

SERMON: December 16, 2018 Third Sunday in Advent PEOPLE  
TEXT: Luke 2:8-20  
SUBJECT: Whom God loves  
THEME: God comes for all, as evidenced by the presence of the shepherds.  
PURPOSE: So that all would know that Jesus has come to bring them hope and salvation.  
PIC: Shepherds seeing star

Mary and Joseph are winding down after a long day. Some things have gone well; most things have been rather frustrating. They are on the road – not in their own home up in Nazareth. They don't have access to their favorite chairs or beverages; all of their friends are far away, and to top everything off, Mary has just given birth. They couldn't find a hospital or even a clean room to have the baby; just a borrowed stable where they could be alone. All they want to do now is to let the day slip away and try to get some sleep.

And then - they get that feeling you get when you are being watched! Mary stirs, Joseph looks up - and there are at least a dozen small eyes looking at them! A ragtag band of dirty, smelly children and a couple of older men have come in and are staring at them!

What would be your reaction?

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We have heard this Christmas story so much that a lot of the time we miss the drama going on here. Have you ever thought about what an invasion of privacy this is? Mary just had a baby!



[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Neonatal\\_Jacoplane.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/f/f8/Neonatal_Jacoplane.jpg)

When my children were born, they were under lock and key and no one was allowed to even come into the room where we were without having to go through 87,000 security checks!

Did Joseph grab a rake and get up to defend his family? Did Mary grab the baby and shield him with her body against this possible intrusion of bandits?

What happened in those first few seconds of this encounter?

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People of faith have been studying this scene throughout the years and trying to understand it based upon recent discoveries in archeology. It's interesting that we talk about the baby Jesus being born in a barn, but where do we get that?

Luke is the only one who mentions anything close to it. Matthew talks about the wise men coming into the house (which we will talk more about on Epiphany in January), but Mark and John don't say anything about Jesus' birth!



[https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2013/11/19/13/32/nativity-scene-213221\\_960\\_720.jpg](https://cdn.pixabay.com/photo/2013/11/19/13/32/nativity-scene-213221_960_720.jpg)

The traditional scene that we think of when we think about Christmas, like in our Nativity scene up here, may or may not completely accurate.

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Luke mentions a manger two times – in verse 12, and then again in verse 16. This word is pretty clear – a manger is a feeding trough. It looks like this –

Not what you were expecting, is it? We're used to picturing a wooden crossbeam structure with hay in it. But the reality is, the Jewish people rarely made things like this out of wood. Wood is fragile. Wood doesn't last. Wood is scarce, and workable wood (big enough to build something out of) is even more scarce!



[https://scontent-mia3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t31.0-8/28698720\\_10155778188614678\\_356201197906060296\\_o.jpg?nc\\_cat=104&nc\\_ht=scontent-mia3-1.xx&oh=89bde5e253af5ff1a0202c8ef5aaa4c5&oe=5C9B498A](https://scontent-mia3-1.xx.fbcdn.net/v/t31.0-8/28698720_10155778188614678_356201197906060296_o.jpg?nc_cat=104&nc_ht=scontent-mia3-1.xx&oh=89bde5e253af5ff1a0202c8ef5aaa4c5&oe=5C9B498A)

This manger here is over 3000 years old. It was found in the excavations of King Solomon's stables, and was used for his livestock! And as you can see, it's still here. Most things like this were made from stone, because stone was plentiful; it was cheap; and it lasted forever.

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So where was the manger where Jesus was placed? Obviously in a barn where they kept animals, right?

Not so fast – we’re assuming Western perceptions at this point. How many of you keep your chickens in your house?

But that’s exactly what people did back then! People living in small villages, like Bethlehem, would not have a large plot of land where they could keep all of their animals. What they would have is maybe a small garden in the front, and a front porch where the animals could be brought for shelter at night.

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A typical home would consist of an entry area (we might call it a foyer), a main room, an eating area, and an upstairs guest room (or an “upper room”. Does that term sound familiar?)

The family all slept in the same room downstairs, and guests would have been quartered in the upper room. This is the word that we have mistranslated “inn” – the “kataluma”. It was the place where visiting family or close friends would be put.

There is another specific word for an “inn” – “pandocheion”. This is the word that Luke uses in the story we call “the good Samaritan”. But here Luke says “kataluma” – guest room.

The census would have meant that a lot of people would have been seeking shelter, and the oriental custom is that you don’t turn away family. By putting Mary and Joseph in the foyer, this would have actually meant that they could be together and have a little more privacy, since men and women would have been separated if they slept with everybody else up in the guest room.

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Since the animals would sometimes have been brought in at night, there would be a manger there for them. That would make a convenient spot for Mary and Joseph to have placed the baby after he had been born. And we find this tradition in Europe even today – a spot in the main home where the animals stay at night. I’ve also seen this in Cuba and in other Latin America countries. It’s not an unusual thing – just strange to Americans!

I found this picture recently – it is a painting by Gari Melchers -



I hope that this doesn’t ruin your understanding the Christmas story – it actually makes it even more meaningful to me. Mary and Joseph were welcomed by family, and

even though it might not be acceptable by our 21<sup>st</sup> century standards, putting them in the foyer would have been a chance for them to stay together during childbirth.

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But let's get back to the shepherds – who were they?

Shepherding was not a high-end profession. It was long hours, loneliness, very little pay – not something you would get rich on!

Shepherding jobs were given to people with minimal job skills. It was usually one of the youngest children of the family, or adults who really couldn't do anything else.

