

“Shame on You, Shepherds!”
a sermon preached by Rev. David Carl Olson

Christmas Eve 2009
First Unitarian Church of Baltimore

“In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night . . .” These words almost define for us what we mean when we describe something as “pastoral.” In my mind’s eye, I see green pastures and herds of animals—horses there, and cows there, and maybe even sheep over there. I bet I even see a split rail fence penning herd from herd. Pastoral. Idyllic. Quaint.

In the Christmas cards of my own mind’s eye, there is even snow, and a warming fire, not burning bright, but soft, the heat and light of well-burnt coals.

I wonder what the listeners of this story heard two thousand years ago?

They didn’t imagine mid-western fields of green, but middle eastern border lands where there is not as much rainfall, where the desert is very close, where caring for sheep was dangerous. The death of one sheep, caught after a fall into a crevice, carried off by a mountain lion, that death meant significant loss to the owner of the sheep. Keeping watch meant being ready to defend the flock, defend the material asset of the owner of the herd. Defending! Dangerous! Even dignified, right?

In first century Palestine, those who live under the rule of the religious theocracy know that being a shepherd is not dignified, but despicable. Professor Joachim Jeremias in his book *Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus* shows that being a herdsman is a despised profession. People feared the shepherds. They were dirty, you know, homeless and itinerant. They lived out in the wild places, and were thought to steal from the good people, the farmers who still owned their land.

They grazed their flocks on land owned by others. And they stole from people, it was said. That’s right! You were not allowed to buy from them directly because anything you bought from them was understood to have been stolen. No wool from them, no lambs or kids, in the case of goat-herders, no milk.

A herder had limited status in the society. They could not be called as witnesses before a judge. Professor Jeremias tells us, “It was to the trade [of herder] that the greatest stigma was attached . . . [those] who followed the[se] trades . . . were not only despised, nay hated, by the people, they were *de jure* and officially deprived of rights and ostracized. . . . [Their] inadmissibility as [witnesses] put [them] on the same footing as a gentile slave. In other words [they were] deprived of civil and political rights to which every Israelite had claim.”

Shepherds were not the only people thus deprived. Gamblers with dice, Usurers, Pigeon-trainers, Dealers in produce of the sabbatical year, and, the perennial favorite, Tax collectors were all counted, with the Herders, among the despised by profession.

And so when Luke sits down to write his story about the birth of Jesus, he doesn't do what Matthew does—cite the appearance of kings and invoke the name of Herod—no! Luke tells us that the first people to know about Jesus are the despised.

Writing the shepherds into story as first recipients of birth news is a political statement. What will the listener learn? What should we think is the meaning of this birth?

Chris Hahne of the New Visions Project gives us a couple of scenarios:

The author of Luke might say, “Shame on you, dirty ones! Alas, you despised. If you will only get your act together, get your economy together (and stop grazing on other people's land!) get your ethics together (and stop stealing), get your wardrobe together (throw away those dirty clothes, wash the sheep feces from your body and get a haircut!), then God has something to say to you.” Is that what Luke tells these shameful outcasts?

An angel appears. And they are terrified! (The literal Greek says, “They felt the fear of tears.”) Wouldn't you, too? If you were the homeless, the outcast, the undereducated, the laid off, the one whose house was about to be taken by the bank. Wouldn't you be terrified? Wouldn't you feel the fear of tears? Wouldn't you be waiting for the angel to say, “Shame on you shepherds, unworthy ones! You have disobeyed God's law and are accursed in God's sight”?

I'd be terrified. My working class family, my Dad who drank too much, my Ma who had to make the best with never quite enough, my family that had to choose between light bill and electricity and mortgage, we felt the fear of tears. As a matter of fact, we often were terrified—or at least gravely worried—that we weren't going to pull it off. We'd be terrified of those angels, terrified of God's message.

Now there might be another message: “Shepherds, God is Love, and God loves sinners like you, outcasts like you, unworthies like you; God loves the sinner . . . but God hates the sin! Repent of your shepherd 'lifestyle' and go join Shepherds Anonymous!”

As a person who has lived those fears, who has heard that awful message time and again, I've cried those fearful tears.

But wait! “The angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I hereby give you the good news of a great joy which will be for all the people; namely, that a savior is born for you today who is an anointed lord in a city of David. And this is your sign: a baby, wrapped up, lying in a grain crib.’”

This is the political message that Luke portrayed: not that there was a historically proven event around a miraculous birth of one who would become, even in his death, a leader of a movement. No! Its factuality is found in this political message: God means to bring into the movement all the people, beginning with the humblest. Those whom other people, other authorities, other systems of power will through out, God will bring in from the very beginning.

This is what is factual about that night, two thousand years ago; that an eternal message of many intuitions was reaffirmed: that each person, no matter how dirty, no matter how guilty, no matter how ostracized; that all the outsiders are welcomed in. All of them. All of us.

The shepherds knew what to do; to hurry and see the miracle of birth; to share the news they received; to marvel with others at the glory of life; to let themselves be changed by what they encountered; and to praise; to praise God in their place and time; to praise life and mystery and reason and wonder in ours.

We receive thankfully the news that *this* community of purpose and politics is *ours* to inhabit; that *this* message of inclusion, even of the outcast, is the message we are called to struggle with and implement; that we may expect to be *changed* in the struggle; and that overwhelming joy may overcome our alienation, marginalization, and trembling fear. Hear these words:

“When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the [shameful] shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing which has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’”

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When [the outcasts] saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard them were amazed at what the [homeless] shepherds told them.

“The [dirty] shepherds returned, glorifying God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

“But Mary treasured [the] words of the shepherds, and pondered them in her heart.”

Let us do likewise. Blessed be. Amen. Amen.