

Title: *For Us?*

Text: Luke 2:8-20

It's interesting to study and to learn apologetics. How it is that we know that the Christian faith is true and how can we present evidence to other people so that they may also place their faith in Jesus Christ. One interesting bit of evidence I would proffer this morning is the sheer unlikeliness of the story.

If you were making up a story or you were trying to found a new religion, how would you go about it?

I was made aware one time of a national Christian ministry that made the tactical, strategic decision that they would go after the "popular" kids in the high school thinking that if they could get the "cool kids" they'd get the rest of the kids, too. In some ways, I can see how that might seem to be a smart tactical move, but it runs counter to the way Jesus operated. He seemed drawn to the poor, the lowly, the outcast, the excluded.

There's a song that says, speaking of Joseph,:

*"Sure he must have been surprised
At where this road had taken him
'Cause never in a million lives
Would he had dreamed of Bethlehem
And standing at the manger He saw with his own eyes
The message from the angel come to life
And Joseph said... Why me, I'm just a simple man of trade.
Why Him, with all the rulers in the world?
Why here inside a stable filled with hay
Why her, she's just an ordinary girl.
Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say,
But this is such a strange way to save the world.*

If there were a verse to the song written for Mary, she may ask, "Why would you send these guys when I've just given birth?"

I don't know of very many mothers who have just given birth who would welcome a bunch of shepherds barging in on her. Maybe when you think of shepherds, you think of Linus in the Charlie Brown Christmas special. Cute, cuddly, wholesome, wearing his father's bathrobe with a towel on his head.

That's not a very accurate depiction of shepherds. It's hard for me to imagine this because I don't have daughters, but I do have neices. Think of someone in an occupation who if your daughter started dating them, you would really not like it. You may not go so far as to try to break them up, but you wouldn't be disappointed when they came to a parting of the ways. Maybe the job just wasn't a very prestigious position, the pay and the hours weren't all that great. It may be good honest work, but not that well respected, like some may disparage "burger

flippers” today.

Maybe there’s an occupation that seems kind of shady or unethical and no good, decent, honest, reputable person would ever involve himself in that. If you could take all of those feelings and misgivings and roll them into one, you’d come close to the stigmatized attitudes people had toward being shepherds. It wasn’t a career choice that one aspired to. It was a job you could get if you were hard up for work.

It doesn’t seem like these guys would be the most strategic people to be the first ones to hear about the birth of the Messiah, but God chose a strange way to save the world. We looked last week and last night at Luke’s telling us about Mary. We’ve heard the story so many times, we hardly need to be reminded about it. You have the young couple making their way to Bethlehem and the child is born and is wrapped up tight like all new babies are and right there in the *kataluma* or the extension of the relatives’ house where the animals would be kept, she gave birth to her son.

It is interesting that in Matthew’s gospel we have the account of the Magi coming from the East to worship Jesus. These were intellectually and spiritually curious men who were looking for something. They were willing and able to pay a high price for their pursuit.

You think of the Magi like you would think of theology or philosophy professors today. Educated, sophisticated, interested in new ideas and able to discuss them and sound like they know what they’re talking about.

Nobody really would think that about a bunch of shepherds. They’re from the lower end of the socio-economic spectrum and not on any social elites A-list. If there were democracy back then and a politician were mounting a campaign, shepherds weren’t the first people that the politician would go after. He would think, “If I can lock up the shepherd vote, I’m sure to get elected.”

Why were shepherds thought of that way? They weren’t the sharpest, the brightest, the cleanest, the most attractive. If they had any ambition or any worthy contribution to make to society, they would be doing something more upstanding than being a shepherd.

It was hard for them to be religiously observant because they worked all the time with their flocks. They wouldn’t have had a lot of witty repartee at a dinner party because they spent all their time with sheep. Sheep were thought to be dumb, nasty disgusting animals so anyone who hung out with sheep all the time must be dumb, nasty and disgusting, too.

But were are the angels on that first Christmas night? They were right there telling the good news to a bunch of dumb, nasty, disgusting shepherds. Isn’t it interesting that the one whose birth they announce would even go so far as to call himself the good shepherd. The ones who he wants to care for and to lead his people would also be called shepherds.

Is it any wonder then that there would be those who would be thought of as good shepherds who would genuinely care about the sheep that were entrusted to them and there would be hirelings who were only in it for a paycheck?

