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# Gather 'Round and Spread the Good News

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## Gather 'Round and Spread the Good News

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Several years ago, my mom called with delight, “You won’t believe it. Without enough kids for the Christmas pageant, I played a shepherd.” My mom is about this tall...the quintessential grandma and her calm presence would be every pageant director’s dream to plug in alongside other fidgety shepherds.

We cast Christmas pageants with those we love, costumed in charming robes, and staged in warm sanctuaries. Enacting Jesus’ birth in this way whitewashes the shock of his impoverished origins.

In this Advent series, “Gather ‘Round the Manger,” we are looking at the faces and lives of those whom the angels called to bear the good news of Jesus’ birth.

In the Gospel of Luke, God acts through the least probable – Mary and Joseph are from the miserable town of Nazareth, filled with the equivalent of section eight housing, and register their heritage to a town of even less significance, Bethlehem.<sup>1</sup>

Listen with a fresh ear to the next group of people drawn into Jesus’ birth.

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Sarah Harris, 2012. “Why Are There Shepherds in the Lukan Birth Narrative?” *Colloquium* 44 (1): 17–30.  
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lsdah&AN=ATLA0001927584&site=ehost-live>.

*Dear God, we come before your holy word, confident we know this story. Silence in us any voice but yours so we may be startled by your truth. Amen.*

**Luke 2:8-14**

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

<sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

<sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!”

<sup>15</sup> 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.”

<sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

<sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Simple gestures communicate powerfully. An infant's smile sends a grandparent to the moon. When the preschoolers walk through the hall, their waves warm your heart. Teens learn small acts can divide and can tell you that your ideas are stupid with a silent roll of the eyes. For some the skill is refined in adulthood.

To be on the receiving end of an eye roll is to experience, viscerally, someone's disdain, to be condescended to, told you are boring, frustrating, or simply beyond words.

Almost a reflex, this one brief flicker arouses an intense response for the target and is rarely forgotten. As well, those who rolled their eyes are relieved to not have waste their breath and can claim innocence of speaking harsh words.

The writer of Luke's gospel knew the mere mention of "shepherd" would provoke an eyeroll.

The folklore of King David celebrates a young boy rising from a hill country shepherd to become king – one of the original rags to riches story. To the ears of refined city dwellers of first century Palestine, the mention of shepherds would have provoked far more than an eye roll.

Jewish writings of the time advised, “A man should not teach his son to be a donkey driver\*, camel-driver, sailor...or herdsman. For theirs is the trade of thieves.” <sup>2</sup>

No one aspired to become a shepherd; one fell to that job. Considered thugs, brigands, and smelling of manure, shepherds reeked of shame. They were not welcome inside the city walls, could not be trusted, and to these lowest of the low, those deserving of contempt, Luke claims the angels appear.

Those who heard Luke’s gospel might not have been fazed by a virgin’s birth but stunned to know God chose the very last people anyone would trust...shepherds. Those most excluded are the first in. They become the first messengers.

We need to hear the story of “shepherds first” every year as an in-our-face reminder of God’s presence with and God’s preference for those who others had been deemed worthless. This story seems particularly necessary in a time when we seem divide along more than just class or professional hierarchies.

Arthur Brooks, formerly the president of the American Enterprise Institute and now professor at Harvard, is an economist by training who studies mind-numbing data of economic trends, attitudes, and policies to distill present day truths.

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, p 20, Out of respect for the pulpit, I edited “ass driver” to “donkey driver.”

His research documents the average Republican and the average Democrat suffer the same assumption that their ideology is based in love and the opposing side is based on hate...comparable to centuries old divisions between Palestinians and Israelis. Each side thinks the other is evil and is therefore an enemy with whom one cannot negotiate or compromise.

To caution us about this toxicity, Brooks refers to what good marriage counselors know: the leading indicator of divorce is not anger or disagreement – both of those are healthy responses that can lead to growth. Instead, the highest propensity to divorce occurs when contempt for the other surfaces.

Contempt is defined as the “unsullied conviction of the worthlessness of the other.”<sup>3</sup> Contempt is dividing dinner tables, families, and inciting hateful actions from which there will be lasting damage. We are headed to divorce and yet our nation cannot be divided with one party moving out.

If we lose our interest and the ability to speak with those we see as opponents, conversations degenerate into silence, making way for violence...and we seem more and more immune to confronting life threatening aggression.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, “Our Culture of Contempt,” *The New York Times*, March 2, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/02/opinion/sunday/political-polarization.html>.

