

A Christmas Eve 12.24.22

Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: God comes unexpectedly

We've been doing this sermon series throughout Advent on the women in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus. First Tamar, then Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. For Christmas Eve, my plan was to stick with the theme and talk about the last woman in Matthew's genealogy, Jesus' mother Mary. But the more I thought about, the more the character, or characters who captured my attention this year were the shepherds, the first to be told the good news of the birth of "a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Shepherds are interesting characters in scripture because on one hand, they were revered as the image of God's love for God's people. Leaders such as Abraham, Moses, and David started as shepherds. Psalm twenty-three's "The Lord is my shepherd" is the most well-known, but many of the psalms refer to the shepherding nature of God. And the prophets all speak of how God will seek out the lost sheep and gather them back together. These were certainly images and ideas that the religious leadership of Mary and Joseph's time would have known about. Someone was certainly preaching sermons in that day lifting up the shepherding qualities of Emperor Augustus for bringing the whole world together—by conquering it, but I'm guessing they left out that detail—or how the forced migration of people by census was like shepherds moving their flocks to greener pastures.

Shepherds were a nice concept and a nice metaphor, but the truth is no one really liked actual, real, in the flesh shepherds. Actual, real, in the flesh shepherds lived outside the law. Wandering around from place to place, grazing their sheep wherever they could, with little

regard for who's land it was. Spending days, weeks, at a time, outside with no one but other shepherds and sheep for company. Actual, real, in the flesh shepherds were viewed as shifty, shady, trespassers who certainly smelled not the greatest. It was one thing for the pharisees and other leaders to wax poetic about God the good shepherd, and quite another to have to interact with an actual shepherd. Shepherds are nice in theory, but not as nice when face to face with the real thing.

And isn't this true about so many things, not just shepherds. We have ideas in our minds about what it will be like to help someone, to provide service, to care or support or experience or whatever. And then we're faced with the actual lived experience, and it's not as great. Being helpful, supportive, caring, always seems like such a nice idea. But then you do it, and the person isn't grateful, or isn't grateful in the way you might have hoped. Or doesn't notice, or doesn't care, or doesn't want your help. Or you don't feel about the situation the way you thought you'd feel. Or, sometimes, the whole thing smells bad. Figuratively, or maybe, also, literally. How often, how easy, it is for reality to fall so far short of expectation.

One can imagine a lot of characters in the Christmas story, in scripture in general, who's hopes and expectations fell short of what they received. Tamar certainly didn't see Judah as her path to salvation, Judah hoped to hid Tamar away entirely. Moving to Israel likely had not been Ruth's lifelong ambition. And Bathsheba had no intention of marrying David. Maybe Mary and Joseph wanted kids, but they didn't want one right then. The owner of the home where the Christ child was born can't have felt great about a savior being born

among their cattle. The whole story is a mess, of people, of situations, of mistakes and miscommunications and failed expectations.

And it is where the Christ child comes. Right in the middle of the mess of humanity. In a world where a despot was proudly announcing a peace that was not peace. To first time parents ill-prepared for the role, until an angel appeared and told them otherwise. To a city without space and a people who didn't know what to look for in a Messiah. And the first to hear the good news were shepherds, a group of people whose expectation never matched their reality in the eyes of those around them.

Dear people of God, ours is a God who shows up in unexpected ways and unexpected places, and to unexpected people. Ours is a God who continually skirts our expectations of what is right and good and proper and shows up anyway. When your world doesn't live up to how you'd imagined it. When your expectations, for yourself, for others, for this creation, fall short, look around, for God is likely already there. From the chaos of creation, through countless exiles, in the prophets hopes and dreaming and a fair amount of yelling, our sacred scripture is the story of a God who shows up in this world, in our messes, with us, when and where we least expect it. And if this is God's history, dear people of God, it is certainly also God's present and God's future. God who is and was and is to come is certainly still showing up with us, among us, in our messes, our failings, our missed expectations and desperate hopes.

And here's something else a colleague said to me this week that I haven't been able to get out of my head since I heard it. Jesus is certainly the most incarnate thing God ever did, but it is not the only incarnate thing God ever did. In just a few minutes, as we prepare to light candles and sing Silent Night, we will read in John's Gospel how "the Word became flesh and lived among us." Jesus, the son of Mary and stepson of Joseph, the child born in Bethlehem during the reign of Emperor Augustus, when Quirinus was governor of Syria, was anchored both in time and space, but the Word became flesh, becomes flesh, and is still becoming each and every day. The Word became flesh at creation, when the Voice of God spoke over the waters and made all which God called good. The Word became flesh in a Burning Bush, leading Moses and the Israelites from slavery to freedom. The Word became flesh in the prophets, as they called people to step away from their, our sinfulness, and turn again to God. The Word was it's fleshiest, yes, in Jesus, the one who was both human and divine. But the Word also took flesh in the shepherds, who came and saw, and then went and told, leaving all who heard their word amazed. It took flesh in the disciples who became the apostles and created a movement of Jesus-followers that persists to this day. It took flesh, or printed word, in Luther's translation of scripture into the language of all people. And it becomes flesh every time we gather, as we will this evening, around this table, in the bread and wine becoming body and blood, a foretaste of the feast to come. The word takes flesh in we who eat this bread and drink this cup, and share Christ's love through our hands and feet, our skills and prayers, our words and actions. We too, dear people of God, are word made flesh sharing the good news of great joy to all people.

Dear people of God, on this night of anticipation, let me be the first to tell you, and whatever mix of hope and trepidation, fear and longing, anticipation and concern, that you bring, that to you. To you. Is born this day. In the City of David, and the city of Battle Creek, and in all places and cities, large and small, to you is born this day a Savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. This is, dear people, good news of great joy for you and for all people.

And before I send you out like the shepherds to share this good news, here's one more piece of hope and promise for you. There are as many faithful ways to respond to this promise as there are people. Maybe, probably, there are more than that even, for how we respond differs day to day, moment to moment, even. We see two such responses in this Gospel reading. The shepherds went with haste, came, saw, and then returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. And that is a faithful response. But Mary, on the other hand, stayed still, treasuring these words and pondering them in her heart. And that, too, was, is, a faithful response.

Dear people of God, here is the promise of this night. To you, whoever you are and whatever you bring, whatever you expect or don't expect, dream or wish for or image. To you, and to all of this beautiful, fragile, unexpected, broken and stitched back together world is born this day, and every day before and every day since, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord. You are the right person for this news and your response, whatever it is, is faithful. Because this news is for you. Thanks be to God. Amen.