

Sermon Text for December 12, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 53:1-12, Luke 2:8-20

“Jesus the baby visited by the shepherds”

So, Advent is a time of expecting a change brought by God which leads to salvation for all of humanity. We have seen changes that we could never imagine over these past few years. In all these changes this church has never missed a Sunday of worship, we began much like we find ourselves today. I have my ladder in my living room with my computer set up on it so that I can have a background that is pleasing for you.

The times in which we are living now are a monumental change to what we were used to and to which we never, ever want to get used to. But let me begin before we get to our Advent Scripture for today underscore that we are still living in the midst of a pandemic. My preaching to you in this format, although I am live and I can see you all, my decision to quarantine is proof that things are not where we want them.

I was exposed twice this past week in very close quarters to people who then tested covid positive. I am going to get tested tomorrow. I have zero symptoms, I am still running every day, I feel great, but I did not think it would be responsible for me to come to church with all of you with the chance that I might spread it to any of you. I love you too much. I know that according to the CDC because I am vaccinated I could come and keep my mask on, but I simply did not want to risk it.

Do you know that in Lancaster County we are in worse shape right now in our hospitals than we were last year at this time, and last year at this time we decided to close go back to virtual worship for a few more months as a result of the numbers. But this is what is especially sad for me, and I want you to hear me closely. 90% of those in the ICU and 90% of those dying in our hospitals, in LGH and other hospitals are not vaccinated. Our record numbers are almost exclusively those who are not vaccinated. Why do I say that? Because I love you too much to not tell you the reality that we are facing today. Please, please, don't just be careful, but please follow the advice of your own doctor, the doctor you trusted 2 years ago, trust her again today.

We, like Isaiah, like the shepherds, look forward to a new day, a day when our Savior will come. We will never forget this Sunday for as long as we shall live. We have never done this before, and we will always remember it not necessarily because of the message that you receive, although I do hope that it is that memorable, but because of the reality in which we find

ourselves. I pray we will remember this Sunday because it will make us more ready for the coming of Jesus. Let's read.

READ

You notice that we included all of the verses for this Scripture in Isaiah. There are times when I choose Scripture that I want to be aware of the time that it takes to read the Scripture, but not this morning, there is no portion of this Scripture that I could think of that we could take out. I had a conversation this week with someone about church and what they were looking for in a church. It was somewhat eye opening and convicting. They said that they were not looking for a church that had a lot of programs in which they could get involved and take on some leadership role. That is not what they wanted.

They were looking for a church where they could grow in their relationship with Jesus and mature in their faith. Now, just us saying that our goal is to make everyone mature in faith doesn't mean that this is happening here. I admit that I am very, very program oriented and if I see something that works or something that you might want in order to address a need, we are going to work together to put structure and substance to it and get it working.

But I have always thought that with my emphasis in my ministry on relationships with each other and the community, that this does leave the potential for a blind spot for a deeper walk with Christ. I have never pretended that in my sermons I am able to teach you at a level that is deep and profound, but rather I have always been someone who wants to leave you with something to think about in relationship to how you interact with each other and with God. That doesn't necessarily lend itself to a profound faith, some could even call it shallow.

There is a real danger in churches that any growth could be the result of branding or shallow enthusiasm. We are not immune to that. While we have been around almost 190 years, it takes work to grow faith, it takes more work to grow faith than it does to grow numbers. Mars Hill in 2014 was a church with 15,000 members in 4 states and in January of 2015 it no longer existed. Now I can hear someone say, I knew Mars Hill and you're no Mars Hill. Which is true, but what we don't want to create together here is a culture where all that matters is that there is growth in number, and not growth in our faith with Jesus. The fruits of a growing church do not guarantee the fruits of profound faith in individuals.

How do we grow our faith this Advent season? Well, I think one way not to grow numbers is by taking the Isaiah Scripture seriously. This Scripture is one of 4 suffering servant Scriptures which we understand as describing Jesus in the Old Testament. Each depicts a person who is not celebrated because of his success and his charisma. But rather one who was despised

and rejected, who didn't have thousands of followers who loved him, but rather was one who nothing in his appearance left us to desire him.

The challenge these days is to find disciples who are willing to follow a suffering servant in the midst of a culture that wants to follow its own desires and its own rights and its own understanding and calling it Christian, while forgetting that this Advent and all of our lives we follow one who was a servant conceived out of wedlock, born in a manger, and then today, visited by the shepherds. The servant depicted in Isaiah was not a celebrity. The servant depicted in Isaiah did not measure the love that he had for us based upon the growth of the churches that we serve.

The shepherds understood something about being what we find in Isaiah 53:3 as someone who was despised and rejected. Luke puts a lot of emphasis on the shepherds maybe because in II Samuel 7:8 we find King David described as a shepherd, even while he was king, and Jesus was in the line of David as we read in both Matthew and Luke's genealogy. The shepherds understood their position in society. They were the outcasts, and so when the angels appear to them and says in vs.11 that "unto you", they took that personally. Why to us, why was this baby born to us and why is this message coming to us?

This isn't great branding right? If you want to get people interested in a movement you need to get those who are respected and liked and are able to carry the message forward with people listening to them. If that is the case then you certainly are not going to get shepherds as your messengers, if you are interested in branding and growing your church, or at least in growing your brand and your movement.

But the message that the angels give have nothing to do with a message that would grow programs or volume in churches. The message is one that would grow your faith in a God and demand a sacrifice on your part which is on par to the sacrifice that the suffering servant made on our behalf. Look at vs.14, Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among humankind, whom he favors. Just like the message in 10 that to you, oh shepherds, is born a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The presence of the shepherds as the receivers of the good news flies in the face of a branding that is almost required in our culture today. A branding that requires more loyalty to the brand, or to the church, than it does to the Savior.

Notice that when the shepherds receive the message they are afraid, and they have a similar fear once the angels leave as they discuss what their next step is going to be. Do we really have to go into Bethlehem that city where no one wants to see a shepherd, where they wish we would stay out in our fields, and see what the angels have told us. No one told them to go,

but when you encounter the presence of God it has to create a spontaneous desire to go and see if what God said is true. So they went.

The shepherds understood the promise that a Savior would come, one that would remove them from their hardworking, fringes of society, despised by those around them, if not misunderstood. The shepherds were representative of all the people, for if God was able to choose the shepherds, certainly he would choose us as well? The shepherds understood the Isaiah who described a Lord who was despised and rejected just as they were. It is interesting that Mary and Joseph do not experience the glory and the singing of the angels, but rather the rough voices of the shepherds who tell them the story of the angels that they experienced and that they witnessed.

That message which they chose to share was that the time is now, we have been waiting for generations, and now no longer do we have to wait. This child, this baby, is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. This child will bring about peace on earth, but as Isaiah states, he will be despised and rejected. He isn't going to win any popularity contests. Those who were present couldn't believe the message, it was stunning. I wonder if they had a harder time believing the message or believing the messengers.

The shepherds return home rejoicing and celebrating, glorifying and praising God. Can you imagine what it would have been like to go back to work the next day after an experience like that? In some ways this is where we find ourselves, called to go and proclaim a Savior, a Savior who isn't interested in branding, but rather is much more interested in you following one who was always on the fringes of culture and society. May God bless us and keep us as we look to do just that. Amen.