Brooks argues the way out of this mess is to find our common ground through “magnanimity, understanding, good humor and love.” It will also take courage.<sup>4</sup>

Brooks recalls a lesson his father taught: moral courage is not standing up to people with whom you disagree. Moral courage comes from standing up to people with whom you agree on behalf of those you disagree.<sup>5</sup>

Somehow, we need to open our eyes rather than roll them, to see the other as human first. Open our hearts to love before we open our mouths with hate. Can we see the other not as evil but as person just trying to raise children, save for retirement, and care for their sick? See the other person as God sees them and then muster to courage speak and listen with respect?

Tuesday marks the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, propelling the US into war with Japan. It caused me to remember Daniel Ichiro Ogata, someone I doubt you would have heard about.

Born in Stockton, CA in 1919, he recalls his father saying after the bombing, “Stupid Japanese, they should not have done that.”

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur C. Brooks, “More Love, Less Contempt – Arthur Brooks – *BYU Speeches*, April 25, 2019, <https://speeches.byu.edu/talks/arthur-c-brooks/more-love-less-contempt/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Arthur Brooks in conversation with Simon Sinek,” *The Arthur Brooks Show*, Vox Media March 24, 2019, podcast 8:48, <https://podcasts.voxmedia.com/show/the-arthur-brooks-show>.



## **Gather 'Round and Spread the Good News**

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Despite the family's patriotism, the US government moved them to a detention center near Death Valley. When they learned they would be settled in rural Arkansas, the rumors of mosquitos as large as sparrows haunted them. While away, their home was ransacked, and business destroyed.

Daniel Ogata remembers the train car pulling into the barracks and being told the barbed wire and armed sentries were for their protection – even though the guards pointed their guns into the camp.

After several years, Ogata received \$25 and a one-way ticket to Chicago. Although his skin color caused suspicion, he could work. To fill the desperate labor shortage, he found a job assembling explosives. Not even African Americans would risk working in a munitions plant. Among ethnic hierarchies, a man of Japanese descent ranked lowest. Ogata's life was deemed expendable. No one would care if he were blown up.

To make Chicago home, he tried with other Japanese friends to find a church. At every sanctuary door the ushers refused them, claiming, "There's no room" despite holding fists full of worship bulletins.

Eventually, Ogata and his friends made it to Fourth Presbyterian, the gothic cathedral Michigan Ave. At the start of worship, they were welcomed and seated in the pew rented by Cyrus McCormick. (This was back before stewardship pledges funded churches and you rented a pew

– paying more to sit in a desirable spot near the front of the sanctuary.) When you hear “McCormick pew” think Mellon pew.

Sympathetic to their desire to worship, Fourth Church’s senior pastor, made an unpopular decision to invite the Japanese visitors to worship in their own language at their chapel in the afternoons.

Legend has it that during the session meeting, he locked the doors, not allowing any elder to leave until they unanimously agreed. The FBI also extracted his pledge of personal responsibility for their behavior.

Neighbors of the church found this unacceptable and would mob, throwing rocks as the Japanese entered the chapel. In response, the minister stood on the sidewalk, in clerical robe and hood.

After the war, Ogata stayed in Chicago. He completed an undergraduate degree and then graduate degree, all in response to feeling God’s call. The Presbyterian church ordained him as a minister of word and sacrament. Ogata told me this story while we sat in his backyard in Grinnell, Iowa. His eyes were rather glassy with age, no longer able to drive or even read scripture. But the smile never left his face when he spoke of ministry.

For fifty-six years until his death The Reverend Daniel Ogata served rural congregations in Illinois and Iowa. Often these

were the littlest, least desirable locations, lowest paying...but that did not matter. He preached grace and forgiveness, proclaimed the Word of God, and ministered to people like those who had thought he was expendable human flesh.<sup>6</sup>

Advent asks us to wait and wonder, perhaps to ask ourselves the tough question: Who is the person you would least like to see arrived at the manger before you? The person who voted for the other party? Someone with intolerable views on abortion? Guns? Mask? Taxes? Do we have the courage to drop what we cling to so we can see God's image in the face of another?

This is how peace rises in our world. Not when the "powers that be" decide to loosen the shackles that bind or level the playing field. Peace comes into our world and our lives, when we let down our guard, when we look at the face of the vulnerable Christ child and all the others gathered there and decide to care for him. Peace comes into our world when we receive his good news and decide to tell others with all our being.

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Ogata, Interview by Jo (Preuninger) Forrest, Fourth Presbyterian Church Oral History, Grinnel, Iowa, April 27, 2006, and "Daniel Ogata Obituary," *Des Moines Register and Tribune*, accessed Nov 17, 2019.

<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/desmoinesregister/obituary.aspx?pid=172706830>



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