

Grace, mercy, and peace to you in the name of Jesus Christ.

“To you is born this day... a savior.” Those were the words of the angel to the shepherds on that remarkable night two millennia ago. “To *you* is born this day... a savior.” I wonder if the angel knew to whom he was addressing those words. And if he did, I wonder if he thought it was a good idea. Because here’s the thing. We who are not shepherds have tended to romanticize shepherds, especially in this story. We imagine them as simple, honest, noble folk doing the necessary jobs that others don’t want to do. Maybe you feel the same way about migrant workers who harvest much of the produce we eat – good, honest, hardworking people just trying to make a life for themselves and their families. Or maybe you despise those sorts of folks and would like to see them gone. If it’s the latter – which you might not admit to in places like Champaign or Urbana – then you would be maybe a little closer to understanding who shepherds were for most people in the ancient world. They were *not* people you would invite to your holiday parties. They were considered dishonorable, partly because they had to work through the night when the risks to their flocks was the greatest. And because they had to work at night they couldn’t be at home to protect their families, as good upstanding people did. But they were also thought of as thieves, because they were known to graze their flocks on other people’s lands, effectively stealing from their neighbors’ pastures. For these and other reasons, the testimony of shepherds was not legally admissible in court. So again, if the angel knew all this about shepherds, I wonder if he hesitated to deliver the message that night. I wonder if he double-checked. “You want me to say this to *those* guys? Are you sure?” And then when the answer was yes, I wonder if he maybe announced the message reluctantly, through gritted teeth.

But then I wonder about the shepherds too. Because they surely did not romanticize their way of life. They knew that they were looked down on, and they may not have disagreed. They knew what they were doing when they transgressed boundaries to feed their sheep. They might have justified that to themselves: “If I don’t fatten the sheep, the owner might not pay me. So what can I do?” But they also knew the commandment not to steal. So when they are confronted in the middle of the night (maybe caught in the act?) they might be expecting that the jig is up. Whatever the case, their immediate instinct when the angel appears is fear, “great fear” in the original Greek. That is to say, they were terrified, expecting the worst.

The worst, though, is not what they get, and the first word from the angel is to reassure them. “Do not be afraid. I’ve got good news, not bad news.” But just as I wonder about the angel, I also wonder about the shepherds. Did they think the angel maybe got the wrong address, got lost on the way to the palace? Because isn’t this a “take me to your leaders” kind of moment? But then when the message sunk in, when they went looking for the sign that this message really was for them, and then found it... I wonder what they thought then, as they were telling the story of what had happened to anyone who would listen. I wonder if maybe by this time they had done a one-eighty and thought that this good news was *only* for them, as if they were somebody special now, more special than everyone else. Did they forget the part about it being good news for all the people, as the angel had said, and not just for them?

There’s no way to know the answer to all of my wonderings, because the shepherds return to their flocks and are never heard from again in Luke’s Gospel. They have played their part and exited stage right. The reason I wonder about the shepherds, though, is that it wouldn’t be the only time people hoarded God’s blessing for themselves. A thousand years or so earlier,

God promised to bless Abraham and Sarah, to make a great nation out of them, and through them to bless all the people on earth. Yet their descendants seem to have forgotten the second part and thought the blessing was only for them and their kind. In a similar way, the Christian church over the centuries has sometimes forgotten that its mission and message, God's mission and message, that is, were only for some and not for others, so that we end up thinking that church is only for good people, people like us, and, using circular logic, that going to church is what *makes* us good people, and *not* going to church is what makes bad people.

And that brings me to what we do with all of this, how we connect this oh so familiar story to the messy reality of our lives and the messy world we find ourselves in. The connection, of course, is going to very much depend upon who you are. If you are inclined to divide the world in to good and bad people, with you and your kind of people being of course on the good side, then the connection for you is realizing, together with the resentful angel that I created in my wondering imagination, that the good news of great joy is precisely for those you despise and have relegated to the bad side of the divide. Because as we heard on Sunday in the famous words of the Magnificat, Jesus has come into the world to turn it upside down, to cast down the mighty and lift up the lowly, to scatter the proud and gather the oppressed.

If the Christmas story now suddenly sounds like bad news to you, take heart. Because you're not as good as you thought you were after all. That's terrible news for your pride, your ego is definitely going to take a hit, but it's good news for who you really are, a sinner whom God loves and means to redeem.

But if you are already there, if you don't need any help recognizing your captivity to the powers of sin, death, and evil at loose in the world, if you already know, like the shepherds, your part in aiding and abetting the unjust, oppressive systems that are currently in control, and especially if you are in a place where you despise yourself and think of yourself as worthless, you of all people need to hear the words of the angel loud and clear, up in your face, as if he were speaking them directly to you. "To *you* is born a savior. Yes *you*. God in Jesus Christ has entered the messy reality of the world, your mess, your world, for *you*. Because in God's eyes you are *not* worthless. You are, in fact, worth *everything*. That is what this night is ultimately about.

So I think that covers everyone. The angel's message really is good news of great joy, and it really is for all people. In fact, the only one for whom it is bad news is that baby in the manger, who has entered our messy reality to suffer the collateral damage of sin, death, and evil for us and for our salvation. But that is bad news that he willing to endure for the really good news it makes possible.

Here's one more cool thing about this story, as if that weren't already enough, which it really is. But just for fun, get this: The shepherds in the story became angels. No, not like Clarence in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Angels are messengers. That's what the world means. When the shepherds found the angel's message to be true for them, they couldn't help but go and tell others about what had happened to them. And so it is with us, when by the grace of God and the working of the Holy Spirit we find the message to be true for us. So I don't have to tell you to "be an angel," as I have before with a wink. I will just happen. Glory be to God! And that peace of God that the angels announced, the peace which passes all understanding, may it be yours, and may it keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.