obvious ringers of the period like lepers and prostitutes.

For you see, in Israel's agrarian society—despite King David's turn herding sheep as a boy—kids didn't grow up wanting to be shepherds. Shepherds were impoverished peasants-for-hire at best. And at worst? Try stinking, despised, ritually unclean and cut-off hillside gypsies likely to rob you blind if left anywhere near your valuables.

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

Their flock? Probably not literally. These guys couldn't afford their own animals. But someone had to raise the sheep for those who could... sheep (one) needed for the parties of those voted most likely to succeed, and (two) needed for the sacrifices of these same people in the temple.

How low can you go? Try shepherd. But then here is the stunning twist in our text today. It is to shepherds... these bottom-of-the-barrel mistrusted men working for far less than minimum wage that the angel of the Lord appears with good news of great joy for all the people. It is to these ultimate outsiders that God announces the birth of the Messiah... his son... with the armies of the heavens singing back-up vocals.

Any ideas who might get this good news of great joy today? Would it be the Dalits ('untouchables') in India? Would it be young factory workers in China? Or maybe the Mexicans who moved to New Orleans to do the jobs no one locally was willing to do? How about the migrants and illegals picking strawberries in California for my homemade sorbet?

Who might get the good news of great joy if the angel of the Lord showed up in Spokane? Would it be the guy up to three this morning washing the dishes from last night's company party in a back room in the Ridpath or the Davenport or the Red Lion?

I might have been an outsider once and still feel like one today, but can I claim on this eve of Christmas Eve to be expecting Jesus like a shepherd? I don't know.

You see I think they were expecting Jesus... expecting a Messiah. They were still Jews even if they lived at the bottom of the social barrel. They knew the prophecies. Yet I don't think... and this is key... I don't think that they expected the coming of the Messiah would make any difference for them.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe there is a place at the bottom where nothing ever seems to change no matter who is in charge. A new president? Who cares. A new king? Big whoop. The promised Messiah? 'So what,' I can almost hear the shepherd say. 'So what. Someone is still going to need to be out here chasing sheep. And I can't remember the last time I was invited to a party.'

So imagine their shock at the angel of the Lord standing before them and the glory of the Lord shining around them. Luke says they were terrified, not that this is much of a surprise. Everybody in scripture gets jiggy when an actual angel shows up, and the shepherd's terror tonight is par for the course.

It is just that along with their fear I'm betting they were also stunned. Why?

Because they are shepherds: only in their wildest dreams... dreams without any conceivable basis in reality... would the good news of great joy include shepherds. For hundreds of years their social status had insured they were exempt from good news, from great joy, from any role whatsoever in God's salvation history... until today.

But today... or tonight really if we are placing ourselves in the story... it is the last who are first... first to hear that "to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Today Isaiah 61.1 jumps off the page as 'good news is proclaimed to the poor.'

And look at what happens: after they sprint through the hills to Bethlehem and after they find the baby lying in a feed trough just as the angel promised, these ultimate outsiders forget their place. They forget their place and begin the 'great glad tidings' to tell to anyone who will listen.

And this matters. It really does. It matters to me and it matters to you. And here's why. I can virtually guarantee you... however far inside you think you've made it in life... that there is still a place in your life that you believe is outside the hope that comes through the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

**Where doesn't it matter if
Jesus is the promised
Messiah because it won't
change anything for us?**

There is a place in your life and mine where we feel cut off from any hope of a Messiah. And I believe the crucial gospel question for us today is where is this 'shepherd spot' in your life and mine? Where doesn't it matter if Jesus is the promised Messiah because it won't change anything for us?

Maybe it is a place of persistent sin in our life: a dark brokenness that we have fought for years to no avail. Who

cares if Jesus is the Messiah because this isn't going change, right?

Or maybe it is a place in our life of long abandonment: an emptiness where our parents were never able to meet us and where our spouse or closest friend seems as broken as we are. Who care if Jesus is the Messiah because this isn't going change, right?

Or maybe it is a place of ridicule and scorn where the best we had to bring was laughed at by the very one for whom it was to be a gift. Who cares if Jesus is the Messiah because what's done is done, right?

Where is this 'shepherd spot' in your life where it doesn't matter if Jesus is the promised Messiah because it won't change anything?

It won't change anything until the angel of the Lord stands before you and the glory of the Lord shines around you and you realize Jesus has come... not for everyone else and not for your dressed-up, superficial Sunday self... but for you as you really are: fighting that powerful darkness, crying in abandonment, aching from scorn.

And you choose to set out on a journey to see if it is true... to see if this Messiah born this day is truly for you... all of you, no conditions.

You know I find it striking that the sign offered as proof of God's salvation touching down isn't the appearance of the angel or even the armies of heaven singing "Glory to God!" It is just a baby wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

Clearly God needs a consultant from Hollywood to add some zing to the divine publicity approach. Or does God?

You know as I've talked to people about the moment their lives change as their sin or abandonment or shame are met by God's glory, rarely is it a moment of angel choirs. Far more often it is a manger moment of quiet release where as the Charles Wesley puts it the hymn **And Can It Be**: "My chains fell off. My heart was free. I rose, went forth, and followed thee."

This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

And they do.

These ultimate outsiders are placed by God... I believe laughing with delight as he does... at the very heart of our salvation story. Why these despised and ostracized vagabonds of the hills become the first evangelists of the New Testament—making known to all what told them about this child.

Expecting Jesus like a shepherd? Where is the place in your life where you feel cut off from any hope of a Messiah because up to now you have been sure that Jesus' coming won't deal with this?

What if it does?

Take scripture seriously and the truth leaps off the page. The very place we feel cut off from any hope of a Messiah... that place of persistent sin or long abandonment or deep scorn... is the very place Jesus meets us with good news of great joy.

All we need to do is what those first shepherds did. All we need to do is make haste to see this thing that has taken place which the Lord had made known to us... making us... ironically... the ultimate insiders who get to tell others the good news of great joy that is for all people... no conditions.

Amen.

Closing Charge: The very place you feel cut off from any hope of a Messiah is the very place this Savior, Messiah, and Lord longs to meet you today with good news of great joy. Will you choose, like the shepherds, to set out on the journey to see if it is true?

