

Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday December 18, 2011

Have you ever wondered why God chose the shepherds to be the first to hear the wondrous news of Christ's birth?

You probably know that in that time and place, shepherds were necessary and extremely important to keep the flocks safe, which would, in turn, keep the sheep's owners both wealthy and warm.

Yet did you know that, in spite of their contribution to the economy and the well-being of society, at the time Jesus was born, shepherds were considered to be the lowest of the low? There was a humanly made hierarchy among the people, and the shepherds came in dead last.

So why? Why would God and the angels choose them?

If we look forward to the life that the newborn child, lying in a manger, would *lead* over the next 33 years, we realize that Jesus not only kept company with, but seemed most comfortable with, those whom the people around them had designated as outcasts within their society. Just scan the gospels—we find Jesus spending a good deal of time with and caring for those who were poor, those with leprosy, those without sight, those with challenges of mobility, with tax collectors, with women and children, among others.

We also realize that Jesus took a great deal of criticism for this from anyone who considered themselves a station above those 'others'.

But Jesus did not look at people through the lenses of society or social hierarchy. Jesus treasured each person's unique qualities—and still does—without judgment and without ranking anyone as more worthy than another.

According to what the angels told the shepherds on that wondrous night was that their good tidings of great joy were 'to be to all people'. All People! And that is how that newborn babe would live his life and how he would encourage us to live ours.

That good news has changed and healed many lives. People who, through the love and grace of Jesus Christ, have come to see themselves as beloved children of God, rather than as 'less than' other members of society.

Unfortunately, there are many modern instances of denigration among people that, through Christ, can be redeemed. Last week, I was sitting in the waiting room of my doctor's office, and an elderly Japanese man was waiting there for his wife. When his wife was paying the bill, she encouraged her husband to show the doctor and nurse something he had received in Washington DC recently. There was lots of oohing and aahing, with all those in the inner office exclaiming how beautiful the object was. I heard bits of the conversation, and realized that this man was a veteran of World War II.

He had been in an internment camp in northern California—and then he was drafted right from the camp and deployed to Hawaii in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

The man came out and sat down again. I went over to shake his hand and thank him for what he did for this country in spite of what our country had done to him. As I spoke to him, I found that I was weeping. He took out a bag, which held a box, in which a large gold medal was nestled. He and many others had been invited to Washington D.C. to be recognized and honored for their sacrifices. This man had met the President, and he explained the different symbols on the medal to me.

He told me about what it was like to be Japanese or of Asian heritage in this country during the 1930's and 40's. They were, he told me, thought of as no more than trash. And they were imprisoned in camps by our government... and then, unbelievably, sent to the front lines to fight on behalf of this country—this was the one 'privilege' these men received for living in America. Yet this man was not bitter. The hardest thing, he said, was that during that time he had his Constitutional rights taken away from him.

Although our country cannot right the wrongs that were done back then, the awarding of these medals is at least a step in the right direction toward healing and redemption.

But –70 years later--what have we learned? The faces and the circumstances change, but there are still classes of outcasts—ignored and mistreated-- all across our country and our world. These include AIDs patients; women and children in most developing countries; the homeless; and those who are severely mentally ill.

If this was the time of Jesus' earthly life, these are among the people with whom he would break bread. In our time, the gentleman in the waiting room; my cousin Jack dying from AIDS; the hundreds of homeless people living in the streets in Santa Monica, and so many others, have been placed in the role of outcasts.

But, these are the most likely people that God would send the angels to in this time.

These would be the first to hear the good news of God's love and grace. And who knows how much comfort and joy these modern-day 'shepherds' might bring to the world?

I've always admired those biblical shepherds. I love the way that they received the Good News so eagerly.

Those shepherds heard and believed.

I am enchanted by their obedience in leaving whatever they were doing in order to go in haste to see the Christ Child.

And isn't it beautiful that God chose these humble servants to be the very first to visit the baby Jesus?

In spite of their lowly station in society, God chose the shepherds. And they did not disappoint, for as they moved through Bethlehem, returning to their fields, they shared and celebrated the Good News of the Messiah's birth. Like the Japanese Veteran, the shepherds held no grudge against those who disparaged them for so long. They did not discriminate as to whom they would share the Good News with, as the shepherds understood that it was for ALL PEOPLE! The shepherds did not refrain from doing their part to bring joy to the world!

Although the infant Jesus could not articulate his purpose in coming to live among God's people, the angels sang the Good News, the shepherds shared it, and Mary and Joseph raised the child in faith.

When, at last, the child born in a stable, God Incarnate, grew up, he did articulate and enact his purpose:

To bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives, to give recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

Since that time, many people have enacted and shared the Good News of the gospel.

Yet, even—or especially—today, the true message and purpose of the child born on that holy night needs to be sung and shared and lived throughout the world so that human hierarchies will end and so that the healing and hope that were born that holy night will spread all over the world to every one of God’s children. And then, like the angels, we can sing Hosannas to proclaim that the Prince of Peace reigns, bringing joy to the world! Amen.

Luke 2: 8-20 (NRSV)

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that 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 they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Luke 2:8-20 (KJV)

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.