

Angels Among Us

“This Will Be a Sign - #morelove”

[Luke 2:8-14](#)

The Bible tells us there were two different kinds of people who came to visit Jesus when he was born in Bethlehem.

According to the Christmas story found in the gospel of Matthew, the first visitors to greet the baby Jesus were wise men from the East. They came because they were astrologists, and through their careful study of the stars, they had become convinced that a new king was to be born in Bethlehem. So, they went to pay tribute to the new-born king.

However, according to the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke, the first visitors to the baby Jesus were not wise men but shepherds, who were living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. As we have heard from today’s scripture reading, they came because an angel of God appeared to them, out of the blue, and delivered to them this good news of great joy for all people -- *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”* The angel was joined by a choir of angels who sang praises to God, singing *“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those he favors!”* When the angels left, the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and baby Jesus in the manger, just as it was foretold.

For a long time in Christian church history, the story of the wise men from the East was more popular than the story of the shepherds from the fields. Then, after the Reformation some five hundred years ago, the shepherd’s story began to surface in Christmas hymns. It probably slipped into American popular culture through Linus’ speech in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special.

I can understand why the early church favored the Magi story over the shepherd story. I am sure it sounded much better to say that wise men bearing precious gifts from a foreign country came to meet Jesus than to say that the first visitors to the Christ-child were a bunch of shepherds, who bore nothing but their testimony of angels appearing to them in the fields. But, the story of the shepherds as the first witnesses of the birth of Jesus has a profound theological meaning for us to ponder.

Then, who were the shepherds? And, why did the honor of receiving the announcement of Jesus’ birth go to them?

In our consumerist society, we have sentimentalized the shepherds. On Christmas cards and other artwork, they look clean cut, sometimes appearing cute and cuddly. They look like very nice, respectable people. However, these positive images of shepherds are far from the reality of the first century because they stood at the bottom rung of the social order.

First, shepherds were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, shepherds were “unclean” people. Their line of work prevented them from participating in religious feasts and holy days. Someone had to

watch the sheep at all times. This meant that when the rest of the people were making trips to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the Temple, or participating in the annual festivals, the shepherds were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. Because they were not able to fully participate in the religious life of the community, they were looked down upon -- even though it was not their fault.

Shepherds were also borderline social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were greeted with suspicion. They were often accused of stealing. If something came up missing, villagers would say, "It must have been those shepherds." Along with tax collectors, shepherds were labeled as "sinners," a term people used to describe those whom they despised. Shepherds were not even allowed to serve as witnesses in court because their word was not considered trustworthy. And on top of all this, they really did not have much contact with other people because most of the time, they were living out in the fields, away from town.

How amazing then that the Christmas story in the gospel of Luke highlights the role of the shepherds as the first witnesses of the arrival of our King! It is to the shepherds, the outcasts of society, those deemed to be sinners, that God's angel was sent to with the news of the birth of the Messiah! Think about it. This is the only announcement of Jesus' birth recorded in the Bible, the only invitation from God that was sent to the world to come visit the newborn baby Jesus. And, it went to whom? Yes, our official representatives to the miracle were shepherds - a bunch of uneducated, smelly, dirty, untrustworthy, social and religious outcasts. God's messenger bypassed all the rich, powerful, and important people in Rome and all the righteous and pious religious leaders, like priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem, and they went straight to the lowly shepherds to deliver the joyous news of the Messiah's birth!

Today's scripture reading says nothing about any special qualifications that the shepherds had to be the first and only recipients of Jesus' birth. There is nothing to indicate that they were more pious or righteous than anyone else. On the night of the angels' visit, they weren't found in deep prayer or some other form of religious devotion. The shepherds were just doing what they did each day and night, tending their sheep! The visit from the angels was not something they had anticipated or could have anticipated. In the middle of what appeared to be an ordinary night, these ordinary shepherds encountered something extraordinary.

Yes, God's grace came upon ordinary people who were in their ordinary places doing ordinary things, totally unexpectedly, as a complete surprise. Once again, we see here how God works. As the prophet Isaiah announced long ago (Isaiah 55:8-9), surely, God's thoughts are not our thoughts, and God's ways are not our ways. Speaking about this different way of God, the apostle Paul wrote to Christians in the city of Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:27-29) that: "... *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, so that no one might boast in the presence of God.*"

The Messiah whom the Israelites were waiting for was a mighty warrior king who would liberate Israel from the bondage of foreign power. However, the king of kings who came to save Israel was a shepherd king. A king who would serve and tend to his people instead of ruling over them. What an upside-down story that Christmas brings to the world!

Then, God chose the lowly shepherds to receive the news of the birth of this shepherd king. Interestingly, you might remember that it was to Bethlehem where Samuel was sent by God to find a future king for Israel, the one whom God had chosen. There, the prophet found David, the youngest son of Jesse, who was tending to sheep in the fields. Who knows, perhaps, the shepherds in today's text were in the same field where David was out shepherding his sheep.

The story of the angels' visit to the shepherds in the gospel of Luke ends with this report (Luke 2:20): *"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."* What they had witnessed that night was the birth of the great shepherd, who would care for his flock -- preaching good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, and setting free those who are downtrodden. The One who would carry them in the valley of the shadow of darkness and death, and who would ultimately, as the Good Shepherd, lay down his life to save their lives.

Friends, this is the good news of Christmas. Born to us is the Good Shepherd who leads us into life. As is written in the gospel of John, *"...God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life."*

In closing, I'd like to share with you a beautiful poem that was written in 1885 by Christina Rossetti. It captures this love of God that is so graciously poured out onto creation:

Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
stars and angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
Love incarnate, Love divine;
Worship we our Jesus
but wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token;
love be yours and love be mine;
love to God and neighbor,
love for plea and gift and sign.

Thanks be to God for this gift of love for us and for all! Amen!

