

**PERSPECTIVES:
THE SOCIALLY UNACCEPTABLE
LUKE 2:8-20
DECEMBER 24, 2012
CHRISTMAS EVE**

(READ LUKE 2:1-7 EARLY IN SERVICE)

There is a parable of several blindfolded people touching different parts of an elephant.

And because of their very different experiences,

they have very different thoughts about what they were touching.

One person touched the leg

and found it so strong, solid and rough they figured it was a tree.

Another felt the elephant's ear

and thought it was a fan.

Still another came in contact with the trunk as it undulated about

and assumed it was a great snake.

The parable is often used to suggest that different people have differing experiences of God,
and different perspectives on who God is.

There are many different sacred writings,

all sorts of preachers, gurus, rabbis, mullahs, priests, and ayatollahs.

And while each person's experience is their own,

no one knows which description of God is best

or even if any description of God is truly helpful.

But the Bible says it is possible to know God accurately.

Perhaps not completely,

because the mind of the creature can never fully grasp the reality of the Creator.

But we can know God accurately.

Because, the Bible insists, God has chosen to reveal himself in flesh and blood.

The baby whose birth we celebrate is, of course, baby Jesus.

But the Bible says this baby Jesus is:

Immanuel, God with us.

(Mt.1:23)

He is the Word of God made flesh.

(Jn.1:1, 14)

The image of the invisible God.

(Col.1:15)

He is the Creator of all things.

(Jn.1:3; Col.1:16)

All this lying in a feed trough in a stable.

The God of the universe has made himself known

by taking on human flesh and coming into the world as a baby.

This month we've been looking at the birth of Jesus from a variety of perspectives.

The view from the stars above,

the view from the bottom rung of the ladder, the poor and dispossessed,

the perspective of Joseph having this unplanned parenthood thrust on him,

the experience of the overcommitted innkeeper who had no room in his life for Jesus,

and next Sunday from the perspective of those who today are called "the one percent."

Tonight we are seeing the perspective of the very first visitors to the new baby, the shepherds.

LUKE 2:8-20

The place of the shepherds is more important than we might imagine.

Consider the unfortunate circumstance of Joseph and Mary.

They were moved from home by a heartless imperial decree.
 Being nine months pregnant did not provide an exemption.
 You must go anyway.
 They went to Joseph's ancestral home, but not where they lived.
 So they were isolated from friends, neighbors, and family.

This played havoc with the birth announcement tradition of the Jews.
 When a baby was born,
 a family member or close friend would serve as the herald, the deliverer of news.
 He would go through the community announcing to other family and friends
 the birth of the child.
 Those friends and family members would then come visit the new baby
 and give thanks to God.

Well, at Jesus' birth there are no friends or family around.
 There was no one to serve as the herald,
 and no one for a herald to go tell.

So God provides a herald.... The angels of heaven.
 Remember the Christmas carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing."
 The angel's first name was not Harold.
 They are the heralds announcing the birth, the herald angels.

And the angels tell... strangers, shepherds, of all things.
 Shepherds were viewed as garbage men.
 Or worse, really... shiftless, dishonest.
 Because of their work,
 they were considered ceremonially unclean and unable to enter the temple.
 They were, we would say, socially unacceptable.
 They're not the ones you want moving in next door.
 You don't sit next to them in church.

But, paradoxically, the first readers and hearers of Luke's Gospel
 would have also heard in these shepherds a quiet echo of King David,
 the greatest king of ancient Israel,
 whose hometown was Bethlehem,
 who was himself a shepherd as a boy.
 The messiah of God the Jews hoped for would come from the line of King David.
 They would know this is the one!
 God's messiah, the savior king, at long last!

An angel came to these shepherds.
 And the shepherds were overcome with awe and fear. FEAR.
 They saw the glory of God,
 the piercing light of holiness exposing the dark smudge of sin in their lives.
 They knew they did not deserve to be there.
 They had no right to stand before these messengers of God.
 They knew they were socially unacceptable.
 They knew they were sinners.
 They shrank back.

