**Shepherds, Why this Jubilee?**

**12-13-20**

Shepherds aren’t cute.

* At least that’s the only reason I can come up with as to why the story of the shepherds has been so frequently ignored in favor of cuter, cuddlier stories.
  + As I was listening to Christmas music this week, I was struck by the popularity of the quasi-shepherd stories sung about.
    - First, there’s *The Little Dummer Boy*.
      * Written in 1941 and first performed by the Trapp Family Singers – yes the same ones we know from the movie as the Von Trapp Family Singers.
        + This is about a little boy who comes to the manger to play his drum for baby Jesus.
        + This song has been recorded nearly a thousand times by everyone from Pat Boone to Bob Dylan.
        + Even Captain Kirk (aka William Shatner) recorded this song.
      * But it was the 1968 stop-motion animated film by that name that added the Shepherd theme, as the Little Drummer Boy was caring for a little lamb that was dying when he came to the baby Jesus in the manger.
        + Too cute.
    - Then, 20 years after The Little Drummer Boy, *Do You Hear what I Hear* was written.
      * Again, grimy adult shepherds were not cute enough for modern ears, so the song begins with the night wind telling a cute little lamb to look up into the sky and see the Christmas Star.
      * From there, the lamb tells a cute little shepherd boy to listen for the Angel Choir…
      * And the little Shepherd Boy tells a mighty King about the Christ Child…(presumably NOT King Herod).
      * And the Mighty King tells everyone that this child will bring “goodness and light”.
  + What is it about the story of the shepherds that people keep writing them out of the script?
    - They seem to like all the other characters: the angels, star, wisemen, mother and child.
      * Even the sheep continue to get top billing.
      * All of them are either cute or exotic. But not dirty old shepherds.
* But the truth is, that’s kind of the way they were thought of in Jesus day as well.
  + Now don’t get me wrong, the IDEA of a shepherd was still highly thought of in Jesus’ day.
    - After all, King David had been a shepherd and God was said to “feed his flock, like a shepherd”.
    - In fact, Jesus compared Israel’s leaders to bad shepherds and referred to himself as the Good Shepherd.
  + But while the idea still had a certain nostalgia associated with it that went with it, the people who were actually employed as shepherds were not seen as a very reliable bunch.
    - In fact, ancient Jewish texts indicate that shepherds were not even allowed to be witnesses in a court of law – that’s how unreliable they were considered to be.
    - In reality, it was an isolated, lonely, poor paying job that often employed dubious characters who were not always welcomed by society.
      * Nothing “cute” about them at all.
      * If anything, it might be considered a little embarrassing to include them in the birth narrative of the Messiah.

But it is to these shepherds abiding in the fields that we want to ask the same question that we put to Mary, the mother of Jesus, last Sunday: Shepherds, Why this Jubilee?

* We noted last week that Mary was a dirt-poor woman in 1st century Judah who’s reputation had been shredded by an “unexplained” pregnancy while betrothed to Joseph, the carpenter, of Nazareth.
  + Being poor left her powerless, being a woman left her disenfranchised and out of the loop when it came to her faith, and being pregnant made her an outcast in an otherwise close-knit community.
  + Yet, she maintained a level of Jubilee in the face of it all that caused us to ask, “Mary, Why this Jubilee?”
    - I strongly recommend that you listen to last week’s sermon if you haven’t had a chance yet.
    - I know Mary’s “answer” to that question spoke deeply to my own heart.
* Well, these shepherds were not in much better shape than Mary.
  + They too were poor, disenfranchised social outcasts, though for different reasons.
    - And we might imagine that they, too, would have very little in their lives to be excited about.
      * Watching sheep during the graveyard shift, night after dark and dreary night.
    - Overlooked, forgotten, and always the last to know what’s going on in society because, well, they were so seldom there.
  + So, as the song says, “Shepherds, Why this Jubilee?”
    - “Why your joyous strains prolong?

What the gladsome tidings be

Which inspire your heavenly song?”

* + - Granted, a curious verse considering that it wasn’t the shepherds singing, but the angels.
      * But it doesn’t change the fact that these poor, down and out shepherds were filled with Jubilee that night and long after.
      * And I want to know why.

So, let’s let Linus remind us, as he did Charlie Brown way back in A Charlie Brown Christmas.

* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVp5AGte_4Q>
  + Start at 20 seconds
  + Stop at 1:23
* I love that telling of the story – and did you notice that when Linus gets to “Fear not!” he drops his blanket, not to pick it up again until he is done?
* Well, we all know the story – the angel, the fear, the proclamation, the heavenly host, that song.
  + All of these things played a part in the Shepherds Jubilee, but no single one of them was what brought Jubilee to their hearts.
    - In fact, great and awesome as that experience was, in the end, it wasn’t the miraculous and overpowering experience that inspired their Jubilee.
  + No, what brought them Jubilee is the same thing – dare I say, the only thing – that brings true Jubilee to any heart; and the shepherds tell us all about it in vs. 15.

