

The Sign of Angels and Shepherds

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Luke 2: 8-20, Micah 5: 2-5

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Last May I went with a group of clergy women to Iona, a small island off the western coast of Scotland. Rocky terrain and with few trees and lots of sheep, it is a place of pilgrimage, with a restored Abbey church and Christian community. In the 600's monks from Ireland settled there and spread the Gospel throughout parts of Scotland and elsewhere. Iona is often called a "thin place," because the veil between heaven and earth is so thin. There is a certain kind of holiness at Iona.

Today's readings are about heaven touching earth, too, the skies opening up with angels



bearing news to the shepherds. *(Hannah Varghese – Malaysian)*

The bible brings them together in Luke's birth narrative, although they are totally different beings. The lowly peasants and the exalted and heavenly beings.



Angels are beyond us – holy and supernatural. God sends angels to give certain messages to people throughout the Bible. You might recall that angels visited Abraham and Sarah’s tent to tell them of a child and to be born to them. In Isaiah, an angel pressed a burning coal upon his mouth to cleanse him and make his words holy. And in the Gospels, angels brought messages of birth to Zechariah for his wife, Elizabeth, would bear John to prepare the way for Jesus. And, of course, the angel Gabriel announced news of Jesus’ birth to Mary, the young peasant girl and to her fiancé Joseph, a humble carpenter. Angels bring God’s message, with shimmering light and usually with the words, “Fear not.” to the frightened and amazed humans.

In Luke’s Gospel, the angels’ appearance to mere shepherds out watching their sheep at night,



seems a strange choice of recipients for the night of the birth of the Savior.

Kees Why did God choose shepherds, of all people? Why not the mayor of Bethlehem, the town council, the village rabbi, or a prominent businessman? Why shepherds, of all people? The announcement of the divine and holy birth was delivered first to some of the very lowest, crusty beings on earth.

”I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people.” (2:10).

This announcement includes four of the five elements typically found in an announcement story in the Hebrew Bible. And we might note how it differs, too.

- 1) The appearance of an angel or the Lord:

⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them,

- 2) fear on the part of the person confronted: *and they were terrified.*
- 3) The heavenly message: *¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*
- 4) An objection expressed by the person confronted (missing here)
- 5) The giving of some sign on reassurance: *¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

¹⁴***‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’***

(Richard Ascough, “The Season of Advent,” in *New Proclamation: Year C, 2000-2001*, Fortress Press: Minneapolis, 2000, p. 43.)

The missing element is an expression of an objection by the ones who receive the message. Isn’t it interesting? The shepherds do not question the message they receive but set out immediately?



Kees

Luke tells the story of shepherds who don’t question, but are simply ready to believe. There’s a kind of openness, a simple readiness to act upon the message of the angels, to take off to Bethlehem – and they go to see this thing that the Lord had made known to them, of all people!

It is helpful to understand that to the Hebrew faith, shepherds had been seen as honorable and their lives were often romanticized. For example, David was lauded as having been a shepherd boy who grew up to be king of the whole nation. However, by the first century, shepherds were almost universally despised. Being a shepherd was considered dishonorable because a shepherd was away every night and therefore, could not protect his wife and children – his household. Also, shepherds were considered “thieves” because they often grazed their sheep on other people’s property.

By having shepherds be first to worship the infant Jesus, Luke’s Gospel highlights Jesus’ own concern for the peasants and outcasts of society, those he especially came to lift up. (A few chapters later, in Luke 4:18, Jesus would begin his ministry by reading the scroll at his Nazareth synagogue, with a reading from Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free...”). Whose faces do we see in our Christmas cards, staring down in wonder at the child in the manger, along with humble Mary and Joseph? Even more humble and lowly shepherds, that’s who.



Giordano (16th c.)

So why did the angelic message come first to them? Was it because other people were too busy or preoccupied to listen? Was it because the way God was doing things was not the way **they** would have? After all, the Messiah whom the Jewish people had expected was to be a ruler, and they'd imagined someone of an elite class who would gain political power and authority. Was the stable setting too humble for more "refined" folks to visit? And, we must ask, can that happen to us, too? Can we express that attitude, too?

Or did the angels come to them in order to let us know that everyone is welcome? This is a heavenly assurance that there is none too poor, too lowly, too humble, or too despised to be excluded from God's circles of light. And from these lowly shepherds the news begins, first in their telling Mary of the angels' visit to them, and then they return to their fields praising God, spreading the news for all to hear: "Go Tell It on the Mountain!"

There is also something that tells us more about who God is--in the coming of angels down the most earthy and humble folk. I think it speaks about who Jesus is. Jesus was God in the flesh, fully human, born of Mary in the town of David. This baby was born to a poor family in a shelter meant for farm animals. By the way, we WILL have some farm animals at the manger in our children's Live Nativity on Tuesday before Christmas – Come and see the sweet scene yourself in our Pavilion outside; ah,, and pet the animals, too (an ad placement here)!

Yet, earthy as the stable was, the hosts of angels showed the divinity of this child. Heaven was coming down to earth in Jesus-- fully divine and God-in-the-flesh. He is the revealer of God, the “**revelation of God.**” John's Gospel calls him the **Word of God, the Light of the World.** God came to earth in Jesus to show us how we are to live and to heal and to bless. And he came to forgive us, to die for our sins so that we might also live eternally with God. He is nothing if he is not simply holy, God's blessing for the world.

Jesus—fully divine and fully human, would come for the lame and the blind and the ill. He would come for orphans and widows and those down on their luck. He would himself be the Good Shepherd, rescuing and feeding his sheep, God among us, caring for us.

Each of us here, whether we are from ordinary homes, or broken homes, some of us struggling now to make our way, might be able to identify with the shepherds. If you've ever felt you were an outsider, out in the cold, you can remember these shepherds. Yet they, too, would need to gather round the warmth of a bonfire to share bread and cheese together in companionship; it's something like the way we share bread in communion and at fellowship suppers, and round tables. The shepherds also cared for the sheep they protected; likewise, in this congregation we try to “shepherd” one another, too, watching out especially for those who need help.

Why the angels brought news of the birth first to these shepherds we will never fully know. Yet we can know that Jesus, the Good Shepherd, continues to seek and find the lost and the lonely, those out in the cold, those dearly in need of forgiveness, in need of love, in need of hope. Angels touching down to shepherds proclaiming the birth of Jesus the Savior – fully human and fully divine, is Good News for us all. Amen.