

Christmas, From the Shepherds' Point of View

Luke 2:1-20

Tappahannock Presbyterian Church

December 22, 2013

Its tough to be an outcast. You know, no matter how hard you try, people still look down their nose at you. Or maybe they won't even stay anywhere around you.

Some people are outcasts because of things they've done. That new neighbor who's an ex-convict? Watch the neighbors avoid him - or her! Got to make sure to say "her" nowadays! Or if the neighbor's kids are real nuisances: trouble at school, trouble in the neighborhood – *that's* a family that gets a bad label. Too bad! They might actually be good people. You know, it used to be that *divorced people* were treated as outcasts, but thank God that's changed! – or about half the population would be lost.

Some people, though, are outcasts for other reasons. It might be because they don't look like the rest of us. They might have some *personal habits* that make you want to *run* when you see 'em coming! Or they might just be “lower class,” and sometimes folks get uncomfortable around those kinds of people. It isn't just about money, either. Rock stars and professional wrestlers are rich, but I bet you never thought about hanging out with them!

In Jesus' day, shepherds were major-league outcasts. Go through any checklist of reasons why people might be outcasts, and these guys seem to have it all. In terms of income: LOW. In terms of having a prestigious job: LOW. Personal habits? TERRIBLE. Hygiene? NONEXISTENT. Reputation? Oh yeah – THE WORST. You can add one more to the list. Fitness to come to worship with you? TOTALLY UNFIT. The synagogue might throw 'em out, that's how unclean they were considered to be. Being a shepherd

was almost like being punished. They handled animals in all kinds of circumstances; they did it outdoors, where it's impossible to stay away from dirt and, well, *dung*. Regular baths just weren't available out there in the field. All of this rendered them *unclean*, unfit for a pious Jew to be around. And it certainly made them unfit to sit in the synagogue or, heaven forbid, the Temple. No matter how bad they wanted to do it, worship was out of the question, normally, for shepherds. Since we know how central worship was to their faith, these shepherds were the lowest of the low, because they couldn't take part, most of the time, they couldn't join with others in praising God. So they lived their lives out there in the middle of nowhere, for the most part; isolated; alone, separated (so they thought) from God.

So that's the kind of life you'd have, if you were a shepherd. When you're sitting outside in the middle of the night, watching a bunch of farm animals, and you know all of these realities about yourself and your situation, I wonder if you ever do think about God? And if you do, I wonder WHAT you think? What's surprising is that, oftentimes, the lower class people are the most patriotic people. To be a patriotic Jew of that day and time, whether or not you were a shepherd, meant looking for the Messiah. It meant expecting the Messiah. Who knows how often that topic came up, on those cold nights around the campfire and the woolly flock? Here's the crazy thing: King David was a shepherd, and I'm sure the shepherds remembered the time when all Israel gave thanks for him, coming out of the fields as God's chosen. God even promised that the Messiah

would come from his family line. David was considered a shepherd of his people, so shepherds were respected, even revered. Man, how times had changed!

So here are our shepherds, huddled around a fire, maybe passing around a little something-something to keep 'em warm. If you were there with them, you wouldn't expect anything much to happen. It'd be a night for dozing off, maybe, for resting in between times of checking on the sheep. Nothing to worry about out here. Nothing much to do; nothing but darkness and sheep out here in nowhere-land.

Suddenly, the night was changed. It wasn't dark anymore! It got real bright out all of a sudden, and there! right in front of them, was an angel of the Lord. The glory of the Lord shone all around them; if they'd have had sunglasses in those days, they'd have had to put 'em on. Well, if they'd have been able to; those shepherds were so scared, I don't know if they'd have been able to do much of anything constructive. Except to listen. After the standard disclaimer that angels give, you know, "do not be afraid", came a message that would change *everything*. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is Christ the Lord." I'm sure the shepherds were more stunned than ever. Could it be? All of those centuries of hoping – was this it? *Finally?* You couldn't blame these guys if it *felt a little FUNNY* – why were THEY getting the word *out here*, in the middle of nowhere? This wasn't the way they'd figured it! The angel probably woke em up from sleep; haven't you been roused from sleep before, and had to scramble to get your senses about you? All of us have; but NONE of us was ever faced with something like this. The

shepherds went through all of that mental and emotional scrambling, and I'm sure they wondered what to do next, as they began to adjust to the light.

Well, angels, when they pay a visit, seem to be one step ahead of us. This angel gave them a sign, and sent them looking for it. "You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger," he says. I know you're all used to the more traditional "swaddling clothes"; NRSV translates this way so you'll understand that the baby was wrapped in bands of cloth, that were designed to restrict the movement of his arms and legs, just as most parents did in those days. So this part wasn't unusual. It was the *second* part that was intriguing: this baby would be lying in the place from which animals ate! Well shoot! buncha droolin' animals been here. That'll make the baby unclean! What in the world kind of king is this?

And then came another one of those Christmas miracles. Though this was all very shocking, what with an absolute ARMY of angels appearing and singing, far bigger and more powerful than any choir in *our* Presbytery, and then suddenly disappearing; in spite of all this, these shepherds, these outcasts, they knew in their hearts what to do. "Let us go NOW to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place!" they say. They went in a BIG hurry – and they found everything just exactly as the angel had told them. There the baby was, wrapped up in those bands of cloth, but more important, lying in that nasty manger. The shepherds told Mary, and Joseph, and everyone around them with the child, what they had heard: that this infant was the long-awaited Messiah. What's more important is, THEY BELIEVED. We read that they returned glorifying and

praising God, for everyone to hear. But there's something funny here: Mary didn't have the same reaction. The original language tells us that Mary heard the shepherds' words, that this her son was the Messiah, and she hoarded them, kept them to herself, and kept turning them over and over in her mind. We don't hear of her glorifying and praising God. Of course, she'd just finished delivering a baby, without the benefit of modern painkillers, so she might not have felt like doing much. But these shepherds were sure carrying the day!

I suppose that their simple lives and faith were one of the reasons God chose to reveal the birth first to them. I remember the words of Jesus, how we can't receive the kingdom of God unless we receive it like a little child – simply. But there's another reason why these shepherds heard the Good News first: they were a symbol of who the Good News was meant for. See, the people expected this Messiah to be from the best Davidic family, from the wealthy, kingly class; his coming would be announced in the grandest royal fashion. You could expect trumpets, a parade, probably a big feast or festival, all sorts of pageantry. That's what you do for kings. At least, that's what us mere mortals do. By sending the angel to these shepherds, these lowest of the low, God showed that THIS Messiah, this king, was for EVERYONE - no matter how poor or despised. That's the message for us today: that this Messiah is for each one of us, no matter how low we sink, or how quote-unquote "poor" we become, in things or in spirit—no matter who you are. So you know what that means to us, the ones to whom Jesus has been revealed? We have to do like those shepherds, and tell everyone we meet

this Good News. I can think of no better gift to offer our newborn savior at Christmas than our own promise to tell everyone the Good News.

After all, what a gift we have received! We have received a savior, and the assurance that we'll live with him forever. Jesus Christ, our savior, has come! So let's you and me go from here, imitating the shepherds, glorifying and praising God, and believing. And as we do, let us remember the words the angels sang: Glory to God in the highest, and on earth – peace.

Let us pray. O Lord, we got the message. Now give us the courage and excitement of those shepherds, who threw all caution to the winds, who disregarded their status in life, to go and spread the Good News. Let them be our inspiration, so that we may serve you as well as they did; in the name of the one whose birth we celebrate, Jesus our Lord, AMEN.