

THE UNLIKELY RECIPIENTS OF THE GOOD NEWS
a sermon by Dr. David Palmer, United Methodist Church of Kent, Dec. 11, 2016
based on Luke 2:8-20

Most everyone knows about the shepherds in the Christmas story, but few people today grasp the real significance of their presence in the story, because in typical pictures of Christmas the shepherds are depicted as quaint. But in the first century Roman Empire, shepherds were not thought of as quaint. If you have ever been in the sheep barn at the county fair, you know what sheep are like—smelly and not very clean. Shepherds spent all their time out in the fields with sheep, and so shepherds were thought of in the same way as the sheep. Nobody wanted to be around shepherds, and the work of a shepherd was considered to be one of the most undesirable of jobs. To get a real sense this story in a modern context, you would have to recast the story and imagine that one night under a starlit sky, there were garbage collectors out working along the street, picking up the trash, when suddenly there was a bright light and a chorus of angels proclaiming the arrival of the Savior. Then you begin to sense the clash between the mundane conditions of the people in the story and the glorious proclamation that comes from on high.

But even the garbage collector image does not quite capture it, because we do not really look down on people who work for trash hauling companies, whereas shepherds in the first century were a marginalized social class; they were not entirely accepted by the larger society. So to get fuller sense of the story, we would need to recast it again and imagine perhaps migrant workers toiling in vegetable fields who suddenly become the recipients of the revelation of God. The story of the shepherds connects with two prominent Biblical themes—that God lifts up the lowly, and that God brings the outsiders in. You can see both of those themes not only in the story of the angels choosing shepherds as their audience, but also in what happens as the shepherds go forth to visit the newborn Messiah.

The shepherds are told by the angels, “To you is born this day in the city of David [that is, in Bethlehem] a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” [Luke 2:11] The word “Christ” is the Greek form of the Hebrew term “Messiah.” The shepherds are told that the Messiah has come, and has come for them—“to you is born . . .” say the angels—and then they are told where they are to find the Messiah. The angels declare, “This will be a sign for you; you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” This element of the story is again so familiar that it is often not given much thought; but to the shepherds the very idea that the Messiah was to be found in a feed trough was a world-changing revelation. The term Messiah means “God’s anointed king.” Kings are born in palaces and laid on soft blankets and fine linens; kings are not wrapped in ordinary cloths and dropped in the straw in a feed trough for a cradle. Yet the shepherds find it to be exactly so.

Thus the shepherds—lowly people, shunned by others because they were filthy and smelly, considered to be outsiders—find that the Messiah has been born in the lowliest of conditions, in a dirty and smelly place, as an outsider, for whom there was “no room in the inn.” In this moment they realize that the Lord has become one of them. The Messiah has joined fully with them.

Here is a central aspect of the good news of Christmas. No one is too lowly for God. No one is unclean. No one is an outsider. God in Christ connects with us all, to embrace us with mercy and love.

You have probably seen the General Electric commercial, “Ideas Are Scary,” which features a shaggy creature that is abhorred and rejected by everyone. In the commercial, the creature represents scary ideas that are not welcome in a company, but the imagery calls to mind how people sometimes are not accepted, and the effect that it has on someone to be unwelcome, and shoved aside. There are people in our society who feel very much shut out. But what a difference unfolds when the door of welcome is opened. The commercial concludes with the idea that GE is place that accepts and nurtures new ideas; but certainly we can think of the much larger calling of the church—to be a community that welcomes people, inviting all people into the love of God, in which everyone’s gifts can blossom and unfold.

This kind of welcome is epitomized in the Christmas story, and it can be seen in both of the stories about the first visitors to the infant Jesus. In the story of the shepherds, people who were looked down upon are the first to be invited by God to visit the newborn Messiah; and the next group to arrive is yet another bunch of outsiders. The wise men will appear in many respects to be quite different from the shepherds—they are rich while the shepherds are poor, they are highly educated while the shepherds are not, they have power and influence in their society while the shepherds have none—but in one respect the wise men are in the same situation as the shepherds: they are not really accepted in this land. In the land of Judah, the wise men are seen first and foremost as Gentiles; and because they are not Jews, they are regarded as spiritually unclean. If they were to approach the temple in Jerusalem, they would see a large sign telling them to stay out, under the penalty of death. But when Jesus, the Messiah, is born, these wise men are welcomed in.

It is not by chance that shepherds and later wise men are featured in the Christmas story. The welcome they receive into the presence of Jesus proclaims a message later expressed by the apostle Paul: “Now in Christ Jesus you who were once far off have been brought near . . .” (Ephesians 2:13) It is a message that would culminate in the cross, where Jesus would offer himself for us all, so that no matter how sinful or unworthy we may feel ourselves to be, we can be brought by the grace of Christ into fellowship with God.

This morning [at the 10:30 hour] our Children’s Choir is presenting a musical that features the story of the shepherds. The children will sing songs with titles like “Shaggy,

Smelly Sheep.” The musical is a lot of fun; but the story of the shepherds also brings us to us a powerful and eternal message. It says that no matter where you are in life, Christ welcomes you now to enter his presence—to know the mercy, the uplifting love, and the life-giving power of God. And it says that when we look toward others in the world around us, we are called to show forth that same spirit of welcome—so that we are a part of the story of God’s compassion and grace.