

“Minor Characters / Major Love: The Shepherds”

By Emily Wilmarth

Now in that same 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 was 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 them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and 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 them

Luke 2:8-20

This Advent we have been looking at some of the minor characters of the Christmas story. Characters that don’t often make it into our manger scenes, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, the parents of John the Baptist, who, it turns out, are a very major part of the story of Jesus’s birth.

Today we hear about the shepherds, who of course, do usually make their way into our nativity scenes. But I would guess that most of us still think of them as marginal to the story. After all, the baby Jesus was coming, shepherds or no shepherds.

And yet, the shepherds are the very first group of people to hear the good news of the baby’s birth. Perhaps they’re not so marginal after all.

You know who doesn’t move fast? Turtles, sloths, and kids.

Kids do not move fast when you need them to. When it’s time to leave to catch the school bus, for example. Or get to church on time. Kids do not move fast during that stage of life when they’re potty training, and they say they need go, so you try to rush them into the bathroom, but then that train set you set out earlier in an attempt to keep them busy only now catches their attention while you shudder to think about yet another accident you’ll have to clean up.

Kids do not generally make haste when you need them to. But when they are motivated, guess who flies? Who flies, for example, out of bed on Christmas morning?

Who rushes to be first in line for the slide at the swimming pool? Who would readily push their sibling completely to the ground to grab the last cookie off the dessert plate?

Kids.

I've got to admit, the kids' priorities aren't all wrong. By all accounts, kids are motivated by the right things. Fun. Excitement. Joy. Food. Kids move when the time is right.

I've been thinking about what's made me move quickly recently. (Besides, of course, my effort to clean up aforementioned accidents.) I've made haste to call or get to the hospital when I hear a church member is ill. I've rushed to the bed of a little one who is crying out in the night. A few years ago I hurried to buy toilet paper when I heard it might run out.

It's usually urgent things that make me move quickly. And in my life, urgency is usually characterized by bad news. What gets me moving are situations when someone is hurting or something is broken and I believe I can somehow help or fix it.

Which is so interesting because the urgency of shepherds is just the opposite. The urgency that motivates the shepherds to go with haste to search for the baby Jesus is the urgency of Good News. The angels tell them that there will be a sign, and the way Luke tells it, the shepherds don't hesitate. Like the child rushing to get out of bed on Christmas morning, if there's great joy to be found, the shepherds waste no time to go searching.

I've always considered the shepherds' role a passive one in this story. When I see them in the nativity scenes, they're always bowing down at the manger or peering over Mary and Joseph's shoulders at the baby Jesus. In the nativity tableau, the shepherds don't seem to be doing anything.

I've even thought of their passive role from a theological standpoint. These shepherds receive the good news the angels bring. They sit out in their fields, and the angels come to them. It's pretty amazing, isn't it, that God chooses shepherds to approach first. Shepherds were not—are still not—society's elite. Shepherds are not celebrities. They are not top earners. You don't need an Ivy League education to be a shepherd. Shepherds are everyday laborers.

Don't get me wrong: shepherds are important, critical in fact. In Jesus's day, shepherds provided the sheep necessary for sacrifices to God in the temple. Sheep are a source of food and clothing. You need sheep, so you need shepherds. Just like you need vegetable pickers and meat packers and restaurant servers and the folks who clean office buildings in the darkest hours of night. Actually, the shepherds of Jesus's day were not unlike those who labor hard in our time. Only—if you can believe it—it was likely worse for them. Worse because extreme taxation by the Roman government required people to pay up to 75% of their wages in taxes. And worse because of the threat of violence against anyone who dared speak a word of resistance or rebellion against Caesar Augustus and his government.

Those shepherds weren't anybody special, and you'd think that with good news like the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord, those angels would have approached an audience with a little more star power. (Forgive the pun.)

But Luke assures us that the shepherds are God's chosen audience.

I wonder if God's angels came to them because, unlike the rest of the world, the shepherds could actually hear the song they sang. Out there in the fields, unplugged, undistracted, those shepherds were quiet enough to hear the angels' song.

Maybe God's angels appeared to the shepherds out in the fields because they didn't want to compete with all the other noise. The chatter of gossip. The endless opinions and quips and sound bites that clog up our ears with so many words. The unrelenting decrees and demands of emperors and their empires.

Maybe God's angels appeared to the shepherds because, if anyone needed glad tidings, if anyone needed great joy of peace for all people, it was the ones whose lives were not characterized by peace at all. If Luke's story of the shepherds teaches us anything, it is that God's love is not reserved for the upper echelons of society, the ones who hold power, the ones we tend to consider "successful" in this life.

God chose the SHEPHERDS to tell first.

And what do the shepherds do with the good news?

They don't just take it in and think it over. They don't debate whether the angels were real. They don't worry if it'll be challenging to find this one baby, nesting somewhere in a manger.

No! They go with haste! They waste no time! I love to play with this scene in my imagination. Did they all run off together? Did the sheep go, too? Did woolly chaos reign in the streets of Bethlehem that night?

It turns out, these shepherds aren't passive at all. They move. They go. And when they find the baby, Luke says, they share with everyone who has ears to hear the good news the angels told them. The shepherds become the first evangelists. And everyone who hears them is amazed.

So all of this makes me wonder. What kind of news gets us going these days? What's eliciting a sense of urgency in us? What news is inspiring us to get up and go with haste to share?

Is it good news of great joy for all people? Is it glory to God and peace on earth?

Are the messages that get you going words of possibility? Words of hope? Words of encouragement, compassion, and justice?

If it is, wonderful. Keep that good news coming! Keep singing and shouting and spreading such holy good news.

If not, then maybe, just maybe, it's time to retune our ears. So that we can be those who listen, not for the drama, the gossip, the endless bickering and finger pointing and blaming. Because those words will eventually wear us down and wear us out. And then, all we'll be is passive. Mere recipients, but never those who spread good news. And the last thing God needs is passive disciples.

A few years ago, a preacher friend of mine gave birth early on a Sunday morning right before Christmas. We're in a small group of pastors who text a prayer for one another every Sunday morning before worship. That morning, she sent our group the picture of her new little boy and followed with the words, "A baby's coming. Preach the good news."

Beloved, a baby is coming. Good news is on the way. So may our sense of urgency be characterized by good news. And there may be nothing more urgent than God's need for us to go with haste and spread the word. In Jesus Christ, God's peace, God's love, God's holy grace has come for all people.