*15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,* *“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened,* ***which the Lord has made known to us.”***

* Did you catch that last phrase? I hope so, because it is the key to their Jubilee.
  + It wasn’t the angel or the choir or even the great theophany as they cowered before what the Jews called the Shekinah glory as the angel approached them.
    - What our text calls *the glory of the Lord shining round about them.*
  + These were all great and memorable – a thrill and exhilarating to be sure.
    - But alone they would not have brought true Jubilee to the shepherd’s hearts.
      * For Jubilee is different from is more than just the emotionally high of a memorable event.
      * Jubilee is an entire change in the trajectory of our lives – it is a shift in fortune, a move from irrelevant to significant, a restoration of value, meaning and purpose.
      * Being part of a miraculous event can be a thrill and bring amazement and gratitude.
      * But for true Jubilee to occur, that event has to be understood to be given directly and only to you!
        + Jubilee does not come from vicarious experience.
        + As you will see later in the passage, those who HEARD the shepherds story were “astonished” by it, but Jubilee did not ensue.
        + No, Jubilee arises when we discover that in our isolation, our insignificance and our destitution, God Himself sees us and reaches out to us – proposes to us, if you will – making known his love and desire to include us in HIS story.
      * Maybe this will help to describe the difference.
  + Over the 38 years Nancy and I have been married, I have disappointed my wife in a myriad of ways.
    - But maybe the first of those disappointments arose from the very way in which I asked her to marry me.
      * We weren’t at dinner, in fact, we weren’t out on a date at all.
      * I didn’t have the ring, I hadn’t worked on a script, and it kind of came off as something of an off-the-cuff suggestion.
        + Something like, “so, do you think we should get married?”
    - Now I don’t remember hearing anything about it immediately after (though it was clear at the time that she was unimpressed).
      * But later, after we got married, Nancy began to hear these great stories from her friends and acquaintances about how their husbands had proposed to them.
        + You know, creative, thoughtful, planned out, surprising, romantic…
      * And every time she heard another story, she became more and more disappointed with my sorry effort.
        + For 38 years…

And I have to say that it doesn’t help at all that these days proposals major productions with three camera shoots and 100,000 likes on Facebook.

* + - * + So, before I go any further, I would like to publicly apologize for being such a dunce all those years ago.
  + But getting back to the shepherds…
    - Up to this point, all they ever heard about God and faith were the wonderful stories of other people’s experiences.
      * Remember, they were the overlooked and always the last to know.
      * Great and wonderful things didn’t happen in their lives – their lives were mundane, repetitious, uninspiring.
      * And every time they heard (probably belatedly) some great thing that happened, there had to be a part of them that felt a little bit like Nancy hearing of these marvelous proposals.
        + It only served to reinforce the pathetic nature of hers – and nothing could ever change that.
    - So angel visitations and choirs and saviors were all fine and good to hear about later, and they may inspire, but they didn’t bring much Jubilee.
      * No, that would only come when God proposed directly to them.
        + And He did.
        + Not in some exotic location, but on the hillsides they watched over sheep every night.

In the middle of their isolation, monotony, and insignificance, God broke in to “make known to them” his great love.

* + - * + With angels and brilliant light, He proposed to these down-and-out shepherds.
      * And what He proposed was a treasure hunt:

*11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*

* The treasure? The Messiah himself – “Christ the Lord”.
  + These shepherds, living in Israel, would have been very much aware of the promises of the coming Messiah.
    - Prophetic messages from the Old Testament had indicated that the time was just about right for the coming of the Messiah (or “Christ” as the Greek text calls him).
    - So, they had a hope, if not an expectation, that Messiah would come and rid the nation of the Roman occupation.
  + Well, the angel declares to these outcasts that this very night the Christ has been born in the city of David, which they knew to be Bethlehem.
* This is the treasure, and now comes the “hunt” part.

*12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”*

* + Here are the signs, the angel says, the clues by which you will find the child and thus know that what is being declared is true.
    - First, its happening in Bethlehem, that’s where you’ll have to look.
    - Second, what you are looking for is a baby.
      * OK, but there were probably lots of babies in Bethlehem. They need more.
    - Third, this baby will be wrapped in swaddling cloths.
      * This would indicate a very young baby, as swaddling cloths were normally only put on infants.
        + The child would essentially be bound up tightly in these cloths (almost a mummy-like wrapping, only leaving the head uncovered) in order to both keep the baby warm and to assist in developing straight bones.

At least that was the theory.

* + - * + Still, though, not much to go on, as using swaddling cloths was pretty common for infants in those days.
      * But then there was a last clue or sign.
    - THIS swaddled infant would be found lying in a manger – an animal trough.
      * OK, that one is pretty unusual, and it would help the shepherds zero in on where to look.
* But what I want you to see is that the thing that ignites the shepherds’ jubilee is not the awe-inspiring event, but the personal invitation or proposal given by God to them.
  + As with Mary last week, God had noticed them and had gone out of his way (really out of everyone’s way) to invite them to take an active role in what we know as the nativity story – God’s story.
    - God found them, He spoke to them, and He invited them to join Him in what He was doing.
    - Or as they said to one another:

*15 “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened,* ***which the Lord has made known to us.****”*

* + - * Now as is normal, our translations and traditions have a tendency to take all the excitement and wonder out of these stories.
        + As if these noble shepherds, with halos glowing around their heads, said in subtle low tones in perfect King’s English…

*Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*

* + - * No, the Greek text communicates a great deal more excitement and confusion as they shepherds spoke wildly to one another.

