

1 Sermon, Christmas Eve 2011

Text: Luke 2:1-20, Psalm 23:1-6, Isaiah 40:9-11, Zechariah 11:4-17,

Title: "Enter the Shepherds, Stage Left"

Central Idea: Just as the good news came to the shepherds, Christ comes to us in the ordinary, with a "fear not," and a "glory."

1. Dirty, smelly Shepherds
2. a thirteen-year-old mother
3. a weary, nervous father
4. The Good news is juxtaposed with our ordinariness.

The cast of Characters is not what you'd expect for a momentous event: dirty, smelly shepherds, a teenage mother embarrassingly pregnant, a weary, nervous father (or so we infer).

It's not a hallmark card. It's not a play. It's not a Christmas pageant.

Babies are beautiful. But birth is not beautiful. It is horrendously painful for the mother, it is messy and bloody, and full of fear for the father – especially before modern medicine, when the mother died as often as the baby.

I know, I was there at two births.

The location was unplanned, uncertain, set up for animals instead of people. It may have been a cave (according to ancient tradition) or a stable (according to popular imagination) or the village square (according to some of the best scholarship. Mangers back then and there were large stone troughs often found in the village square. Travelers would put food for their animals in those public mangers.

If we look at scripture literally, it says they laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. It seems to indicate that they couldn't get inside, so they stayed outside.

Just think about those adjectives I've used: dirty, smelly, embarrassing, weary, nervous, messy, bloody, painful, unplanned, uncertain, outside.

It doesn't sound like a Christmas pageant. But it does sound very real.

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I think that's what we should get out of the Christmas story. It's very real. God is made flesh in the midst of a very real world, where things are dirty, smelly, embarrassing, weary, nervous, messy, bloody, painful, unplanned, and uncertain.

The sermon title is "Enter the Shepherds, Stage Left." And nothing could be further from the truth.

It's not a play, where the shepherds enter and then exit and then take off their costumes.

No, it's real. And the shepherds are stuck out there all night long.

And here are some things we know about shepherds in Bible times. God was often compared to a shepherd, who leads his flock, who protects them, whose voice is familiar to the sheep. God is seen as patient (there's a lot of waiting when you're a shepherd), and God is seen as always present, because above all, good shepherds have to *be there*.

At the same time as God was called a good shepherd, actual shepherds were looked down upon and mistrusted. Shepherds were not able to keep the Sabbath, because sheep need watching on the Sabbath, too. They could not follow the Kosher dietary laws, because of their situation out in the wilderness. They weren't able to live up to the expected religious standard. Shepherds' earthly status was so low that their testimony was not accepted in a court of law.

Shepherds were stereotyped back then as grimy, smelly thieves. Shepherds were out at all hours of the night, and people feared that they would break in and steal while others were asleep.

Shepherds didn't always even own their own sheep, either, but were hired men for the owner of the flock. Shepherds were often landless, and sometimes even homeless.

Today's reading from Zechariah speaks of worthless shepherds, shepherds who are hired to care for the sheep but instead desert the flock, and who even eat the sheep without permission of the owner.

There might have been a song back then, "Mamas, don't let your babies grow up to be shepherds."

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That's real. That's the real world of problems and woes into which Jesus was born.

Jesus was born as a promise, a flame of light in the midst of a darkened world.

The story of the birth of Jesus is also a message of grace.

God's love comes to us even when we don't deserve it. If you were an author back then and wanted to write about someone who didn't deserve to see the coming of the messiah, you might well pick shepherds.

If you wanted to pick someone who was the very opposite of power on the throne, you would pick shepherds, far removed from most of society.

That's grace. As far as we know, the shepherds did nothing to earn an appearance of angels. They did nothing to deserve to see the savior. And yet it happened, and they did.

That, too, is very real. It still is that way. We do nothing to deserve the grace of God, yet God gives it to us. And God's grace comes in the midst of meetings, and waiting in line, and watching television, and getting ready for work. Grace comes, and we find that we are OK in the sight of God, and surrounded by love, and given a future and a hope.

Yes, it's very real.

There's nothing fancy or exalted about a teenaged mother giving birth in a strange city, far away from home, with no hospitality.

There's nothing special about a father who is scared stiff that his wife or baby is going to die far away from home in a strange city. Mothers and babies often died in childbirth.

That's real. And God is present in that reality: often in the form of a subtle encouragement when you're uncertain, often in the form of an understanding that there are possibilities that you haven't seen. God may appear as an earthly angel with a message of encouragement or a gentle presence.

In the midst of a messy world, God may direct our attention to blessings and abundance, or call us to a mission of love or justice. Or God may just lay on your heart that there are some things you need to change.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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"Thus said the LORD my God: Be a shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. Those who buy them kill them and go unpunished; and those who sell them say, "Blessed be the LORD, for I have become rich"; and their own shepherds have no pity on them. For I will no longer have pity on the inhabitants of the earth, says the LORD. I will cause them, every one, to fall each into the hand of a neighbor, and each into the hand of the king; and they shall devastate the earth, and I will deliver no one from their hand. So, on behalf of the sheep merchants, I became the shepherd of the flock doomed to slaughter. I took two staffs; one I named Favor, the other I named Unity, and I tended the sheep. In one month I disposed of the three shepherds, for I had become impatient with them, and they also detested me. So I said, "I will not be your shepherd. What is to die, let it die; what is to be destroyed, let it be destroyed; and let those that are left devour the flesh of one another!" I took my staff Favor and broke it, annulling the covenant that I had made with all the peoples. So it was annulled on that day, and the sheep merchants, who were watching me, knew that it was the word of the LORD. I then said to them, "If it seems right to you, give me my wages; but if not, keep them." So they weighed out as my wages thirty shekels of silver. Then the LORD said to me, "Throw it into the treasury" --this lordly price at which I was valued by them. So I took the thirty shekels of silver and threw them into the treasury in the house of the LORD. Then I broke my second staff Unity, annulling the family ties between Judah and Israel. Then the LORD said to me: Take once more the implements of a worthless shepherd. For I am now raising up in the land a shepherd who does not care for the perishing, or seek the wandering, or heal the maimed, or nourish the healthy, but devours the flesh of the fat ones, tearing off even their hoofs. Oh, my worthless shepherd, who deserts the flock! May the sword strike his arm and his right eye! Let his arm be completely withered, his right eye utterly blinded!" Zechariah 11:4-17, NRSV.