

Text for Christmas Eve Service December 24, 2017

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:8-20

“A heart for humanity”

We have been on a journey these past 4 weeks during Advent. A journey through the Gospel witnesses as we looked at each of their Christmas stories. We looked at Matthew at his wonderful story of the wise men. John and his very sublime yet powerful message of Christmas that reminds us that in the beginning was the word, the Word was with God and the Word was God. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.

What about Mark? Remember how many verses he used to give the Christmas story? Zero, none, nada. Each Gospel writer in their own way describes a Christmas story very differently from the one we see in our world and in our culture today that we are trying to defend and uphold with some fairly complicated semantic gymnastics.

This evening we come to what is probably the most beloved of all the Christmas story tellers. Luke. Mark gives 0 verses, Matthew 30, Luke gives 120 verses. Luke loves Christmas. And Luke's Christmas is full of songs and poetry and intimate details. Only Luke tells us the story of the group of people that we are going to look at tonight, the shepherds.

And so Luke wrote a Gospel, he wrote a Christmas story. Four times bigger than Matthew, and very different. It is a story of people, and a God who appears to them, and a baby who is born to them. A new king, yes, but also a baby. A human being. A real human baby born for humanity and who loves and cares for real people.

READ SCRIPTURE

One of my favorite Christmas movies is the Chronicles of Narnia, the lion, the witch and the wardrobe. What a great Christian movie. It fascinates me how the 4 main characters up until they meet Aslan the lion, who is really Jesus, never really believed that they had any role at all to play in the saving of Narnia. There was no way that they could have been chosen by God to play any role, they were kids, humans, ordinary. Until they met Aslan and then they were kids, humans ordinary that God was able to use for God's purposes.

I see the same thing happening with the shepherds here in the story. Let's remind ourselves who these shepherds were in the 1st century. When we think shepherd we think cute, cuddly, little animals. Or an animated happy Jesus laughing with a lamb across his

shoulders. Very romantic, but not very realistic. We think isn't that neat, shepherds and their fuzzy, wuzzy sheep.

But in the time of Jesus, shepherds were at the bottom of the social food chain. They were poor and not only were they poor but they were also outcasts. They were filthy because they lived out in the fields with their sheep. Look at vs. 8, living in the fields, making their home in the fields. Their feet and their legs were covered with manure and grime.

They were also mistrusted. They were considered thieves, and in fact many of them were. Did you know that the only group that was lower on the first century social ladder than shepherds were? Lepers. You can't get more ordinary, more common, more human than shepherds in Jesus' day.

But it is the ordinary, low-class, outcasts of the world that God chooses to first give the message of life. Look at vs. 10, the angels come and deliver the good news to all of humanity to these ordinary people, people like you and me. In verse 11 the angels state to you shepherds, I have a personal message for you. How often have you heard this passage? Probably a dozen times about the angels in Christmas pageants etc.

But do we ever hear it personally as the shepherds did as if the angel said: to you- say some names- is born a Savior, because he loves you. It is a story and a message that was not meant just to give us an emotional rise, but to change our lives. It is so personal because it is given to me, it is so communal because it changed the world.

Luke's story uses ordinary human beings to care for and bring good news to ordinary human beings. Because no matter what the world thinks of them, they are precious to God. First Presbyterian Church has tried over these years to care for what we would call people at risk in our community. We have tried through a food bank, through a community church vibe that is contagious. So we get people into this church and into this building who wouldn't necessary have come in had it not been for a welcoming spirit that is being fostered. And it has been hard to wipe off the image of outcast and replace it with child of God, but I think we are making progress.

It is amazing what people who were normally outsiders can teach us, as the shepherds were able to teach the holy family that night because they truly were on a mission from God. And if Luke is to be believed it is these hungry, humble, poor, and even at times non-status quo people who will be filled up and lifted up, and enthroned.

Luke's Christmas story is a sober reminder to us that we who are rich and powerful had better care for the poor and impotent of the world. Because God does. IF we will use our advantage and abundance to care for the powerless in this world, God will bless us. If we won't we will be emptied and we will be cast down and we will be scattered. We do not need all we have. We cannot possibly use all that we have. God wants us to share with and care for those that in the past we might have preferred to ignore. So, Luke's Christmas story is a warning.

But it is also an extraordinary gift to hundreds of us here this evening. Because there are hundreds here who consider themselves insignificant and inadequate and unworthy and shameful. Hundreds who consider themselves extraordinarily..., well, ordinary. Extraordinarily human. May I say to you that you are precious and remarkable in the sight of God? It is in this time of year that the suicide rate spikes in our communities. It is in this time of year more than any other that people feel inadequate or so unworthy or so redundant that they don't hear Luke's Christmas message.

I want to cry out in these moments from the mountaintops "God loves you. He thinks you are remarkable. You are precious to him. And if you will let him, he will use you in ways that you could never, ever imagine."

And then those of us who in certain moments may be prone to grumble because we are asked to write another check, or volunteer for a nursery worker who wants a break, or help hold a baby because we have more infants than hands, or help feed a hungry local resident. In those moments when you feel put upon because you are asked to do one thing more and you find it inconvenient, I invite you to repent of those feelings, and re-confess your gratitude to God for loving you and blessing you and calling you to this profoundly divine ministry to a profoundly human and ordinary world.

May I also say to you that if you are struggling with your sense of inadequacy and ordinariness, you are not alone. Believe it or not, you are surrounded this morning by people who are struggling with the very same feelings. Maybe that's why I love Luke's Christmas. Because it takes ordinary terrified human beings and by the power of the Holy Spirit calls them and equips them for extraordinary service. We are all utterly dependent upon our gracious God who gives the Christmas message to shepherds. May we always be dependent upon him. Amen.