

December 17, 2017

Bucyrus United Methodist Church

Let's Keep the Shepherds in Christmas

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Pastor Becky Smithey

Pastor Adam Hamilton tells about a time, years ago, while he was serving as a Youth Director of a church in Texas, that he took the Youth to do repairs at the homes of two elderly women living in a very run-down South Dallas neighborhood. Some of the other homes in the neighborhood were boarded up. Some had been torn down. Some were drug houses.

Hamilton writes, "These women had lived in this neighborhood for decades, but the world seemed to have forgotten them." He says that the women were excited when the Youth group arrived, and as they scraped and caulked and painted their homes, they made cookies and lemonade for the kids.

The following Christmas, Hamilton decided to take the kids back to carol for these two women. The Youth had taken up an offering to give to the women; they collected two hundred dollars for each woman. They signed Christmas cards and tucked the money inside.

Hamilton writes, "I'll never forget what happened at one of these homes. We emptied the bus, and 45 Youth stood around the doorstep of Miss Violet's home. We began to sing, and as we did it seemed the whole neighborhood came outside to see what was happening. It had been a long time since any of them had seen a caroler on that street.

Miss Violet turned on the front light and slowly opened the door as we sang. Then one of the Youth stepped forward and presented her with gifts and the card. The young person said, 'Miss Violet, we came to remind you that God loves you. These gifts are a sign of His love and ours, too. Merry Christmas!!!'"

Hamilton continues, "Miss Violet stood there, dumbfounded. Her hands shaking, she opened the card and read it, then looked at the money that fell into her hands. Tears began to roll down her cheeks, and she said in almost a whisper, 'Ever since my husband died, I thought God had forgotten me. Tonight, you reminded me that He still remembers I'm here.'"

I wonder if that is what the shepherds felt the night that Jesus was born and "a great assembly of the heavenly hosts...said, 'Glory to God in heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors.'"

These shepherds whom the Lord decided to announce the birth of His Son to...These shepherds who were the first people other than Mary and Joseph to see Jesus Christ...These shepherds who were the first humans to spread the good news of Jesus' birth were nighttime hired hands. They were minimum salary shepherds. They were at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the poorest of the poor. They owned nothing, and they were looked down upon by just about

everyone. They were thought to be untrustworthy, and yet God trusted them with the greatest news ever!!

Knowing all this about shepherds, many people have wondered—over the years—why the angel came to the shepherds first. Shepherds were considered too backward and simple. They were uneducated, unsophisticated, and unclean.

When I made my journey to Bethlehem a few years back, I was surprised to learn that this is still the way shepherds are perceived among many people even today. We even met a shepherd and his family who made their living by keeping a dozen or so sheep in and around Bethlehem. A person in my group asked the shepherd why God chose to invite the shepherds to be the first to see and celebrate the birth of Jesus. The shepherd responded instantly: “Because Jesus was humble and shepherds are humble.”

It is true that the way God chose to come into the world is radical...really, really radical! We are so used to the story, that it's easy to forget just how scandalous it is! I mean think about it. God came into human history completely helpless, as a newborn baby, and was laid in a feeding trough. From the beginning, God decided to trust ordinary human beings, not only with God's care, but with God's upbringing and from then to now—with God's message!

Think about how God could have come into this world. God could have done it any way God wanted. He could have come with power, and majesty, born into privilege—a member of the upper crust. But instead, God was born in a small town, far from the center of power. God was born to a young, poor couple—peasants really. The crib was a feeding trough, and the people invited to witness the newborn Savior of the World were shepherds, not kings. And by entering our world this way, God identified God's self with the powerless, the oppressed, the poor, and the homeless.

What are we to make of this? Could it be that a humility born of need is a prerequisite for entry into God's Kingdom? It seems to be God's theme, does it not?

Jesus looked at the wealthy, the leaders, the self-righteous and said: “The tax collectors and prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.” Jesus' first disciples were working men. Most of them were poor fishermen, with the exception of Matthew who was a hated tax collector. His followers were mainly the poor, the outcasts, the marginalized. Many were women and prostitutes.

A lot of people think Mary Magdalene might have been a prostitute whom Jesus saved...and if that's true, a former prostitute was the first person to see the Resurrected Christ and then tell others about it.

