

15 December 2019

What's the Deal with the Shepherds?

Luke 2:1-20

Over the last two weeks, we have looked at those who bore witness to Christ's birth before the event: prophets and angels. Today we meet the first to witness the child after his birth. We read Luke 2, verses 1-20:

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

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. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When things become overfamiliar, two unfortunate things happen. First, we take amazing blessings for granted – things like love and beauty and life itself that should astonish us daily but that we seldom think about. Second, when we get used to something we no longer notice when that thing's really weird. A quick example: American polite table manners demand that the left hand is to stay on one's lap when not in use for cutting or passing dishes or something. Why is that? What's the point of eating with one hand when a utensil in a second hand would be really helpful? You don't have to do this anywhere else, but it's the rule in the United States. It's weird and senseless, but we don't even notice, maybe because we're distracted by chasing our peas around our plates, but more likely because it's just the way things are. Well, of all the stories in the Bible, the Christmas story is probably the most familiar, and sure enough, we don't usually ask questions about it. In fact, it's really strange. For instance, when the Son of God is born on earth to bring salvation to all humanity, God sends a host of angels to announce that world-

changing event to . . . a group of shepherds. Huh? Think about that. Of all the people to whom to announce the birth of a savior, why them? What does this teach us?

Well, first of all it teaches us that God is a terrible strategist. I can say that, because I've read a lot about strategy. It's one of the most popular subjects these days, at every level of society. We talk about military strategy, marketing and sales strategies, strategies for self-care and strategies for coping with crisis. We *love* strategy, and no one loves it more than the church. We have strategies for evangelism, for ministry, for missions. Our mission in the United Methodist Church – to “make disciples in Jesus’ name for the transformation of the world” – but without a strategy for implementation, that’s just a lot of words. So I’ve been to many strategy workshops. I have served on the District Strategy Team, and with that background I can declare with confidence that in no universe is this shepherd thing good strategy.

Shepherds in ancient Judea were at the bottom of the social scale. They were the ones whom other people were least likely to listen to or believe. In fact, these weren't just shepherds; these were the ones working the graveyard shift. These were the ones who hadn't even earned enough trust to get to work days. And God chose to send a host of angels to *them*? And, while we're on the host of angels thing, what a colossal waste of resources! Mary, Mother of God, only got one angel, but these unwashed, low-wage, farm hands got a sky full of them? If I wasted church resources on such an unpromising prospect I would have to answer to the council, and maybe get a talking to from my District Superintendent and the District Strategy Team, or even the Conference Strategy Board (yes, we have one of those, too). But that's what God did – blew a couple of centuries' worth of angelic visitation on some *shepherds*! What can I say? Someone from the conference really needs to sit down with God and explain how things work, because based on this example at least, God just doesn't get strategy.

Unless – another possible explanation, I suppose – unless God's intention wasn't to make the biggest splash and get the word out in the most effective way, as our plan would be. But that's not reasonable. Why wouldn't God want the message of the Messiah's birth to go viral? Why wouldn't God's strategy be the same as ours? But, just for the sake of argument, if that *weren't* God's plan, why might these shepherds have been chosen to get the first word? Okay, so *conceivably*, God meant to start with the lowest stratum of society. But if so, why? Well, it might have been to make a point – for instance, that God is the one who hears the cry of the lowest and least, whose concern is for those without power, whose ear is attuned to the prayer of the outcast and the friendless. If that was God's message, it would sort of make sense of the whole shepherd thing, but before just jumping to that conclusion we should probably look for some other sign that God's like that. If only there were some other evidence in the Bible to support this hypothesis. Like, maybe, if when God chose a special people to bear his blessing he chose not a great empire but a bunch of nomads. Or, for instance, if God had broken a great empire to deliver those people from slavery, then given them a law that says over and over, “You shall treat the foreigner well, because you were foreigners yourselves.” Or, for the sake of argument, suppose when God chose a king, the chosen one was youngest member of an insignificant family –the family shepherd, in fact. Stuff like that. And if only the Messiah who was announced that night had lived a life of reaching out to the dregs of society! For instance, suppose the Messiah had spent his time on earth with poor people, forgotten people, lepers, prostitutes, thieves, and other riff-raff. You see what I mean? The idea that God sent a host of angels to the shepherds so as to show the world that God is the God of the oppressed is plausible, but before we accept that, we

really should check to see if there's anything else in scripture that would support that idea. Like, you know, maybe *all of it*.

All of it. Start to finish, that's who God is. All of it. You see, if God sometimes doesn't seem very strategic, maybe it's because God's goals are different from ours. If God sometimes seems not to worry about physical resources, maybe it's because – well, because God doesn't. If God's actions don't always support our strategic projects for the advancement of the church, maybe it's because God's not especially taken with those projects. God's project – and it's hard to see how scripture could be more clear about this – is to lift up the humble, feed the hungry, deliver the oppressed, befriend the friendless. So that's where the angels went.

There is one more thing I want to point out in shepherd story, something new and unexpected. Last week, when I talked about angels, I stressed that they were messengers first and foremost. And these angels were. They brought a message to the shepherds. But then they did something we hadn't seen angels do before. They burst into songs of joyful praise before the God who hears the cry of the oppressed. Let's join them.