



Sermon for Christmas Eve
Rev. Jonathan Stepp
December 24, 2019

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

A young boy was desperate to receive a bike for Christmas but his family was going through some hard times and his parents weren't sure they could afford to buy him one. So, his mom told him to write a letter to Jesus and ask Jesus to send give him the bike. The boy sat down at the kitchen table and started writing: "Dear Jesus, I've been perfect all year long and I'd like to have a bike for Christmas." Then he paused and realized that he really hadn't been perfect and he probably shouldn't lie to Jesus, so he started over: "Dear Jesus, I've been pretty good this year," but he knew that wasn't true either. So he started writing a third time: "Dear Jesus, I did the best I could," but he knew he hadn't.

Suddenly he had an idea: he ran to the living room, grabbed the statue of Mary out of the Nativity scene and rushed back to the table to write the letter: "Dear Jesus, bring me a bike if you ever want to see your mother again."

I have to admit, this joke seems just a little off-color for a Christmas eve service – it seems slightly inappropriate unless we are aware of something in Luke's Christmas story that is, itself, a little bit off-color. I'm referring to the presence of the Shepherds.

In our day we tend to have a very romanticized view of shepherds: to the extent that we think of them at all they generally conjure up images of cute sheep, beautiful pastures, or Christmas pageants with rosy-cheeked children dressed in oddly fitting costumes. But 2,000 years ago, when Luke wrote his gospel, Shepherds were generally thought of as much less respectable. For the most part shepherds were at the bottom of the social hierarchy. If a family owned sheep it was usually the younger children, who weren't strong enough for other work, that were given the job of tending them. When sheep were being raised commercially it tended to be seedier characters, vagabonds without families or decent jobs, who signed up for the work of shepherds.

And yet Luke includes them in his story. He includes shepherds who are, at best, people with little else to contribute to society besides tending the animals and who are, at worst, people that you might not want in your house around your good silver. For the original readers of Luke's Gospel their presence in the story would have added something a little bit off-color to the whole scene.

But it's even more than that, isn't it? It's not just that there are shepherds *in* the story. It's the fact that shepherds are *central* to the story. They are the very first to hear the good news that the Son of God has become human and come to live among us. The angel doesn't go to the Temple to announce the good news to the High Priest, it doesn't go to the palace to announce it to the king; the heavenly host is not singing from the rooftops of Rome, proclaiming good news to the Emperor Caesar Augustus. When God wants to announce good news for all people, for the whole world, he sends his angels to the lowest, the outsiders, and to the poor. The good news isn't announced to the cool kids' table in the lunchroom it's announced to the nerds that no one takes much notice of.

Luke's readers would have been surprised to learn this detail and perhaps even a bit shocked or scandalized, just as we might be at hearing of child who contemplates felony kidnapping against the Blessed Virgin.

It's interesting that this account of Jesus' birth begins with a proclamation *by* the highest member of ancient Roman society – a proclamation by the Emperor that all the world should be counted – and it ends with a proclamation *to* the lowest members of ancient Roman society – shepherds watching their flocks. This contrast is an integral part of what God is revealing to us in Christ. What is being revealed is that God loves everyone, from those that we regard as the highest to those that we regard as the lowest. As the angel says, this is “good news of great joy for *all* the people.”

And yet, because the proclamation of this good news comes to the lowest people in their society, there is something else being revealed to us in the coming of Christ: if we try to force God to choose between the high and the low he will choose the low every time. If we try to force God to choose between the rich and the poor he will choose the poor. If we try to force God to choose between the cool kids and the nerds he will choose the nerds.

So, let us resolve once again this Christmas, and in the new year to come, that we will honor our Lord and Savior by not trying to force him to choose. Let us resolve to follow in the footsteps of Christ and seek to love, honor, and respect *all* people – those whom society respects and values as well as those, like shepherds, who

are viewed as the least and the lowest among us. After all, regardless of where we began in this world – in a palace or in a manger – and regardless of how our lives have turned out – joyful or difficult – we are all headed to the same destination. We are all headed through the narrow doorway of death and then into the fullness of the life of the world to come, the life that Jesus called the kingdom of heaven.

In that light, I'll leave you with this image, which you may remember, from *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. Early in the book Scrooge's nephew Fred drops by his office to wish him a Merry Christmas, to which Scrooge replies, "Humbug!" And then Fred says these memorable words:

Christmas is the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creatures bound on other journeys. And therefore, uncle, though it has never put a scrap of gold or silver in my pocket, I believe that it has done me good, and will do me good; and I say, God bless it!

May God bless you and those you love this Christmas with sure and certain of hope of his love for you and for all people and may you be given the grace to follow in the footsteps of Christ and as you love, honor, and respect *all* people.

Amen.