

December 16, 2012
The National Presbyterian Church

Shepherds: The Common Touch

Luke 2:1-8; Matthew 12:1-18

Dr. David Renwick

Note: This sermon was preached two days after the deaths of 20 school children and six staff at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Newtown, Connecticut.

The joy of the shepherds that we hear of in the account of the Christmas story in Luke's gospel is shattered in Matthew's gospel as it tells the story of Jesus' birth and what occurs soon after. You may remember the wise men come to King Herod and say, "A baby has been born – where is he?" Herod's wise men say, "In Bethlehem. Go find him." But the wise men head on their way home. We read in Matthew Chapter 2 at verse 16,

"When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men he was infuriated. He sent and killed all of the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah; a voice was heard in Rama wailing and loud lamentation – Rachel weeping for her children. She refused to be consoled because they are no more."

In our sermons through Advent we have been thinking together about different people or groups of people who enter the Christmas story, who found themselves caught up in an event which is much larger than they are. Some of them come before the time of Jesus like the prophets.

- We looked at the prophets a couple of weeks ago, who, hundreds of years before Jesus (as George Frederick Handel realized as he knit together the words and the music of his “Messiah”), proclaimed that one is coming who will be the savior of the whole wide world. And we thought together about what we think of the future and how it impacts the present in our lives for all of us have ideas about the future that impact the present way we live our lives.
- Last week we moved on and we thought together about the kings who enter this story: *King Herod* and his use of brute force to kill those innocent children; *the three wise men* who used their knowledge in the service of a higher power, a higher authority, a higher king as they come to the baby Jesus. And then we looked at this ‘other’ king, King Jesus, who doesn’t look like a king at all. And yet here’s the one, this one who seems to be absolutely powerless, whose life changes the course of human history. So these kings remind us to think about power, the power we have and the power we do not think we have, and how we use it for good, how we use it for God, how we’ve been entrusted with it as stewards of the living God.

This week we move on to think about the shepherds who enter the story. We read of them in Luke's account in the second chapter. They are at the other end of the social spectrum from the powerful kings. The shepherds are people who have absolutely no power. Everybody else determines what's going on in their world, and they just play their part no matter what happens – pushed and pulled by all the forces of the world around about them, often at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

This is the world that many people experience today including those who suffer grief indescribable in our nation in Connecticut, living right now with things that they cannot explain, and with pain which is deeper than any words can describe.

Sometimes we dare to dream that we are masters of the universe – that life is contained in a neat package that we have wrapped up and put together and we can keep together. Then all of a sudden we find in life that the package unravels and life takes an unexpected turn. Sometimes it's just an inconvenience and we're really annoyed at the way things are going and we can't control it. But at other times it's absolutely tragic and we have no clue what will happen next. And what is even more fearful is the possibility (or certainty!) that we have no control over what will happen next – we are powerless.

This kind of situation in the world is not new. Indeed it's an essential part of the story of Christmas that sometimes we gloss over because we read the story of Christmas through a lens that is all glitter and tinsel. But it's there in

both accounts that we have, whether in Luke's account or in Matthew's account; the two books in the Bible in which we read of Jesus' birth.

In Luke's account for example we come to the story of Jesus' birth through Mary and Joseph who are traveling from Nazareth down to Jerusalem. Not because they're going on vacation but because they have to, because they've been told to, because they've been commanded to. The forces of the Roman Empire are all around them. We're told that this journey takes place in the days of Caesar Augustus and in the days when a man called Quirinius is the governor of Syria. The Romans (as always!) want taxes for and from their Empire. And in order to organize the taxation and estimate what they're going to be able to collect they want to register the people. They need a census to find out the taxable population of their provinces. And it's that context that Luke shares quite deliberately as he sets the scene for the birth of Jesus: Mary and Joseph involuntarily, because they have to, leave their town of Nazareth and go to Bethlehem where the census for Joseph's family is going to take place.

So there they are on this 80 mile hike while Mary is pregnant. Maybe they're walking; maybe Mary is on a donkey as she's so often described in tradition (personally, I'm not sure that a donkey for 80 miles is any better than walking for 80 miles!). When was the last time you did that, on donkey or by foot!? Some of you may do it voluntarily; you go hiking. But when you *have to do it*, it's a forced march, it's cruel – and at such a time when a baby is almost due? But they have no choice in the matter.

