

**CAST OF CHARACTERS:
A Mess of Shepherds**

*Luke 2:1-20 Auburn First United Methodist - Auburn, Indiana
December 24, 2020 Dr. Mark Owen Fenstermacher*

If you've ever been a child, known a child, or have raised a child -*I think that may just include all of us*- you know that children have a favorite story or two or three. They may have thirty or forty books on the bookshelf in their bedroom, but when it is time to read a book, and they are allowed to choose, they will often go back to the same two or three or four books. No matter how many times they have heard them read in the last week or so.

Sometimes, when reading a story to our our grandchildren, I will try and steer them to a new book, a new story, but often my efforts fail and I'm told, "No, read *this* story, Grandpa!"

I'd get grumpy about that but then I have *my* favorite stories. I'll almost always choose "Goodnight, Moon" or "The Runaway Bunny" or "The Sailor Dog" or "Wherever You Are".

Certain stories we never get tired of hearing. And the interesting thing about our favorite stories, as children, often say something about who we are as adults. Ask someone what their two or three favorite books were when they were children, and you can sometimes see those stories -like flecks of gold found in a formation of rock- in their life as an adult.

So here we are on, on Christmas Eve, at the end of a year unlike any other year we have ever lived. On this night, when we are in the habit of gathering in packed sanctuaries which are half-lit buy candlelight, most of us are at home. Maybe by ourselves. Maybe with one or two or three other people in the apartment or house, and yet we are very aware of those we have been missing for too long. Although this is the night when we usually gather in churches large or small to sing carols and hear the nativity story read, tonight most of us -outside of New Zealand and a few other places- can't do that.

There is so much that is different this Christmas Eve from any other Christmas Eve, and yet the story is the same. It's the same story. It's the same amazing story. And we want to hear it again.

Yes, we've heard it before. Many of us can't remember a time in our lives when we didn't have some kind of familiarity with the story of the woman named Mary, the carpenter named Joseph, the pregnancy, the difficult trip from Nazareth in the north country to the rocky highlands of Judea in the south. Many of us can't remember a time when we didn't know something about this story of a couple unable to find a decent place to stay, where young Mary would be able to give birth. We've heard the

story of the arrival of the child, wrapped in swaddling clothes, who was placed -most likely- in a stone feeding trough. We've heard the the story and marveled at the claim that the Son of God, the Savior of the world, was born in a stable, cave or lawn shed, with the pungent smell of livestock in the air. We've heard this story before. And we want to hear it, again.

This is a story we seem to never get tired of hearing. In fact, I've learned to love the story more and more as the years have gone by. Details of the story speak to me in new ways.

And unlike so many stories we love when we're children, this story is true. This story is real. This story isn't make-believe. A child may ask, "So is there a real Beauty and the Beast?" and we must say, "No." A child may ask, "Are there real talking tea pots and candle-holders?" and we must say, "No." A child may ask, "So where is the room with the lady whispering 'Hush?'" and we say, "It's not a story, honey." A child may ask, "So will a pigeon ever drive my bus?" and we'll say, "No, sweetheart, pigeons don't talk and they don't drive buses. It's just a story."

But this amazing story of a king, a Messiah, a Savior, whose love can heal the world and do a new thing in us even no matter how ragged or lost we are, is true. This story is real.

The story of Jesus, the story of nativity, isn't only real but it is still happening. The story still goes on. The love story keeps growing. There are new developments, twists and turns, new characters, new surprises and new lessons. It's still happening!

So here we are tonight, after a year unlike any other, reading this story. Hearing this story. Asking for this story. Because there is no other story quite like it!

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Matthew, who wrote his account of the life of Jesus for a largely Jewish Christian audience wanted to stress that Jesus was the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures. He wanted anyone who read his story to see Jesus as the fulfillment of the promise of a Messiah...a ruler from the line of King David whose kingdom would be unlike any other. Matthew tells us about visitors from the East who came bearing gifts fit for a king.

In Matthew, his gospel full of Jewish prophecies and talk of a Messiah, we have royal visitors from the East.

Luke, however, wrote his story of Jesus for a largely Gentile or non-Jewish audience. Many of the people Luke had in mind as he wrote his account of the life and ministry of Jesus were struggling at the bottom or edges of society: his gospel is peopled with tax collectors, Gentiles, lepers and prostitutes.

Luke tells us about angels speaking to shepherds. It's an interesting detail. Shepherds were considered, by many in first century Palestine, with suspicion. Because of their

work they were unable to keep the Jewish kosher dietary laws or offer the proper sacrifices in the Temple.

They were not only ritually unclean, but they were somewhat transient: here today and gone tomorrow.

They had a reputation for being a little unpredictable, a bit odd, dirty and stinky.

