

IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

The Reverend David J. Powers
Sunday, November 18, 2022

Luke 2:8-20

We continue this morning, as I mentioned earlier, with our Advent sermon series Minor Figures, Major Faith. And so our first week of Advent we studied Zachariah, then Elizabeth, then last week Gabriel, and this morning, as we've heard, the shepherds. I invite you to go back if you want to catch up. We have all the sermons and worship services on Livestream, but also on YouTube as well. You can check in on those. We feel that each of these figures has something to teach us about what it means to welcome Christ in our lives and the world. So this day we will learn what it is the shepherds have to teach us. We'll read from the Gospel of Luke, the second chapter beginning in the eighth verse and moving through the 20th verse. Let us listen for God's word to each of us and to the world.

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 were 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 he 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 to 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, just as it had been told to them.

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the word of Our Lord endures forever. Amen.

So in this season of Advent we wait. We wait for the thing that God is birthing. We wait for the thing that God is growing within each of us and within the world that will be born.

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And so much of Advent, then, is teaching us patience in our waiting, a leaning forward and expectation most certainly, but also patience. It's a good lesson for us in a busy world, one we do not need to take lightly. Elizabeth nurtures John. Mary nurtures Jesus. Sometimes the faithful work of God means waiting patiently, but the shepherds teach us another way of being faithful. The shepherds teach us responsiveness. Sometimes faithfulness to God means waiting patiently for God to work, but sometimes faithfulness means to set aside the tasks at hand and to go—to move with haste, as the scripture tells us, even when it seems irresponsible. When the angel 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.” And scripture says, “So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying there.”

Sometimes God's work is quiet and deliberate. Like pregnancy. It takes time and intention. But sometimes God's work is rapid and decisive. And sometimes faith needs a response in real time.

It's a scary notion for us Presbyterians, or for those of us who call Idlewild home. We want decency and order as we say, but the shepherds convict us of our rigidity.

They surrender the arrogance of decency. They lay down the idol of order.

Scripture does not tell us that they waited until such a time when all the sheep would be taken care of and they were unafraid, that they left one for just a moment they would perish. That's not what the story says. The story says that they heard this good news, and in response they said, “Let us go now. Let us see this thing that has been told to us.” And they went quickly.

We want the shepherds to be responsible to their duties, and instead they were responsive to the movement of God. And we are left to wonder about what happens to the sheep, but we don't have to wonder at all as to whether they had an experience of God. Scripture says that they arrive and they find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger, just as they were told it.

Sometimes the work of God within us is patient and quiet, even if painful; and sometimes what God needs from us is our willingness to respond. So the shepherds teach us responsiveness in a way that perhaps no other figures within this story of the Incarnation teach us, but they also teach us something else. The shepherds teach us to be curious.

Glory to God in the highest heaven and on Earth peace among those whom God favors.

The shepherds are favored—like Mary when Gabriel visits, like Elizabeth, like Zachariah; and those who would have heard this story would have been confused. Shepherds were not favored in this time. Shepherds were not held in high regard, esteemed for their morality or their ethics. In fact, shepherds couldn't even testify in court. Their witness was considered suspect at the very least, and yet scripture says that there is a peace among them because they are favored.

Why would God entrust the good news to people who cannot be trusted?

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The shepherds were the people who were making the lives of the ancient society more comfortable. They were the ones keeping the engine of society and worship going. They were feeding people and providing sacrificial animals. But they were virtually unseen by their community. In fact, the people would rather them be hidden and voiceless out in the field at night. The people would have heard this text and said to themselves, “Well, we want what they provide to us, but we don't want to see them.”

So if God can speak to and through the shepherds, then who else might God speak through?

This week I was thinking a lot about what it means to be curious as the World Cup reached its climax. It was just after halftime last time I checked the score. Argentina was up by two. Maybe it's over. Nobody's checking their phone. {Dialogue ensues between Reverend Powers and the congregation} It's 2-2 now. Wow, thank you, Betsy! It's good. So we still are left to wonder. Will Messi get that elusive title?

I was thinking about soccer this week, and so it made me think about one of my favorite TV shows, one that I've talked about here before. Um, Ted Lasso is a wonderful character that captured the hearts of Americans. It's the story of an American football coach, an American football coach hired to run an English football team.

See, Ted Lasso is a character entrusted with a responsibility for which he is not qualified. He doesn't know the first thing about soccer, or the world's game of football. Toward the end of the first season there's this scene in a pub. Think about it, it's like the Brass Door. The team's fans and Ted and the owner, Rebecca, they've all gathered together. There's someone else there too—Rebecca's ex-husband and arch nemesis in the first couple of seasons, Rupert. Rupert doesn't like Rebecca, and Rupert definitely doesn't like Ted. He doesn't think he's qualified for the job to be the coach of his former team. He sees Ted in the pub that day walk across and throw a wayward dart at a board and decides to challenge Ted to a—uh, a contest.

Ted sets the stakes. “How about this, Rupert? If you win, you get to set the starting lineup for the last two games of the season; but if I win, you can't go anywhere near the owner's boxes at least as long as Rebecca is in charge. Stay away from my friend if I win,” Ted says.

And they agree to this duel, and the scene skips to the last turn of the match. It's obvious that Rupert is ahead by a wide margin. Ted leans over and asks the bartender what he needs to win—two triple 20s and a bullseye. And the bar gasps.

“You know, Rupert, guys have underestimated me my entire life,” Ted says. “For a while it really bothered me. I couldn't understand it. But then I was driving my son to school one day, and I saw this quote painted on the wall. It was a quote by Walt Whitman. It said, ‘Be curious, not judgmental.’ I like that.” And Ted throws his dart—triple 20. “And I got back in the car, and I was driving to work, and it hit me. All those fellas who used to belittle me, not a single one of them was curious. You see, they thought they had it all figured out, so they judged everything and they judged everyone. But it hit me that they're not questioning me. Who I was had nothing to do with it. See if they were curious, they would have asked questions—like have you played

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any darts, Ted?” He throws a second triple 20. “To which I would have said, ‘Yes sir, every Sunday afternoon at a bar with my father from the time I was 10 until the time I was 16 when he passed away.’”

Ted rolls his last dart between his fingers, and he says his father's lucky phrase, and he lets it fly. And it can't land anywhere else but in the bullseye, and the pub goes nuts. Everybody is celebrating this coach that they don't even like, actually, but celebrating because he's put Rupert in his place.

And I want to celebrate too. If you've seen that show or you've seen that particular scene, you want to celebrate too. We all want to celebrate because we think we are Ted Lasso. And maybe we are, but, Beloved, more often than not I believe we're Rupert.

We question to whom and in what ways God decides to show up. Moreso, we question the qualifications of the ones to whom God reveals God's self. That's why in this season of Advent we need the shepherds. We need the shepherds to teach us to be a little more curious and a little less judgmental.

Maybe in this season of Advent, you are sensing the spirit nurturing something brand new within you, the coming of something unforeseen, the growth of something holy. Maybe God is bringing about something within you or your family or your faith. And if that's the case, maybe the shepherds have something to teach you. Maybe they are teaching you to surrender your decency and order so that you might be more responsive to the coming of Christ in your life and in the world. Or maybe they're teaching you to be curious, to ask questions of a new thing, to not let judgment short-circuit possibility. In either case, know this, Beloved. The thing which God is nurturing within you right now is indeed good news of great joy for you and for all the people.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, one God, Mother of us all. Amen.