Jesus said of himself, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for

the sheep. ¹² The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. ¹³ The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. ¹⁴ "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me"

While these shepherds were out under the nighttime sky engaging in who knows what kind of coarse conversation or making rude bodily noises or just trying to stave off boredom, the angel of the Lord appeared to them and said, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Of course the angel would say, "Don't be afraid." That's what angels always say. These guys were at the lower end of the totem pole and they weren't used to having powerful, influential people say nice things about them. It's just natural that when you're out on the hillside at night and this angelic being shows up, you're going to be afraid especially when you're used to being beaten down."

Even the fact that this would be for all the people would be special to them. These guys aren't used to being included in anything. Do you ever feel that way? Sometimes, it's just because we're throwing a pity party. I'm pretty good at it, actually. Other times, though, there is that deep gnawing sense that I'm out on an island somewhere. There aren't people who really care about me. I don't fit in. Why would anyone include me? Why should anyone include me?

Max Lucado says, "Had the angels gone to theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching. Had he gone to the successful, they would have first looked at their calendars. So he went to shepherds—Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough."

Michael Ramsden, a co-worker with Ravi Zacharias, shared the following true story about a minister from Iran. As the minister was driving with his wife, they stopped in a small Iranian village to purchase some water. Before entering, the minister noticed a man holding a machine gun and leaning against the wall outside the store. The minister's wife looked at the man's face and the gun, then put a Bible in her husband's hand and said, "Give that man this Bible." Her husband looked at the man—his menacing beard and his machine gun—and replied, "I don't think so." But she persisted: "I'm serious. Give it to him. Please, give him the Bible."

Trying to avoid the issue, the husband said, "Okay, I'll pray about it." He went into the shop, purchased the water, climbed back into the car, and started to drive away. His wife looked at him and said, "I guess you didn't give him the Bible, did you?" Looking straight ahead, he replied, "No, I prayed about it and it wasn't the right thing to do." She quietly said, "You should have given him the Bible," and then she bowed her head and started praying. At that point, he turned around and told his wife, "Fine! If you want me to die, I will."

When the minister returned to the store, the man with the machine gun was still standing against the wall. The minister approached him and placed the Bible in his hand. When the man opened it and saw it was a Bible, he started to cry. "I don't live here," he said. "I had to walk for three days in order to get to this village. But three days ago an angel appeared to me and told me to walk to this village and wait until someone had given me the Book of Life. Thank you for giving me this book."

The minister became a courageous witness for Christ. Eventually, along with many other co-workers in the Iranian church, he was martyred for his faith. Who would think to include a mean looking Muslim man in the middle of Iran who is probably a terrorist or a militant? God would. Who would include the nerdy kid at school that sits by himself at lunch because he really doesn't have any friends? God would. Who would include a drug-addict or an alcoholic who says, "I've done too many bad things and hurt too many people, why would ever include me"? God would. Who would include you? God would.

After the angel makes the announcement, the shepherds are treated to a concert unlike any other that has ever been before or since. It's just right that they should be. This is the most significant event that has ever happened. We talked a little bit last week about the virgin birth. Writer Madeleine L'Engle said, "The virgin birth is far less mind-boggling than the power of all Creation stooping so low as to become one of us."

There's a poem that says:

*"More light than we can learn, More wealth than we can treasure,
More love than we can earn, More peace than we can measure,
Because one Child is born."*

When you ponder the greatness of it all and the significance of what's happening here, what's left to say, but Glory to God. The highest glory to God.

In Hebrews, the writer says, "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.³ The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.⁴ So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.⁵ For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?⁶ And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."

As much as we talk about inclusion, the angels aren't included in what we're included in. Peter says, speaking about the gospel, "Even angels long to look into these things."

More important, though, "On earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Maybe you've been in turmoil so long you don't know what it would be like to be at peace. Maybe when you think things are going reasonably well, and you find out they aren't. Maybe you're uneasy this Christmas because you know that after a period of relative calm comes a storm. Jesus Christ

came to show us God's glory. He came to say to people who are regarded as insignificant, you matter. You're included!

The Shepherds left and spread the word to anyone who would listen. When's the last time a bunch of rough, tough, blue collar guys like that got all excited about the birth of a baby?

Mary, though, pondered all of these things in her heart. Left to dream about all that would lie ahead for her.

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