

December 10, 2017
Luke 2:8-18
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“Out of the Ordinary”

Good morning! This is the second Sunday of Advent, we are half-way to Christmas, and we have another character in our adventure. Last week we talked about the story of Jesus’ conception and birth as not only Advent; Jesus’ coming and reaching the destination of Bethlehem, but it is an *adventure*, a story which engages us and draws us in, and something we experience ourselves. What makes a story an adventure is an element of danger, or the risk of loss. Adventures do not have safe and predictable outcomes.

The birth of Jesus Christ, of God’s incarnation as Emmanuel, God With Us, is just a moment of God’s story. The history of salvation began with God’s work in creation, and continued after a terrible flood and a covenant that God would never again destroy the world. God rescued the chosen people from slavery in Egypt, gave them the law, and led them safely to the land which God had promised. The people established a nation and demanded a king, the people turned their backs on God and were taken to exile in Babylon. They returned to their land and rebuilt their Temple, but were conquered by the military force of the Roman Empire. This is all part of the biblical record; in the Old Testament and in the inter-testamental record we know as the Apocrypha. This is our story: no matter what country we were born in, no matter who our family is, this is the story which all Christians share.

The story of how God came to earth as a human infant is part of that story. It’s an event that we re-tell and celebrate each year with music and food and gifts. But Jesus’ birth is not the end of the story -- or even the most important part of the story. It’s part of the adventure which culminates with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and an adventure which continues in every time and every place where

people claim Jesus Christ as Lord, and continue to re-tell the story and live as followers of Jesus until he comes to earth again at the end of time.

This Advent, rather than trying to take in the entire story, we're looking at individuals in just a tiny part of the story, and how their story intersects with our own story -- two thousand years later, and half a world away. This morning we're going to look at a group of people, represented by a single figure. This fellow on the far end of the chancel table is a shepherd, and you can tell because he's holding a sheep. This may sound obvious, but it's significant: there's no such thing as a theoretical shepherd. If you're not taking care of sheep, you may be an authority on animal husbandry, or an expert on bloodlines or wool or whatever -- but a shepherd is a job you do outside with smelly critters -- most of whom are animals.

The Bible, as we know, is full of shepherds. If any of you AMBS students have taken Loren Johns' introduction to biblical languages class, you've probably had to track all of the Hebrew and Greek references to sheep, lamb, ewe, ram, young sheep, holocaust sacrifice and the many references there are to sheep in both testaments. Where there are sheep, there need to be shepherds. The Hebrew word for shepherd literally means "feeder:" someone who feeds the sheep.

There are good shepherds and bad shepherds -- shepherds who care for the sheep and shepherds who care only for themselves. Abraham and his family tended sheep and goats, Moses spent time herding animals and stumbled upon a bush which was in flames but did not burn. The prophet Amos was a shepherd in the southern kingdom of Judah, and warned the Jews to repent or fall to the armies of the neighboring kingdoms. The most famous shepherd of the Old Testament is probably David, son of Jesse. The carpenter Joseph, whom we talked about last week, is a direct descendant of David -- about 21 generations later. This turns out to be an important detail of our adventure. David isn't famous because of what he did as a shepherd, although he did prove that he was brave, and he did have a lot of time to practice his lyre strumming and stone-slinging. What David is famous for is that he became the king of Israel, despite the fact he started out as just an ordinary shepherd. God could call a kid

who didn't have any royal qualifications or aspirations, and anoint him with the Holy Spirit, and that ordinary person was set apart for an extraordinary task.

We have no reason to think there was anything exceptional about the shepherds we meet in the second chapter of Luke. We're not told that they were amazing people -- we don't even know if they were good at watching sheep. They were uneducated guys doing an entry-level job for little or no pay. If they were outstanding in their field, it's because that's mostly what shepherds do: they're out, standing in their field. The fact that they were out with the flock a night means it might have been early spring and lambing season -- a time when newborn lambs are especially vulnerable to predators. We're not told why this particular group of shepherds was visited by an angel of the Lord -- maybe they were the only folks who were awake in the middle of the night -- but when the glory of the Lord shines over them, they respond the way anybody with sense would: they are terribly afraid.

I'd like to read this statement from the angel and what happened after the shepherds went to Bethlehem. This is the same text that Shelly read for us earlier, and I'm sure it's familiar to you. But this time, listen especially to hear if this sounds like another part of the story which you might have heard in the gospel of Luke. Here is Luke 2 beginning in verse 10:

[The shepherds] were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born -- Christ the Lord! . . . so they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a manger. When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said."

Now listen to this passage from Luke chapter 24:

"Suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood beside them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground but the men said to them, 'Why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen. . . they told all this to the

eleven and all the rest . . . Peter got up and ran to the tomb; then he went home, amazed at what had happened.”

What I want to know -- and this is a rhetorical question, you don't have to answer -- what is God thinking? Two of the most important parts of this adventure -- Jesus' birth and his resurrection-- and God sends angels to people who aren't reputable witnesses. Do we really expect anyone to believe a bunch of roughneck shepherds? They're not exactly the brightest bulbs on the Christmas tree. They're uneducated and uncouth. The only people who are less credible than sheep herders would be . . . women. Oh dear. What is God thinking entrusting such extraordinary information to ordinary people? We get a chance, later in the Christmas story, in Matthew's gospel, to meet some magi: wise men, wealthy, respectable -- those are the kind of witnesses you need: people with power and authority. Maybe folks will listen to them. Alas, King Herod actually *does* take the magi seriously, and they have to go home by another road. They aren't able to go back to Jerusalem to share the news of the infant who is born King of the Jews. And the little bit of information that Herod has is tragic for all the infant boys of Bethlehem. So we're left with the testimony of ordinary people. People like you and me. People who were going about their lives and happened to have an encounter with Emmanuel, God With Us.

I believe that God knows the question which will change our lives, and the answer which will put us in the middle of this adventure. The question is *not* What did you see? The question we need to answer is What difference does it make? There are going to be a lot of people bearing witness to the birth of the Christ child in the coming weeks: a bunch of folks at Christmas Spec at Concord High School, sanctuaries full for services on Christmas Eve. What difference does it make if we see a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger? What difference does it make that God came down to earth and entered our ordinary lives and has called us to do extraordinary things? We need to know the story, but more importantly, this story should make a difference in how we live our lives. We don't have to be the smartest or the wealthiest or the most influential people to tell this story. This story is for everyone, in all places, in every age: Glory to God! Our Savior Christ is born and our ordinary lives are changed forever. We'll hear more about this story next week.