When the heavens opened and a great assembly of the heavenly hosts sang out, “Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those he favors,” King Herod was asleep. The Roman Generals were asleep. The rich merchants, the lawyers, the teachers, and the priests were all asleep.

God chose to have the angels sing to these humble folk, these shepherds, the weakest of the weak, the loneliest of the lonely, the poorest of the poor. God appears to have a special heart for the humble.

There is a physician named Gary Morsch who is one of the founders of "Heart to Heart," an organization that delivers medical supplies to impoverished countries and disaster areas. One of Gary's lessons in humility came when he went to visit Mother Teresa's mission in Calcutta. He and his team arrived to deliver medicine and to care for patients at the Home for the Dying and Destitute.

Gary, with a stethoscope around his neck, introduced himself to Sister Priscilla as a physician from the United States who was ready to help the sisters. She said, "Follow me, please," and proceeded to escort him through the wards of dying people to the kitchen, where there was a large pile of putrefying garbage. She said to him, "We need you to take this garbage to the dump. The dump is several blocks down the street." In an instant, the doctor was demoted to garbage man.

As Gary made trip after trip to the dump, he started to feel sorry for himself, resenting the fact that he had come all the way to Calcutta, delivered millions of dollars in medicine, was a physician with a stethoscope in his back pocket to prove it, and yet was hauling garbage!

After having done this for several hours, he noticed a small sign with Mother Teresa's famous words: "We can do no great things, only small things with great love." It was then that he understood why he had been assigned garbage duty. It was God's way of teaching him humility. Those who are humble are open to the eternal.

Historically, the great Christian revival movements have started among the poor and humble. Think of Saint Francis going to the poor in Italy...or John Wesley in England...and William Booth offering Christ to the poor of London to start the Salvation Army.

Paul seems to indicate that this is God's way as he writes to the Christians in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 1:26-28. "Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are."

And just as then, it still remains true that the truth of the Gospel is often found today in the lives and witness of people we would probably not think of as strong or powerful. This is a good thing to remember in the midst of a culture that puts so much stock in following the ways of the influential, the good-looking, the wealthy.

What does it mean to proclaim that Christ was born in a barn? Finding the Savior of the world in such impoverished circumstances was as amazing then as it would be now! Would we believe it if we were told to look for a newborn Savior in a homeless shelter or a truck stop? But here it is in the Bible: The Savior of the world, the Word made Flesh, takes on human form in the most humble of places...among the most humble of people.

In our Gospel Lesson from Luke we are told that the angel said to the shepherds: “This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger...and when the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, ‘Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened.’” We are told that “they went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard was amazed at what the shepherds told them.”

So here we have the rhythm of the Christian life just moments after Jesus’ birth. Others tell us about Jesus, we see with our own eyes and believe, and we tell others what we’ve seen. Then we return to our daily lives with joy, and changed forever!

Christmas is just about upon us, and there are many people who don’t typically go to church but are searching nonetheless for the “good news of great joy for all the people.” They’ve been searching at the mall, at their Christmas parties, even sitting in front of a decorated Christmas tree, but they still haven’t found Christmas. And they won’t find it unless someone plays the part of a shepherd, glorifying and praising God and inviting them to come and see what they have seen and hear what they have heard.

A woman named Ann was invited by her neighbor to go with them to the candlelight Christmas Eve Service at their church. Ann wrote, “If my neighbor hadn’t invited me to come to church, I would still be searching for a way to fill the hole in my heart that God now fills.” That was many years ago. Today, Ann has become a leader in that congregation.

We have a Christmas Eve Worship Service next Sunday morning with lots of music at 10:30a.m. and in the evening at 7:30p.m. Candlelight and Communion. Who is God calling you to invite to come with you to hear the “good news of great joy” this year?

Let’s keep the Shepherds in Christmas to remind us that a humility born of need may be the prerequisite for entry into God’s Kingdom. Let’s keep the Shepherds in Christmas in order to know that God has not forgotten us, that God still remembers we are here. Let’s keep the Shepherds in Christmas in order to remember that an invitation to “come and see” changes people and thus changes the world.

Praise God. Amen.