

Characters of Christmas: The Shepherds 12/3/2017

“So.... what is it that you do....?”

No doubt we have all been asked this question before.

It is perhaps the most common question that is asked when first getting to know someone.

And then we answer..... we say *“I am a student....Or I am an Engineer, or I am a homemaker.....or we say I work in Finance or I am retired or I am in sales.....”* (*Pause*)

And then.....whether we like it or not....I believe there many people who make assumptions about us based on how we answer....

I see this firsthand all the time.....when people ask me what I do and I share with them I am a pastor the conversation always goes one of the following four ways:

- 1) They say that I do not look like a pastor to them...
- 2) They immediately start telling me about their spiritual journey and ask me questions about Church.
- 3) They apologize for the cuss words they used before they found out what my job was.....OR
- 4) They just say “oh that’s nice” and get away from me as fast as they can.....

Whether right or wrong....we act differently around people based on what their role in society is.....

And the same was true over 2,000 years ago in Israel....

If you were a Tax Collector, you were viewed as a traitor who worked with the Romans to take money from your own people and that you were most likely corrupt.

If you were a Pharisee, people viewed you as a teacher on the right ways to live...they thought you had the answers to some of life's deepest questions...

If you dug wells or cut stones or cleaned the streets people assumed you were un-educated and poor....and they were probably right....

But one of the very lowest positions you could hold.....one of the most difficult, unappreciated, dirty and rough jobs you could have was that of Shepherd..... **(Pause)**

Over the next 4 Sundays leading up to Christmas, we will be looking at the Characters of Christmas and learning about who they were and what it meant for people in their position to trust that God was doing a totally new thing in the world in the birth of Jesus....and this week, we will be starting with those on the bottom of the social ladder, the Shepherds.

It is interesting, we are so familiar with the Christmas story that I think that we've lost some of the "shock factor" that the writers, Luke and Matthew intended. We see shepherd figurines in stores and front lawns, we sing about them, children dress like them in pageants. We are confronted by the image of shepherds a hundred times each December. But when was the last time you reflected on why they are in the story?

During the time of Jesus, most Pious Jews disliked being around shepherds because they were ceremonially unclean. This was due to the fact that they lived outdoors in the fields with their sheep and therefore didn't have the luxury of following all of the rules of a clean life back then.

Because they basically worked 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, Shepherds were not the ones you would typically see in the Temple or in the Synagogue.....In other words, they weren't the ones you would see show up to church on a regular basis

Historical sources indicate that they were generally considered to be untrustworthy because some of them were not shy about helping themselves to the property of others.

Yet interestingly enough, despite how they were viewed, shepherds were one of the cornerstones of the economy and to the Jewish religious system. Through their sheep, they provided food, milk, hides, leather and wool.

They also provided sheep for the constant flow of sacrifices made at the Temple in Jerusalem. Think about that for a moment....the shepherds who provided the sheep and the lambs for sacrifices in the temple....were the same guys who people looked down on because they were rarely in the temple due to their work schedules and conditions. There is some irony in that isn't there?

If I could think of one work to describe the shepherds it would be this: Outsider. They were outsiders.

What about you? Do you always feel like an insider....or do you ever feel like a shepherd....do you even feel like you are left out of the larger picture?

For those of you in school....or those of you who can remember being in school....did you always feel like an insider....or did you ever feel left out?

If we are honest with ourselves, we can probably come up with long lists of times we have felt like outsiders. When we feel like we didn't fit in with a particular group or felt that we weren't good enough....not smart enough or cool enough or good-looking enough or maybe even religious enough to be with the in-crowd.

Yet, if you take the time to read through the stories of the Bible, you find that God rarely chooses insiders to change the course of narrative.....

God rarely chooses the popular...God rarely chooses the powerful....When God wants to do something big, it is usually the people we least expect who are chosen to make it happen.

God seems to have an inclination to pick the outsiders and no story shows this more clearly than the birth of Jesus. (*Pause*)

So the question before us today....is what can we learn from the story of these outsiders? What can we learn from the Shepherd's story....

First, we learn that the Good News can show up in unexpected ways...

These Shepherds were just tending to their flocks...all indications were that it was just a normal night for them....gathered around the fire...making sure none of the animals wandered away....but then in an instant their whole outlook on the world was changed...

And they were told by the Angel that The Messiah was born in the city of David and the sign they would see if a baby lying in a manger...in an animals feeding trough...