And the theme that “they have no choice” continues into Matthew’s account (2:1-18) when, after the birth of Jesus, Herod, having heard the Magi share the idea that there is a baby somewhere born to be a king, decides that all the babies in Bethlehem need to be destroyed. Herod wants to get rid of any threat using any possible means. So he sends his forces into Bethlehem to kill the babies!! All of them, two and younger. And what can Mary and Joseph do? The only thing they can do is flee with their child for their lives. They cannot go home north to Nazareth but flee for their lives, further and further away from home.

They seek safety in Egypt in the south which is quite deliberately ironic in the gospels – that they should seek safety in Egypt; of all places in the Biblical story, Egypt is the quintessential place of slavery, the place where a king who is rather like Herod 1500 years previously put to death all the baby boys because the Hebrew slaves were growing too powerful.

This was the world in which Mary and Joseph lived. A world in which there were acts of terror inflicted on adults and on children in which people lived at the mercy of forces beyond their control.

History is full of such stories and it’s there, it’s there in the Christmas story as well. And for very good reason – so that you and I would know that beyond all the tinsel and the glitter (which I think is wonderful) we might know that Jesus Christ came, not into or for a fairy tale world, but into and for *a real world* – a world that is no different than our world: in which there are Pharaohs and Caesars and Herods, and decrees and taxes and terror – in which there are awful events, whether far away or near,

sometimes in our own city and at times in our own families. It was to such a world as this that Jesus came to be the helper and the savior that we need, whether we think that life is packaged up neatly and in our hands or whether we know that it's out of control.

And this is surely why the shepherds enter the story: as a sign of God's common touch in this world – that God knows who we are and where we are and what we need, no matter who we are or what we experience.

Let me put it like this. We might expect people like the three kings coming to see Jesus: wealthy, successful, thoughtful, faithful, important people, able to choose the course of their lives. God is interested in such as these! But, here's the interesting thing: they expected ones are not the first ones who arrive at the manger.

The first ones invited by God are the shepherds: those who may think that they are last, those who may think that they are least, those who know that they have no power in the world; those who just get on with their business because everybody else is controlling life around about them. They are the ones invited to the manger, pushed and pulled by forces beyond their control.

And it is to them that the angels say, "Fear not!" Not just because the appearance of the angels was fearful and awesome (we would be fearful, too, if they came to us and we saw them; we'd surely be wondering what in the world was going on). No, this was not just a 'one-time do not fear'! In the Greek the command is an "ongoing, continuous present" that means, "Be not fearing in the days ahead, don't live in fearfulness;" although you live in

a world which has all kinds of fears, don't let them win or control you! "Fear not!" say the angels, and then, "Come and see what God has done in this world for you; come and see the savior of the world!" And the angels are even clearer than that: the Savior of the World is THEIR savior: "for you this day has been born one who will be the savior of the world."

So the shepherds do this. They listen to the angels and they come and see. And what they see is not just a helpless baby, though they see that. But they see in that manger *God's decision not to stay aloof from them or from this world's pain and suffering, but to enter into it and to become weak himself, to allow himself to be under the control of all the forces around about him. And yet, all the time using that powerlessness and weakness to fulfill his will and purpose for our lives and for his world – to be the savior we need.*

"Fear not! Come and see!" And they come. And then they return. Back to their sheep. Back to the fields. *The world has not changed.* The world is just the same in many respects – absolutely the same; all kinds of things will still happen that that do not understand and cannot explain and that will cause enormous pain.

BUT in another sense everything had changed because of that invitation.

- They came to realize that though, like Mary and Joseph they lived in a world over which they had little or no control, though they were the last and the least, God noticed them. They were the first in God's sight, as if

there were no others. God sees us in the same way: the first in God's sight as if there were no others.

- They realized that God was not far off but had risked everything to be their helper and their savior, willing to come in the form of a helpless baby, and yet, even in this weakness, fulfilling his will. If God were that powerful, even in weakness, then surely he would also be able to hold on to them through every path in life, no matter how far out of control life might seem to be? Surely God would be able to sort things out in due season, both the confusing events and the unbearable barbarities of life?
- True, the timing of events and the course of their lives may still not always be of their own choosing, but what they could now trust was that God was not unaware of or caught by surprise by the mess, but had entered it, and would ultimately redeem all, restore all, and save all those for whom he came. Including them. What they saw now only "through a mirror dimly" they would one day see clearly, face to face (1 Corinthians 13).

May we know this good news and be at peace and find God's joy and be strong enough to share that with others who do not know.

David A. Renwick Copyright © 2012 All Rights Reserved.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, D.C. 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800