

Day Twenty-three

Scripture:

Luke 2:8-15; Psalm 78:70-71; Psalm 23:1

Reflection:

Why would shepherds be the ones chosen to hear the angels' joyful announcement of "good news that will cause great joy for all the people?" The Bible never directly answers this question. But a couple of real possibilities come to mind.

Although shepherds were not a despised vocation (despite what you might have heard), they were certainly not wealthy or powerful. They were part of the ordinary groups we might now call manual laborers or blue collar. While the Gospel is certainly for the lowest of sinners, as well as for the rich and powerful, it is easy to miss the great in-betweens. The ordinary people who are neither despised nor admired.

We spend a great deal of time focusing on the needs of the most disadvantaged. Special programs for the neglected or the mentally challenged can be found in nearly every community. We also provide for the most gifted, whether in athletics or in academic abilities. It is easy to give little thought to those who disappear into the fog of simply being average. In fact, to suggest to a family their children are average might be heard as a kind of put-down.

God brings the Savior to Bethlehem to bring salvation to the worst of sinners, as well as to the most righteous. But the simple shepherds remind us He is also sent to bring Good News to those between worst and best. Most of us are,

despite our protestations, extraordinarily ordinary. The good news for all people is good news for us. Good news for our neighbors and our families and all the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve.

That's certainly one great lesson we might draw from this part of the Christmas story.

But there might be something else at play in sending the shepherds off toward Bethlehem to search for this newborn. It's no surprise we might have missed it, since we see God so often meeting our spiritual needs. They are told this is the promised Messiah, the Root and the Offspring of David. He is, in fact, the virgin-born Son of the Most High and the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. We know that the whole history of mankind will be forever changed by the "glory to God in the highest" proclaimed by the hosts of heaven.

While all that is true, is it possible there's another mercy hiding in plain sight? Could there be other reasons God would have for sending shepherds to the stable?

Acknowledging the cosmic significance of that night does not require God ignores the practical. Think about where Mary was and what this experience must have been like. She's far from home. Far from her family. She's giving birth in an overcrowded town packed with strangers. It was not just being forced into a shelter of last resort to endure the long hours of labor and birth. Mary had to go through this without the support of a mother or sisters or neighbors all serving as an expected community of midwives. She was in a stable, sure. But, in a way no Jewish girl would have anticipated for such an event, Mary and Joseph were alone.

But, then, God sends angels with a mission for a group of shepherds. Of all the men God could have sent, think of what it meant that He sent shepherds. There was no vocation more experienced and knowledgeable about births than shepherds. Although no one would have dared call them male midwives, shepherds were about as close as you could come in that world. While the birth had taken place by the time the shepherds arrived, there would still have been much to be done for the mother and, of course, for the child.

Also, don't forget one other fact: The Bible tells us these shepherds were local. They were all from in or near Bethlehem. They had homes there. They had wives and mothers and sisters all living close. Did you ever notice the Bible never suggests Mary and Joseph spent another night in the stable? Is it any wonder Matthew tells us, a little later, they were living in a house (Matthew 2:11)? As the shepherds went out and spread news of what had happened, God surely transformed that town of strangers into a community of neighbors and friends.

The image and language of shepherds is deeply woven into the ongoing life of the church. God called a shepherd-boy to be a King who would be shepherd to the whole nation (Psalm 70:70-71). God calls the shepherds of Bethlehem to welcome the promised Son of David and Savior of the world. In the church we ought to expect many will still call their local leaders shepherds. We are more used to hearing shepherd in its Latin form: pastor.

Family

For this teaching activity you will be talking about a shepherd's crook (or staff). If you have a walking cane or a

walking stick, either would work nicely. If you do not, find a good image or picture of a shepherd's staff and use that, instead.

The ornament we are putting on the Jesse Tree today makes us think of shepherds. When you see shepherds in paintings or movies about Christmas, many times you will see them holding one of these. Do you know what these are called?

People still use things like this today. Why is that? What do you think people do with these (walking sticks, canes)?

- Walking: They help people walk. Sometimes people get injured or maybe they are not as strong as they once were. But you also see people use these when they go hiking, especially if they must hike up and down a lot of rocky hills. Shepherds around Bethlehem had to walk up and down hills all day long. They even had to be outside walking with the sheep at night.
- Defending: what else could you use a big stick for? Well, if you had to, you can use it to hit a wolf or even a dog that might scare or even hurt one of the sheep. That's also true. The same stick that helps you walk up and down hills can also be used to scare off animals and keep the sheep safe.
- Protecting: But, what about this part (point to the curved part of the staff on the ornament or picture). What would they use this for? They could use this to reach out and hook it over a sheep's neck and pull it back into the flock. Maybe it was wandering too close to a big cliff. Or maybe it was just going off by itself, where you could not keep it safe. So, the same stick

that could be used to strike a wolf could also be used to gently pull a lamb out of danger and keep it safe.

This is why people like to think of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. In fact, King David writes a psalm that begins with the words, "The Lord is my shepherd." Jesus loves you so much he was willing to go to the cross for you. Like a good and loving shepherd, Jesus wants to walk with you every day. Like a shepherd he wants to guide you where it is safe. And, He will protect you and keep you safe.

And, so, can you see how God sending the angels to tell the shepherds about Jesus shows us about God's love? God wants to love and take care of you, just like He wanted to take care of Joseph and Mary and the baby.

Prayer:

Great are you, Lord our God, both King of the Universe and Shepherd of our souls. We are like sheep always in need of a shepherd.

We can see in the shepherds to whom the angels appeared how wonderful it is that Jesus was coming into the world. We can also acknowledge that when You sent them searching through the dark streets of Bethlehem, it is because Jesus is Good News for ordinary people like shepherds.

Heavenly Father, we want to be like those sheep that recognize the voice of the Good Shepherd and follow that voice. Now and always, help us follow Your Son, our Shepherd, who loves us so much He has laid down his life for us. Amen.