But the angel said, "Do not be afraid."
 "Do not be afraid."
 The most frequent command in the entire Bible,
 found 365 times, once for every day of the year.
 And almost every time,

the reason to not be afraid is because God is with us and God is for us.

“I bring you good news
of a great joy for all people.”

God is with you and God is for you.

He’s on your side.

How can you know God is with you and for you?

Jesus.

A baby born in Bethlehem,
the town of King David,
the place where God’s messiah is supposed to come from.
Announced first to socially unacceptable shepherds.

Then the angels sing of peace on earth.

Not the Pax Romana, the peace of Rome, that Caesar Augustus enforced with the sword,
but the peace of God which passes all understanding,
peace WITH God because of God’s gracious mercy and forgiveness,
peace with God because this child would one day
hang on a cross to bear the punishment for our sins,
so we could be forgiven and reconciled with God,
if only we would accept that gift from him to us.

This child brings peace with God.

In the wake of a mass school shooting and a world filled with other violence,
peace sounds so good.
And it is so elusive.

A baby is born.

God comes to earth to be with us, to be for us.

Peace on earth.

And when that child grew up,

he spent his time and energy ministering in the midst of ordinary people,
offering them peace with God.

In the Gospels we see Jesus calling fishermen, working class people, to be part of his ministry:

His group included at least one who would have been socially unacceptable,
a tax collector named Matthew.

And the people he ministered to?

Demon possessed people were set free.

A sinful adulteress was defended against her accusers and forgiven,
and then told to “Go and sin no more.”

Hungry people were fed.

A widow grieving the death of her only child received him back, alive and well.

Broken bodies were healed.

Lepers, ritually unclean lepers, were cleansed.

A woman with a long-term flow of blood,
considered unclean by the religious establishment,
touched the hem of Jesus’ robe and was healed.

A Samaritan woman who had been through a series of marriages
found the acceptance and love she craved only in Jesus.

He even made time to be with children.

All of that was foreshadowed in the humble circumstances of his birth
and the lowly station of his first visitors.

Consider the paradox, the irony.

The light of God piercing the dark of night, the darkness of the world.

The holy God coming to sinners.

The glory of God made manifest in a baby boy, born in a barn, sleeping in a feed trough.

The God of the universe coming to the socially unacceptable.

The Muppet Show had a skit where Miss Piggy was a beautiful princess.

She went to kiss Kermit the frog and turn him into a handsome prince.

Instead, she became a frog, and went into a panic.

Well, that's the story of Christmas,

God becoming a frog,

coming into human flesh in a very lowly way,

but without Miss Piggy's panic.

Because it was God's idea from the beginning.

Not coming into the throne room of the Roman emperor.

Not into a situation of wealth and comfort.

But into a very humble setting.

Being announced not to the powerful elites,

but to ordinary people who work for a living.

Sometimes a church can give off a vibe that only certain people are really welcome there.

They may not do it intentionally, but they do it.

You feel like you've got to drive a certain car or wear certain clothes.

You should make a certain amount of money, live in a particular neighborhood,

or even be a certain color.

You can't be a janitor, a garbage man, a grocery store checker,

or the wrong color.

I'm pretty sure that is not the church that Jesus goes to.

Do you want to know where Jesus shows up?

God came in the flesh, Jesus,

not born in Washington, D.C., not on Wall Street,

not in Hollywood or in the Dominion,

but in someone's garage on the side of one of those hundreds of streets

that are Timber-something or Ridge-something.

Not even in the house,

but a visitor no one planned for or had room for,

out in the garage.

God came in the midst of, and was first announced to,

ordinary people like you and me,

some of whom were even considered socially unacceptable,

at least to the establishment,

but not to unacceptable to Jesus.

So the shepherds got the word from the angels.

That was as close as Jesus ever got to a campaign commercial

broadcast over national television or posted on YouTube.

Angels singing to a handful of shepherds who smelled a bit like their sheep.

When you get such overwhelming news as that, God's messiah, the savior has come,

you've just got to go see for yourself.

Good news is good news,

but it doesn't make any difference at a gut level unless you experience it yourself.