*What are we standing around here for? God has just included us in the first and greatest “reveal” party in history and all the action is down in Bethlehem! We’re invited, He’s told us what to look for, there’s got to be someone we can leave the sheep with. Let’s go!*

You see, Jubilee moves us:

* When filled with Jubilee, we cannot stand still and quietly “appreciate” it – like the old Church Lady on TV saying, “isn’t that special”.
  + Jubilee changes us, it moves us, it causes us to sing, to declare, to endure, to act, to search…
  + And search is what the shepherds did.

*16 And they went with haste and found…*

* + - In other words, they ran to town.
    - And the Greek word translated “found” might better be translated “sought and found”.
      * They didn’t just happen upon it, but they diligently searched according to the clues God had given them by the angel.
      * And they soon found the child that fit all the criteria – a new-born wrapped in swaddling cloths lying there in a cattle trough.
        + This was the sign – the indication from God himself that this child was *the Savior, who is Christ, the Lord*.
        + This group of ruffians had a front-row seat to the coming of the long-awaited Messiah.
* How might that change a man or a woman?
  + For Mary, who had been invited to join God in this adventure some nine months previous, the journey was just beginning.
    - She was still basking in the Jubilee of God, treasuring the whole experience and pondering what it all means.
      * For surely, these unexpected guests crowding their little birthing stall shared with them the story of their invitation to hunt for the treasured Messiah.
      * For Mary it would have been an affirmation at the end of a long journey that her invitation not been just a dream, but that God was still at work, and she was still in the middle of His plan.
  + And for the shepherds?
    - In some ways, nothing changed.
      * The Bible implies that they headed back to their fields to take care of the sheep – their isolated occupation still demanding their time.
    - But they were not the same men and women.
      * They were no longer forgotten and isolated – they were known and chosen by God.
      * They were no longer disenfranchised and powerless – God himself had invited them and commissioned them as a part of HIS story on earth.
      * Sure, their occupation continued to be the shepherding of sheep, but they had a new vocation: to make known what God had made known the them.
        + Look at vs. 17

*17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.*

* + - * That phrase *made known* is the exact same wording that was used back in vs. 15 when they talked among themselves about:

*…this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

* + - Just as in a few years God would choose fishermen, a tax collector, and a revolutionary to spread the Good News of Jesus…
      * On this night, He chose shepherds.
    - And these shepherds did what anyone who experiences the Jubilee of God does naturally – no training and no command necessary.
      * They spread the Jubilee of God wherever they went – to every corner of their influence.
      * Because the Jubilee of God changes everything.

The lost are found, the insignificant are noticed, the disenfranchised are invited, the powerless are made mighty, the oppressed are released, the dispossessed are restored…

* Now the text ends by telling us that those the shepherds spread Jubilee to were “astonished” or “amazed”, but it doesn’t say by what.
  + Obviously, the story the shepherds told was amazing all by itself – angel choirs and Shekinah glory and all.
    - Some I’m sure were encouraged, others were doubtful.
  + But some of those who stood amazed at the shepherds story may have been most amazed at the idea that God would actually stoop so low as to reveal the coming of Messiah to shepherds and not Kings or Religious leaders, or even them.
    - They were astonished that these backwoods, destitute dirtbags would dare to think that anyone would believe that God would speak to them.
    - The very notion was insulting and even a little bit embarrassing – laughable, even, if it weren’t so sad.
      * God speaking to shepherds – and Messiah born in a barn.
      * Ridiculous, outrageous, astonishing.
* It is the stuff of Jubilee.
  + God raising up, reconciling and restoring those who know their desperate need and their complete inability to fill it.
  + Such Jubilee can be yours today – for God continues to make His proposal to humanity.
    - The Savior, who is Christ, the Lord, has come and died so that you might live in Jubilee from here to eternity.
    - But such Jubilee can only be known when we start with the attitude of a destitute shepherd or an outcast, unwed mother.
      * It starts with acknowledging that apart from Him, we have nothing, can achieve nothing, and are nothing.
        + Our value and significance is only found in the fact that God loves us and wants us to be with Him.
        + That the Son of God made himself nothing, so that all of us who were nothing might become sons and daughters of God.
        + And so He invites us – He proposes to us – after all, is not the church called the bride of Christ?
* Shepherds, Why this Jubilee?
  + It’s because God took notice of them, reached out to them, and invited them to take part in His story.
  + And this same God is still reaching out; and He’s reaching out to you – to all who understand that we are paupers in need of rescue by our gracious God.
    - This was the source of the shepherds’ Jubilee, a Jubilee that will be experienced by anyone who will humbly respond to the proposal of the Savior – Christ, the Lord.

**Benediction:**

*Now by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned, for the Jubilee of God arises out of a humble heart as God raises us up and makes us His bride.*