

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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The Christmas Message

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Many years ago, my mom called with delight, “You won’t believe it. Without enough kids for the Christmas pageant, I get to be a shepherd.”

Since my mom stood barely five feet tall, she would blend in with the youth. The shepherd’s head drape would camouflage the soft curls of her white hair and keep others from noticing the smile lines around her eyes.

Every pageant director would dream of plugging her quintessential grandmotherly calm alongside fidgety youngsters who fight over the stuffed sheep.

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.

It also diminishes the revolution God begins among those least capable of changing the world. Listen with a fresh ear to the next group of people drawn into Jesus' birth.

Luke 2:15-20

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.

Simple gestures can communicate so powerfully. An infant's first smile sends a parent to the moon. When the preschoolers walk through our halls, their waves melt our hearts.

As these little angels grow, they learn other small acts. By the time they are teens, they can signal that your ideas are stupid with a silent roll of the eyes.

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 within their intended target and is rarely forgotten.

And the person who rolled their eyes feels relieved having not to waste their breath and protect their innocence – they didn't say anything that would be demeaning.

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

Our modern-day naivete has swallowed the folklore of King David that glamorizes a young boy's rise from country shepherd to become king – one of the original rags to riches story. However, we focus on the power of his riches and not the poverty of his rags even though David is the same beloved child in all aspects of his life.

To the ears of first century Palestine refined city dwellers, 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."

No one aspired to become a shepherd; one fell to that job. Considered thugs 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.

Just as I was in the final edit for this meditation, I wondered how many people the angels may have asked who said, "no thanks," or "too busy," or "not my job."

We need to hear the story of "shepherds first" as an in-our-face reminder of God's *presence with* and God's *preference for* those whom others deem worthless.

We have elevated the familiar opening lines of the Christmas story with the warm glow of candlelight and surrounded it with fragrant garlands and gleaming tinsel. We place figurines of hand-carved wood or painted porcelain in nativity scenes. These delicate figures in no way resemble the original, gritty humans.

Luke's story describes the grimmest place. This is where our smelly, lowly shepherds hurry to greet Mary and Joseph at the manger.

These parents had journeyed from the miserable town of Nazareth. Imagine a place filled with the equivalent of section eight housing and they travel to a place of even less significance, Bethlehem.

The politicians and rulers of the day, Ceseas and Herod, played them like marionettes on a string, forcing them to

register in a census, which was nothing more than a ploy to tax and control.

As the Gospel of Matthew records, the only other people willing to risk themselves to the angels' message are foreigners from the east. They arrive, offer their gifts, and later flee for their lives before Joseph, Mary and the infant become immigrants themselves.

And yet – among these people, faith flickers most brightly. God entrusts to this collection of humanity the Messiah.

Tonight we live 2,000 year later in a world, with communities and homes as deeply divided. Isn't this the "good news of great joy for all people" that we need to hear today?

At a time when we feel as though we might be judged for who we love and what we value, it feels risky to venture into a

cross section of humanity. When we feel the weariness of trying to bridge these divides, but find they seem to deepen, we might recoil in fear.

Why does it feel as though the weight of healing rests on our shoulders? We cannot live this way. Toxic attitudes will poison us as surely as fear will further divide us.

The gift — the glory — of Christmas is that God has come to be with us in our discontent, in our resignation, and in the contempt that forms when the machinations of the powers-that-be fuel our fears. The gift and the glory of Christmas is that God shows us the way to heal from all that our frail, fickle prejudice compels us to do and not to do.

This good news becomes life changing news when we *all* start to live with Christ at the center.

Somehow we need to trust this ancient story and the promise given to us by Christ. With God's grace we open our eyes rather than roll them. We see the other as human first. We open our hearts to love before we open our mouths with hate.

After gazing at the Christ child, we start to see the other not as evil but as someone also trying to raise children, save for retirement, and care for their sick. With the grace of God, we live as Jesus taught. We listen with respect and muster the courage to stand up for the marginalized.

The Christmas story reminds us that none of us are perfect. Shepherds could not control anything. None who God called could command or order, fix or repair. This is how peace rises in our world and not when the *powers-that-be* decide to loosen the shackles that bind us or level the playing field.

Peace comes into our world and our lives when we let down our guard, when we say “yes,” when we look at the face of the vulnerable Christ child and all the others gathered there and decide love is stronger than hate.



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