You may remember that David was a shepherd – because he was the youngest, and none of the older brothers wanted to do such a demeaning job. Joseph (of the Joseph and his brothers story) was able to get out of it because he was his father's favorite, which I'm sure added to the animosity of the older brothers who resented that their YOUNGER brother got to stay inside while THEY had to go out and work!

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Shepherding was not a high-valued position. It was about as low as you could go in society. Shepherds were rarely invited to the nice parties or cotillions in town. Uneducated, dirty, smelling like sheep, covered with lice – this is NOT who you would want holding your newborn baby!

Now, this leads us to the theme of this week – ***Why did God choose to reveal Himself first of all to the shepherds?***

We talked about this question at Bible study on Wednesday. Why shepherds? Why not kings? Why not the news media? Why not the priests, or the other religious leaders? Why did God send the angels first of all to those whom no one else really cared about?

What do you think?

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People say that the ways of God are mysterious, but in reality, they're not. When you understand God's heart and how different God's priorities are from the worlds', we can start to get an inkling of what God is up to.

We talked about this last week when we were discussing prophecy. Do you remember?

***Prophecy is not predicting the future, it is understanding God's heart so well that you can see what God is doing next.***

If we start with the assumption that power and strength and dominance is what God values, then we will misunderstand God every single time. We can't understand

forgiveness, or humility, or loving our enemies as we love ourselves if God is all about power and control.

But those are not the values of God. Power and strength and being exalted in front of everybody else is not the heart of God, but rather the heart of Satan. Satan is the one who craves power and dominion. God doesn't, because God is not insecure. Truly great people don't need to be told how great they are.

The true measure of strength is not how many people you can control, but how many you can serve. The world operates on the fear of running out; God gives and gives and gives, because that's who God is.

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I believe that God came to the shepherds first to show that there is no one beneath His love. Those whom the world overlooks, whom the world uses, God exalts. An immigrant couple, pregnant, unmarried, travelling because of political circumstances – that's who God chooses to bring His powerful love into the world! The insignificant of society is who God spoke to first. And God chose to come to earth, not as a conquering hero, but as a baby.

At our District Pastor's meeting recently the speaker was talking about when he and his wife had gone to a local restaurant. They had a young baby, and it was late at night, and the crowd wasn't of the people that you would normally invite over for scones and tea. It was a pretty rough group.

At one point his wife had to take the baby to get changed, and the path to the nearest restroom was through the bar. Again, these weren't the bright, shining bastions of society. These were the broken, hard, rough-around-the-edges people who had just come to drown their sorrows for a while.

But as he watched his wife weave her way through this crowd, he saw a change come over the people. In the presence of a baby, their demeanor became different. They softened. The hard lines around the eyes opened up. They stopped drinking; they stopped scowling; they started smiling.

Who could be intimidated by a baby?

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In my daily devotions there is one I came across recently that has these words:

***Jesus took the lowest place so decisively that no one has ever been able to wrest it from Him.***

Because of His birth in a manger, because of His death on a cross, because of His willingness to associate with those whom the so-called "good" people avoided, there is no one whom Jesus can look down upon. There is no one lower than He!

This means that Jesus will never look down upon you! Whatever brokenness or sins or habits that you have in your life, Jesus will never be ashamed to call you “Friend”.

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These are the people that Jesus came for – **“Come to Me, all who labor and are heavy-laden, and I will give you rest.”**

God has a special place in His heart for the broken, the sad, the overlooked and abused. God loves all of His children, but His desire is that everyone would have enough to eat and a place to sleep and people who care about them.

For those of us who already have this, that’s great! So God is calling us now to join Him in caring for those who don’t have it yet.

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Why did Jesus talk so much about the poor? “Blessed are the poor”, “Give to anyone who asks from you”, “Whoever does this for the least of these my brethren” –

God chose to become poor, to become nothing, to hang out with sinners and gluttons and drunkards – because they need Him most.

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And that is what Jesus is calling us to do. We who call ourselves His disciples have to continue the work that He started. We are now His hands and feet to bring hope and healing to those who are lost.

So the message we hear from this scripture today is, first of all, God does things in very unusual ways!

God does not follow the world’s priorities, but gives and cares for those who can give nothing back. He doesn’t say, “Follow Me – if you can be of benefit to My cause.”

No, Jesus says, “Come to Me, and let Me give you rest.”

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Two words to give you for our mission today –

First, ***YOU MATTER TO GOD.***

It doesn’t matter what you’ve done or what other people have done to you, you matter to Jesus. He is not ashamed to be called your friend, and He will never look down upon you.

And second, ***HOW YOU TREAT OTHERS MATTERS TO GOD.***

How you and I treat others shows Jesus what we really think about Him. And more specifically, how you treat those who can never pay you back is the greatest indicator of how you really feel about Jesus.

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I was reading up on some management techniques recently and one of the recommendations was to take potential employees out for lunch or dinner.

The reason was to see how they treat the wait staff at a restaurant. How people treat those whom they consider to be their servants is a good indicator of what kind of person they are.

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So what kind of people are we? What kind of servants will we be during this holiday season?

Keep your eyes open for the unexpected, for ways that God is working that the world misses.

Look for God at work in feeding those who are hungry, visiting those who are sick, being compassionate in the face of oppression. God is not done with this world yet, and He still comes to those who keep their eyes focused on the small things of this world.

For those who are broken – you matter to Jesus.

And for those who have been healed – share His healing power with those whom you meet.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>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: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

<sup>15</sup>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.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.