

Sermon Series: Anxious

Sermon Title: The Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

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It wasn't until I became a parent that I began to question the wisdom of giving sticks to young children in church. Whoever thought that was a good idea? I think that's why I and most of my friends always wanted to be shepherds in Christmas plays. No halos, no fluffy wings with glitter, no cardboard crowns or long robes, just large sticks that quickly would become swords, or light sabers, or whatever weapon we could imagine them to be and that we could wield against our friends.

I recall one Christmas pageant where a couple of older kids had to literally separate two shepherds who had locked the crooks of their shepherd's staffs in a battle of epic proportions right in the middle of the play.

Luke tells us that the shepherds were the first to come and see the newborn King. Not the Magi or Wise men, not emissaries from foreign governments or people of position and power, not dignitaries and people of wealth or name, not Caesar or even Herod, and not even Bethlehem's religious elite. No, the first to arrive on the scene, at the birth of Jesus, were the shepherds, which is interesting because first-century shepherds were at the low end of the economic ladder. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, which is a collection of commentary and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: "No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds." "Shepherds were typically uneducated, usually poor, and since they lived among their animals in the elements they sometimes smelled, well, like a barn. Because most shepherds did not own land, they grazed their flocks on the land of their neighbors which sometimes created tension. (Imagine your neighbor's regularly turning their dogs loose in your yard.) Shepherds were tolerated but certainly not held in high esteem.

So, when Luke tells us that shepherds were the first to be invited to see the Christ child, first-century hearers would not have found this endearing, but shocking!"¹ What do you mean, Luke, telling us that shepherds were the first to see Israel's Messiah and King? Surely he is worthy of more than shepherds?

As Luke tells it,

"There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them. God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and

¹ Adam Hamilton, *The Journey*. p. 113.

joyful event that is meant for everybody, even for you: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Lord.” (Luke 2:8-11)

This news, of God coming in the flesh, of salvation, news of healing, liberation, and life breaking in, is even for you. Now if you're a person of means, a person of position in society, a person with a reputation, with some power and privilege, you're not surprised by good news, you're not caught off guard when a king's birth is announced to you.

You're accustomed to getting the invitations to the year's best events. You deserve the perks that come with your place in society. That's just how the world works. But this announcement calls all of that into question and turns custom and polite society on its head.

This announcement, to shepherds, to some of the lowest of the low, suggests that God sees the world in a way that is quite different from the way we've been taught to view the world. God, it seems, has different priorities. God has, what we might call, a preferential love and concern for those who are poor, and vulnerable, and living on the margins. And so, the most important news ever delivered, news about our Savior's birth, news that God had come among us in the flesh, was given first to shepherds. Not because there is something innately good about shepherds but because this is simply who God is - "...lover of the poor, protector of the downtrodden, savior of the lowly."² And this shouldn't surprise us at all. There are countless places in Scripture that point to God's preferential love and concern for the weakest and most vulnerable among us. Proverbs offers us this wisdom:

*Speak out for those who cannot speak,
for the rights of all the destitute.
Speak out, judge righteously,
defend the rights of the poor and needy.
(Proverbs 31:8-9)*

And the book of Psalms reminds us:

*who executes justice for the oppressed;
who gives food to the hungry.
The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind.
The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
the LORD loves the righteous.*

² William H. Willimon, *Pastor: The Theology and Practice of Ministry*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002, 128.

*The LORD watches over the strangers;
 he upholds the orphan and the widow,
 but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.*
 (Psalm 146:7-9)

And of course, Jesus teaches us,

*“Blessed are you who are poor,
 for yours is the kingdom of God.
 “Blessed are you who are hungry now,
 for you will be filled.*
 (Luke 6:20b-21a)

This is simply who God is and how God sees and engages the world.