You can read an article about a great new car.

But it's not the same thing as sitting in the driver's seat and taking it out for a spin.

To really get it,
 you've just got to have the keys in your own hand,
 and go for a drive.

It's the same with the good news of God's love for you in Jesus.

It's good to hear about it on Christmas Eve or whenever.

But to benefit from it, to really get it, you've got to get in, buckle up, and go for a drive.

That's why the Bible says,

 "Taste and see that the Lord is good."

(Ps.34:8)

Or, as an old TV advertisement used to say,

 "Try it, you'll like it."

Have you really given Jesus a try?

 I don't mean "have you gone to church."

 Have you opened your heart and your life to Jesus?

 Give it a try, as a Christmas gift to yourself.

 Taste and see that the Lord is good.

PRAYER FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO GIVE JESUS A FIRST TASTE

So the shepherds went and found Mary, Joseph and Jesus, just as they'd been told.

And what did they do?

 Two things.

 First, the Bible says they "spread the word."

 When good news is that good, you don't keep it to yourself.

 You can't.

 You want to tell everyone about it.

 When you bought your dream car,

 you couldn't wait to take it to work and see your coworkers drool.

 When you landed the job or got a raise,

 you looked forward to going home and telling your family.

 When you found out you were finally pregnant, FINALLY pregnant,

 you knew you were supposed to keep it quiet awhile,

 but you SO wanted to tell.

 When the Spurs won the championship,

 everybody around here knew,

 but you still wanted to talk about it.

Perhaps you think you've got nothing to tell,

 that your life has been too difficult, too painful,

 that God has not done much.

But it's probably just a matter of perspective.

Consider this story told by Senator John McCain.

 "As a POW, my captors would tie my arms behind my back

 and then loop the rope around my neck and ankles

 so that my head was pulled down between my knees.

 I was often left like that throughout the night.

One night a guard came into my cell.

 He put his finger to his lips signaling for me to be quiet,

 and then loosened my ropes to relieve my pain.

 The next morning, when his shift ended,

 the guard returned and retightened the ropes,

 never saying a word to me.

A month or so later, on Christmas Day,

 I was standing in the dirt courtyard

when I saw that same guard approach me.
 He walked up and stood silently next to me,
 not looking or smiling at me.
 After a few moments had passed,
 he rather nonchalantly used his sandaled foot
 to draw a cross in the dirt.
 We stood wordlessly looking at the cross,
 remembering the true light of Christmas,
 even in the darkness of
 a Vietnamese prison camp.
 After a minute or two,
 he rubbed it out and walked away.”
 In the midst of the ongoing ugliness and suffering of a prison camp,
 John McCain saw God at work.
 Surely you can see that God has done something in your life.
 And when you see what God has done or is doing,
 it’s always good news... really good news.
 When was the last time you told someone
 what God was doing in your life?
 Has God forgiven your sins?
 Given you a family with him as your Father?
 Answered a prayer or two?
 Has he seen you through tough financial times?
 Brought you comfort in the midst of grief?
 Helped you sort out a moral dilemma?
 Maybe God helped your marriage
 by teaching you how to love and forgive?
 Or gave you a meaningful way to serve others in his name?
 Practicing telling those stories with people you know well
 will make it easier to tell them in other places.
 Maybe you could do that
 around your Christmas tree tomorrow morning.
 You’ll bless those you tell.
 And you’ll find a blessing in it for you, too.
 The shepherds spread the good news of Christmas,
 that the savior had been born into the world.
 And they “glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen.”
 They worshiped.
 They poured out their hearts to God,
 because God had already poured out his heart to them.
 And to you and me.
 And that is why we’re here tonight to worship.

You’ve heard the good news of Christmas,
 that Jesus, the savior, is born in Bethlehem.
 He brings forgiveness of sins, reconciliation with God, salvation, healing,
 purpose, direction, and so much more.
 Now we’ll all have an opportunity to “taste and see that the Lord is good”
 through communion, the Lord’s Supper.
 And then, before we return home, we’ll glorify and praise God with a bit more worship.