I have to wonder if perhaps...the reason the Angels came to the shepherds was because they were the only group low enough....cold enough....poor enough.....and crazy enough to believe this incredible news....that the savior of the entire world was in a barn in the town of Bethlehem....

The shepherds teach us that we have to be ready for the good news to show up when we least expect it and we have to be willing to listen no matter how crazy it sounds....

The second thing we can learn from the shepherds is that after hearing the Good News, we should go out and experience it.

Our text tells us that the shepherds don't merely sit around after the angels have left them.....they go with haste to see the thing that has been made known to them.

Notice they don't argue about who has to stay back and watch the sheep...they don't start debating whether what they heard was true or not...they run to go be in the presence of God.

So many times, we can find ourselves over-thinking the Good news we experience when we trust in God's promises in our lives instead of running out and going to experience those promises first hand.

The shepherd could have made many different excuses not to go and find Mary, Joseph and the baby...it was dangerous to travel at night....all of their sheep could be stolen or wander away....remember...these are extremely poor people....their sheep were literally the only possessions they had...

If they came back and the sheep were gone it would mean they would have no money or food....they would be left with absolutely nothing....they could literally be giving up their life to go search out Jesus..... but they knew that living into the promise of God is worth so much more than what little security we have built up for ourselves...and they knew no matter what....God would take care of them....because the savior of the world had arrived.

What are the things holding you back from going out and experiencing the promises God has for your life....what do you need to risk in order to go with haste so you can witness the miracles God has placed on earth for you to see with your own eyes?

The third thing we learn from the shepherds is the importance of sharing the Good News with Others

Upon finding Mary, Joseph and the Baby, the first thing the shepherds did was share what the angel had told them. And our text seems to indicate that others beside Mary and Joseph were hearing the news from the shepherds as well...when it says *"All who heard it were amazed at what he shepherds told them...."*

When we experience something Holy....when we have a spiritual awakening, we shouldn't keep to ourselves..... We should share it with others.

You never know what the words of hope that you share with others means to them...

For many years, my primary role as a Pastor was working with youth in Middle and High School.

I can't tell you how many teenagers would come to my office or call me or snap me...and share how hopeless they felt....

Between the pressure to get into the right college...dealing with unfaithful friends...dealing with parents fighting with one another....I heard over and over again how they felt like they couldn't possibly get through this....

And do you know what I found to be one of the best ways to help carry them through those experiences....It was to connect them to a young adult who went through a similar experience and share the good news that even though it felt hopeless at times.....it would get better....they would be strong enough to make it through....

When I called those 19-25 year olds up to ask them to share about their stories with a youth....they had never thought about the fact that they had good news to share....that their triumph and strength through adversity was a story with sharing.....but their empathy...their encouragement....their stories of the light they found in the midst of darkness literally saved lives.

We get so caught up in thinking that our story isn't important...that we neglect sharing the good news of all that God has done in our life... or for some reason we think it isn't politically correct or its pushy to share stories like that....

But think back to the beginning of this service...when I asked you to share with other people about the best Christmas gift you had ever gotten... after you thought of the gift....was it hard to share the story?

Did the story get easier to tell each time?

Shouldn't the same be true for our stories of faith? What would it look like if telling people about how we see God working in our lives felt just like telling someone about the best Christmas gift we ever got.....?

The fourth and final lesson we can take from the Shepherds this morning is the importance of giving thanks and praise for the good news.

Our scripture passage this morning ends with the declaration that *“The Shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.”*

When was the last time you celebrated the fact that God made you to be a unique and beautiful reflection of the diversity and variety of life?

When was the last time you celebrated the good news that you have something to offer the world...and that no matter what other people tell you, you are made in the perfect image of God.

The reality is that we called to gather here on Sunday mornings not to just read the Bible and say prayers.....but to literally celebrate the life God has given us.

Yesterday, during our Rise Against Hunger event, I found myself not only packaging food for those in need, but also learning more about the people I was working with....hearing their stories and sharing my story....and each time we packaged 1000 meals someone would ring the loud gong and everyone would just stop for a moment and cheer....

When the final gong rang signaling that we had reached our 10,000 meal goal I saw people high-fiving one another....hugging one another....smiles on each and every face...from 7 year olds to

well...people who are much older than 7...celebrating together....that is church....that is how we are called to live all the time....

1. Be ready for the Good news to show up in unexpected ways
2. Be willing to take a risk and see the Good news for yourself.
3. Share that Good News with Others.
4. Don't forget to Praise God and be joyful along the way....

These are the lessons that the Shepherds offer us today..... May we strive to follow their example!

Amen and Amen.