Data suggests that almost 50 million U.S. citizens live below the poverty line, which is set at about \$28,000 annually for a family of four. Globally, the United Nations puts the number of poor people in the billions. And the number only continues to grow. Approximately one billion people on the planet live in extreme poverty, which means they live without adequate food, water, housing, healthcare, education, employment or dignity. “Material poverty, biblically speaking, is never good. It is an evil to be opposed. It is not simply an occasion for us to be charitable, or an opportunity for us to misquote the Bible and say things like “well Jesus said we’d always have poor people so there’s really nothing we can do about it so let’s move on.” No, poverty, is a degrading force that denigrates human dignity and ought to be opposed and rejected at every turn.”³

To be poor, is to be insignificant. It’s to be told that you don’t matter, that your life is not as valuable as the person’s life that has more than you.

And so, in announcing the birth of the One who is King of kings and Lord of lords to shepherds, to the poor, to those who were seen as unimportant, Luke is making the claim that has been made throughout Scripture that there is no one who is insignificant in the eyes of God. It’s why one of our core values here at Boone UMC is everyone everywhere matters. That’s not just some nice thing we say to make ourselves feel better. It is a reflection of the nature and character of the God in whose image we are made. To God, everyone... everywhere matters.

It is no mistake that when God goes looking for a people God chooses an old, childless couple, Abraham and Sarah, and sends them to the middle of nowhere to birth a nation. It is no mistake

³ John Dear, *Gustavo Gutierrez and the Preferential Option for the Poor*.

that when God comes among us in the flesh that God does so through the life of a poor, young, unwed teenager and her small-town husband. That God's son is then born in a barn and not in a palace or fine hotel, is no accident. It's no mistake that God announces this news first to shepherds. After all, when God went looking for a king for God's people, God called a shepherd boy named David and in his town the Good Shepherd was born.

This is who God is. As Buechner writes, "God is the comic shepherd who gets more of a kick out of that one lost sheep once he finds it again than out of the ninety-nine who had the good sense not to get lost in the first place. God is the eccentric host who, when the country-club crowd all turned out to have other things more important to do than come to the banquet, God goes out into the skid rows and soup kitchens and charity wards and brings home the least likely guests: The man with no legs who sells shoelaces at the corner, the old woman in the moth-eaten fur coat who makes her daily rounds of the garbage cans, the old wino with his pint in a brown paper bag, the pusher, the addict, the crazy guy standing at the traffic light waving his hand as the cars go by.

They are seated at the damask-laid table in the great hall. The candles are all lit and the champagne glasses filled. At a sign from the host, the musicians in their gallery strike up "Amazing Grace."⁴ That's who our God is, that's who was born in Bethlehem's manger – lover of shepherds and anyone who has ever felt or been labeled insignificant.

And who God is, should define who we are called to be as the people of God the Church. If we are, by the power of the Holy Spirit, the ongoing incarnation of Christ in the world, if we are the body of Jesus alive and at work in the world, then our life together must resemble his life, because it is he who is living in and through us.

So, the good news today, on this fourth Sunday of Advent and on the Eve of Christmas is a beautiful promise and a gracious invitation. The promise is, that no matter whom you are, where you've come from, how insignificant you may think you are, the promise of the good news, first told to shepherds, is that Christ, God's love in the flesh, is born for you, because no one is insignificant to God. And God has a preferential love and concern for the poor and the poor in spirit. So, the promise of the good news is that "God so loved the world: that He gave his Son, his one and only Son, so that anyone who trusts in him may have whole and lasting life." God so loved *you*; that his Son was born for *you*.

Which then means, that we, having received this promise, are also extended a holy calling to go into this community, to the places we live, work and play, and wherever we find the poor, the hungry, the lonely, the addicted, the imprisoned, the lost, the abused, and the broken, wherever

⁴ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy, and Fairy Tale*.

we find anyone anywhere the world has labeled insignificant, we are called to share this good news with them. We are called to let them know that there are no sheep that are insignificant in the eyes of the Good Shepherd. We are called to find our own Calcutta, and as Mother do the work of Christmas. Or as Howard Thurman so beautifully wrote...

“When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone
When the kings and princes are home
When the shepherds are back with their flocks
Then the work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost, to heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner, to rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among brothers and sisters,
To make music in the heart.”⁵

⁵ Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas*.