I remember how people in my small, Indiana town would talk about the carnival workers who would come to our town every summer. They didn't look like us. They didn't sound like us.

You made sure your house was locked up when "they" came to town. You watched where your kids were when the carnival rolled into town. When you played one of the games on the midway, you kept one hand on our wallet and an eye out for a scam. The town would add an extra patrol officer or two to keep an eye on these unclean folks from god-knows-where. That's what it was like when the carnival came to town. And that's what it was like

-sometimes- in first century Palestine when shepherds showed up. Lock up the house. Hide the valuables. Keep your family close. Watch your wallet.

Luke tells us the shepherds were living in the fields. The shepherds are keeping watch over their flocks by night, and that is when an angel of the Lord suddenly stands before them.

I've got a theory about this. There may not be another preacher or priest or Bible scholar in the world who would given any credence to my theory, but here it is: I have a hunch that the an angel of the Lord showed up to other people but other people were too busy to notice. I just think that is the way it often is. I think the angel of the Lord may have shown up on Wall Street but brokers were looking at the ticker. I think the angel of the Lord may have shown up on Capitol Hill but political pros were busy making phone calls to donors and reading the latest polls from back home in Indiana or Georgia or Montana. I think the angel of the Lord may have shown up in the church office or the synagogue office, but the priests or preachers were working on a timeline for the next congregational visioning process.

The angel of the Lord shows up to the angels, when they are out counting sheep and studying stars, doing anything they can to stay awake, and so they notice when the angel of the Lord shows up in the middle of their group. They are paying attention!

The angels tell the shepherds not to be afraid. Those are almost always the first words out of the mouth of every angel worth his or her salt: "Don't be afraid." Then, the angel tells the shepherds about the birth of a child who will be a Messiah -a Savior- for all people. This is a joyful thing, the shepherds say. This is a hand-clapping, foot-stomping, whistle-ripping joyful thing for every corner of the earth and every square yard of the cosmos and every person whether righteous or rascal.

The sign that this child is special and all of this is a God thing, strangely enough, will be an ordinary, simple thing: "You'll find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Then, just to finish the scene, there is an angelic choir pounding out some Kirk Franklin gospel music, or something that must have sounded like the Staple Singers or Aretha Franklin.

The shepherds race off to Bethlehem. Luke tells us they "went with haste." They find the child, his mother and father, and they tell the couple what the angels have told them. Which must help Joseph and Mary as they seek to understand more fully what God is up to.

After their visit to Bethlehem, the shepherds go off singing and dancing and acting -in the eyes of some, I am sure- like fools who are out of their mind with joy.

I love this story because this is a story about a God who comes to the earth to heal the earth, to make things right and whole and beautiful, and that healing love is offered to us. I love this story because it isn't done but it goes on. And I love this story because angels visit shepherds, and these ragged, unclean, somewhat suspicious rascals end up in the middle of the story. Which tells me that there may be room in God's story, God's kingdom, for a rascal like me.

I was about five years old when my sister, Heidi, was born. We were living in Harrisburg where our Dad was doing his surgical residency. I remember the day they brought Heidi home from the hospital. I was outside the brick apartment building where we lived, and I -along with a friend- was making mud clods and throwing them up as high as we could against the solid brick wall at our end of the building. We stayed away from the windows, of course, but we were making a pretty good mess of the brick wall at the end of the building.

My parents got out of the car, carrying this bundle wrapped up in a white blanket, down the sidewalk and past my buddy and me. We stood there in silence, watching this royal procession, our arms and feet covered in mud.

After they were inside the apartment for a few minutes, one of my parents came out to get me. They told me that I needed to get cleaned up if I wanted to see my new sister. I remember doing my best to get cleaned up. But even after I tried to get as clean as I could get, I was still pretty dirty.

I was told to take off my shoes and leave them outside. Then, I was invited into our parent's bedroom where Heidi had been placed on the middle of the bed, on the comforter, and her white baby blanket. I remember standing about three feet from the bed, looking at this new addition to our family, and I just remember this bundle of white light and perfection. "Don't touch her," one of the adults told me. And then, like some supplicant at a royal court, I was excused. I left the room. It's probably my imagination

but it seemed to me that they couldn't get me out of there and away from her quickly enough.

The Jesus story is a different story: Jesus comes for people who are ragged, imperfect, and have some kind of mud all over them (or maybe the mess is inside them). We are welcomed, invited to linger and told there is a place for us with him.

Oh, and there is more to the story of Heidi's arrival. Three days after she had been brought home from the hospital, my parents told me that I said, "Isn't it about time?" They responded, "About time for what?" And I said, "Time to take her back to the hospital."

They told me she was staying.

And so it is: the Messiah is born. He isn't going anywhere. He's staying with us. The story goes on.