

Supporting Roles: The Ordinary Shepherds

Luke 2:8-15

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In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I bring 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

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This Advent we are preparing for Christmas by spending our Sundays taking a closer look at the characters huddled around the manger in our nativity sets. We are asking ourselves the question – why, if God could just show up on his own accord – would he choose to involve these kind of people in the story about when heaven met earth in the person of Jesus?

Today we are focusing on the supporting role of the shepherds. Where John the Baptist (who was our focus last week) makes headlines in all four gospels, we only find the shepherds mentioned in Luke. I am reading from the second chapter. Listen with me for the word of God.

Just after worship today, at 12:00 in the Wood Fellowship Hall, the children of our church will be enacting the Christmas story in our annual Christmas pageant.

Always a highlight of this season - there will be sheep with cotton-ball ears, wise men with cardboard boxes full of fake frankincense, Mary and Joseph – holding the baby doll filling in for Jesus, and there will be shepherds – wearing their bathrobes and tennis shoes and carrying their shepherd staffs.

I've been around a Christmas pageant or two in my time, and have seen some productions – if the cast is a little older – where Mary and Joseph will actually wrap a real-live baby in swaddling clothes and lay him in a manger.

But I have to tell you that at no point in my Christmas pageant experience have I seen a real-live shepherd take part in the play.

Could you imagine what it would be like if an actual, middle-eastern shepherd decided to make a cameo in our Christmas pageant? If a rumped, smelly, scraggly-looking man sauntered into the fellowship hall and took his place up on the risers with a group of bathrobe-clad first graders to look after an unruly mass of kindergarten-aged sheep?

I'll tell you what would happen. Officer Gary McFayden would be on that real-life shepherd like white on rice. Real shepherds belong in the fields with the sheep – not around everyday people.

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It is probably because of our experience of too many cute first-graders in too many Christmas pageants, or our familiarity with beloved passages of scripture – like the 23rd Psalm, or the tenth chapter of John – it is probably because of these experiences that we have softened the picture of a typical shepherd in our mind's eye.

In reality, the job of a shepherd was not a highly sought after profession – nor was it a highly regarded one. Shepherds held about the same kind of social standing in their time as a graveyard-shift truck-stop employees do in ours. You're glad they're minding the store, but they are not the kind of people you are going to invite over for supper.

It's not just that a shepherd's life was unglamorous – how would you like to live in a field and watch after meandering sheep? – but shepherds were also looked upon with some suspicion. Say a shepherd told you that two sheep had gone missing over the night – how would you know whether a wolf had come to snatch away two of the flock, or whether that shepherd had taken the sheep to market to pad his own wallet and maybe even satisfy his hunger with a little sheep stew?

Shepherds were just so ordinary. Think about the event that drew Joseph and Mary away from their hometown of Nazareth to go to Bethlehem. It was a census – decreed by Caesar Augustus. "I hereby declare that all the world should be registered!" Caesar said. The shepherds were so ordinary that they didn't even get counted in the census. In fact, like a lot of people in our day who live and work in the fields, the shepherds didn't want to be counted. They preferred to live their lives on the outskirts of town away from the center of attention.

And yet on the night that our Lord was born – right under the nose of powerful people like Caesar Augustus, and Governor Quirinius, and King Herod – on that unique night, the angels – or the messengers of God – appeared on a Bethlehem hillside to share the Good News.

It's hard to imagine what that must have felt like, isn't it?
To be working a graveyard shift in the field, in the dark, in the cold, and then to be thrust face-to-face with an angel and with God's glory.

Fredrick Buechner takes on the persona of a shepherd in that field and gives us some words to us experience the event. He says,

“That’s how it was on this night...like finally coming to – not things coming out of nowhere that had never been there before, but things coming into focus that had been there always. And such things! The air wasn’t just emptiness anymore. It was alive. Brightness everywhere, dipping and wheeling like a Hock of birds. And what you always thought was silence stopped being silent and turned into the beating of wings, thousands and thousands of them. Only not just wings, as you came to more, but voices – high, wild, like trumpets. The words I could never remember later...but something like... ‘By God, it’s good brothers! Everything. Everything!’”¹

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Luke simply says, “An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And they were terrified!

“Do not be afraid!” the angel said. “For I bring you good news of great joy for all the people...”

I have so many questions.
Why the shepherds?

What the angel shared was news that changed the course of all time and history. God had entered into the world in a person! Emmanuel...God with us. No more would we need to wonder if we were on our own. This was the long-hoped for messiah – our Savior – who had been promised by the prophets. This was news that needed to be shared – it needed capable evangelists to share it – and of all the people in all the world, the angels selected shepherds?

Why not a group with more influence?
Why not someone more respectable?
Why not someone with more credibility?

¹ Buechner, Fredrick, an excerpt from “The Birth” in *The Magnificent Defeat*.

More, why did the angel make it a point to clarify that the Good News was for all the people?

Wasn't that obvious?

Who would think otherwise?

Could this be part of why God sent messengers to the lowly instead of to the powerful? Because the powerful had a habit of hoarding the Good News and making some people feel that they didn't belong? That they weren't the ones that God came to save?

And what was God's glory doing in a field anyway?

There was a place for the glory of God – it belonged in the temple – where things were holy and decent and in order.

Why did the angels comingle the glory of God with the ordinary?

The glory of God – our theologians tell us – reveals the essence of God's very being. It is what all of us – ultimately – long for. We are – all of us – hungry, Augustine would say, restless, to experience God's glory. And, so often, we look for it in the wrong places.

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Over the past two weeks the pace of life has picked up, hasn't it? We're still two weeks away from Christmas, but I've noticed that my heart has quickened from its rhythm at the end of November. There are lots of things that drive the uptick of our activity of this time of year – the parties, the get-togethers, the decorating, the baking, the gift-buying, the preparation for houseguests and family. But one reason why we do all of these things, I think, is that we are searching for the holy. In this time of year and around the celebration of Christ's birth, we are yearning to see God's glory.

We don't always know this, of course. We can get so busy that we lose sight of the reason for our busyness. But that is what is really going on – that's the feeling that we are after – an experience of the holy, of God's glory.

I don't know how Christmas preparation goes in your house, but in mine the expectations exceed the ordinary. We don't want to have an ordinary Christmas. We prefer our Christmas to be merry! I don't know where all the pressure comes from. A lot of it is self-generated, I'm sure. What can we improve this year that might it more special than the last? Some of the pressure comes from the world around us – why can't our house look as perfectly splendid as our neighbors? What will happen if somebody else's kid gets the new iPhone before mine? How can I impress my in-laws who will be in town?

The truth is – we fear the ordinary.

What could be worse than being known as ordinary?

To be an ordinary husband or father or friend

Or an ordinary employee

To leave an ordinary legacy
Or to be an ordinary disciple?

We push ourselves to be more than ordinary.
To achieve.
To make a mark.
And that works in a lot of areas in our life.
But it doesn't work when it comes to our relationship with God.

Here's a little secret about God's glory – in as much as we want to – we can't make it happen. No matter how hard we work to capture the essence of God, God's essence is not something we can conjure or control.

God's glory happens to us.
We come into contact with God's holiness on God's terms.

And we might learn something by remembering that in the story of how God came to be with us as Emmanuel, God continued his pattern of using the most ordinary means and the most ordinary messengers.

Shepherds, mangers, babies...

And every-day disciples like you and me.

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As we walk the next two weeks toward Christmas and the pace continues to quicken, may we train our eyes to scan the landscape for the ordinary people and moments that God might use as opportunities to announce the Good News.

Amen.