

The Shepherds and the Manger (Luke 2:1-20)

Misfits and outcasts - that describes the cast of characters we encounter in Luke's telling of the Christmas story. There can't a Christmas pageant or play without shepherds. It was to these misfits that God chose to announce the Good News of Jesus' birth – not to the mayor of Bethlehem, or King Herod. One would think with all these angels around, surely one would show up at Herod's Palace saying, "Hey, Herod. You're done. There's a new king in town." That didn't happen. Outcasts and misfits were the chosen ones this night.

Remember Mary's words in the Magnificat at the Annunciation:

God has shown to those who fear the Lord His mighty arm,

He confused the proud within their thoughts.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,

and raised the lowly ones on high.

He has filled the hungry with good things,

and the rich He has sent away empty.

The shepherds were religious and social misfits. Luke says they were "out in the fields." The work of keeping sheep made the shepherds religiously unclean. The temple priests wanted nothing to do with shepherds. It's ironic because the priest and temple assistants needed the shepherds who provided the sheep for the temple sacrifices. They were necessary, but they were shunned. They were religious misfits.

And they were social misfits as well, living rugged lives "out in the fields." You'd never find shepherds in 'polite' company. But the same city folk who shunned the shepherds needed them because they kept the sheep that provided meat for the markets and wool for clothing. Still - they were social misfits.

God announcing this Good News to misfit shepherds makes sense. Recall also that this baby whom the angels announced on that Judean hillside outside Bethlehem to this band of misfits would grow up to call himself "the Good Shepherd."

The announcement came first to these shepherds perhaps because we find in the shepherds that which represents us all - we're all misfits. The announcement came to a bunch of misfits because the Savior came to save a world of misfits. We are created for a relationship with God, and the announcement that the Messiah was born was our invitation to come home.

In Advent, we anticipated the coming of the Christ child, but it is more than that. It's also an anticipation of His coming again. The announcement has come, but, in another sense, there's still something missing. The pain, the sorrow and the grief of this life remind us there are still misfits around us, there are those who are searching for a place to belong. Our task, like that of the first shepherds, is to tell others this good news. Luke says, "When they saw this, they made known what had been told

them about this child.” **We’ve been to the manger. We’ve seen Jesus. Now, let’s go tell others what we’ve seen, what we’ve heard.** Let’s tell it to the least, to the lost, to the forgotten, to the outcast, to the misfit. **All they’re waiting for is the invitation.**

God chose to announce to the shepherds the wonderful news of the coming of Jesus because they were prepared for that event. Bethlehem and Jerusalem are just a few miles apart, separated only by some hills on which shepherds raised their sheep. Their minds were uncomplicated. They were not great theologians. They didn’t think of reasons not to believe. They just believed. When God spoke to them through angels they listened & accepted the news with great joy.

When they heard the message they were willing to step out & take a leap of faith. Shortly after the angels went back into heaven they said to one another, "Let’s go to Bethlehem & see this thing that has happened." They didn’t say, "Let’s go to Bethlehem & see if this is really true." They didn’t question God’s message through the announcement of the angels. They didn’t sit around & think about all the impossibilities & how it didn’t make sense. No, they just rushed to Bethlehem to see the baby.

It was a journey of faith, which doesn’t make sense to people who don’t know the message or share the faith. Before Christmas will ever be real to us, our journey must also be one of faith. We will never completely understand the wonder of God’s love, but in faith we must be ready to accept it.

So here we are. Some of us may be like the shepherds. We don’t have much, & we may not know a lot that the world considers important. But we are ready to listen to what God has to say.

God wants to make all of us into shepherds – people of faith. But that can only happen when we are willing and ready to receive God’s message...when we are willing to surrender to God. The invitation is extended to us tonight & God invites us to the manger, to know Divine love.

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