

Rethink Family

Sterling UMC
December 11, 2011
Isaiah 61:1-4

If you had good news, whom would you tell first?

When something wonderful happens to me, the first people I want to tell are those closest to me, those most important in my life, my family. They have proven themselves trustworthy over time, and will rejoice with me. They've stood by me during difficult times, and will share in a victory.

When God had the best news of the ages, whom did He tell first? Who does God announce the birth of His Son to? Who does he invite to come and see the new baby? A ragtag collection of sheep herders! There is only one announcement of Christ's birth recorded in the Scriptures, only one invitation from God to anyone to come visit Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus. And that one invitation goes to a bunch of uneducated, smelly, low-class, social and religious outcasts, a bunch of shepherds.

Why shepherds? They were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of. First of all, they were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean. Their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields, watching over the sheep. A modern day example might be a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. But they were looked down on, from a religious point of view.

Not only that, but shepherds were borderline social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion. Kind of the way people today might look at gypsies, or even immigrant workers. They were often accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds. They were not permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy. And on top of all that, they really didn't have much contact with other people. Most of the time, they were "living out in the fields." This was not a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack.

Now, step back for a moment. Imagine you're God and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever; an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ. The birth of the One who will be the Savior of the whole world. The One for whom the nation of Israel has been waiting and hoping and praying for thousands of years. Finally, He has come! Who do you

announce it to? Who do you tell? Who do you invite to come and see?

You would expect an event like the birth of Christ to be announced to the most important people in the nation. Political leaders – kings, governors, magistrates, even Caesar – might be invited to come and pay homage to the future ruler. Religious leaders – Priests, rabbis, synagogue officials, the head of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin – they would all be invited to worship their Messiah. Military leaders. Wealthy merchants. Men and women of distinction. But none of them got the word. None of them were invited [Some foreign kings figured it out by following the star of Bethlehem, and they informed Herod. But they didn't get an angelic messenger, or angel choir, or invitation.]. Only these few, poor, shepherds, these social and religious outcasts, received the announcement.

So why? Why did God do this? Why did He send His angels to announce the birth of Christ to these shepherds, to invite them, and them only, to come and see the child?

Were the shepherds especially pious, unusually holy? In spite of the fact they couldn't participate in organized religion, were they just outstanding believers in God? It's doubtful, although the passage does say that when they got the news they believed what the angels said, and did what the angels told them to do. But there's nothing in the text to indicate that they were more religious than anyone else.

Were they perhaps expecting this, were they looking to God to visit them? Could they have anticipated this in any way? No. In fact, if I'm a shepherd, I'm probably convinced God has no idea who I even am. I don't sacrifice at the temple, I don't show up for the feasts, I don't go to synagogue; and my deepest theological discussions are with a bunch of stupid, snot-nosed sheep. If God does know who I am, he can't think much of me.

So why did God send the angels first to the shepherds? Several possible answers have been proposed, such as the fact that Jesus Himself is later called the Good Shepherd, caring for us as His flock. But I prefer a simpler explanation. God wanted to rethink family. God wanted to show that His love does not discriminate on the basis of class, or wealth, or social standing. He does not respect kings and princes more than hourly laborers; he does not value priests and pastors above the people in the pews. God does not show favoritism; He does not give preferential treatment to one group of people over another. His love is available to all on the same basis – faith in Jesus Christ, and faith alone.

In fact, many passages of Scripture indicate that God loves to lift up the lowly and humble, while at the same time bringing down the proud and self-satisfied:

“You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low.” (2 Samuel 22:28)

“For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation.” (Psalm

149:4)

“For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:12)

"God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. (1 Peter 5:5-6)

And from our Scripture lesson for today, “He has sent me to bring good news to the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim release for captives, and liberation for prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor and a day of vindication for our God, to comfort all who mourn, to provide for Zion's mourners, to give them a crown in place of ashes, oil of joy in place of mourning, a mantle of praise in place of discouragement.” (Isaiah 61:1-3)

In other words, God was demonstrating, by His choice of these humble shepherds to be the first to receive the news of Christ's birth, that Jesus was not going to be the Savior of only the political and social and religious elite. Jesus was not going to be the Savior only of kings and governors, or popes and priests. Jesus is the Savior of all equally, he doesn't give preference to any group or any class. Nor does he discriminate on the basis of intelligence, or education, or wealth, or profession, or political power, or social standing, or any of the other qualities that human beings judge by. His love is offered indiscriminately to anyone who will repent and believe, anyone who will trust in Him as Savior.

Paul makes the same point in his first letter to the Corinthians:

‘Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

In other words, God especially likes to use people who are humble and lowly and ordinary, because that makes His power and wisdom all the more evident. When He uses people who are obviously very gifted and powerful, then the results can be attributed to human effort and human talent. But if He uses people of obviously low to average abilities, then all the credit for the results go to Him.

So, what does all this mean to me? Well, if you identify with the shepherds, it should be very encouraging. Perhaps you see yourself as kind of on the outside looking in. I imagine that many nights, as the shepherds sat out in those cold, lonely fields, with nothing but dumb animals to keep them company, they looked over at the village, saw

the lights of the homes and heard the faint sound of families, people laughing, and wished they could be a part of that. Maybe you've felt that way too. Not one of the "beautiful people," not especially wealthy or powerful or influential. Not likely to ever see your name in the paper for some great accomplishment. On the fringes socially. Maybe when you compare your level of religious observance to others, the comparison isn't favorable. Spotty church attendance, little Bible reading, infrequent prayer. You think that if God is even aware you exist (which He probably isn't), He probably doesn't have a very favorable opinion of you. And you know what? A lot of people, deep down, secretly feel like that. Even people you would think of as "having it all together". On the surface, everything is going great. But on the inside, you feel like you don't fit in. You feel like God doesn't really care, couldn't care, about someone like you.

If any of that description strikes a chord with you, then I have good news. Great news. The best news possible. God loves you. Just like He loved those shepherds. You are a part of his family. And you are special to Him. Just like those shepherds were special to Him, so special that He gave them the incredible privilege of being the first to hear of Christ's birth, being the first people other than Joseph and Mary to lay eyes on the Son of God, being the first to tell others about Christ. He didn't give those privileges to the Roman Caesar or to the Jewish high priest; he gave it to the shepherds. Not in spite of who they were, but because of who they were – humble, ordinary people with no high opinions of themselves. Simple people who were willing to simply believe what God told them and to simply do what God commanded them.

When they heard the news, they didn't seek out the religious professionals for a second opinion. They simply accepted what the angels told them. When they were invited to visit Bethlehem to see the newborn Messiah, they simply obeyed and went.

Will you do that today? God didn't send an angel to give you the news, but He did send me and he did give you His word the Bible. God is inviting you today, just like he invited the shepherds. Will you receive His love? Will you be a part of His family? Will you believe what He says and do what He asks? Will you acknowledge your need of forgiveness and put your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation? You don't need to be a genius or a member of the "in" crowd. You just need to believe and obey. Listen to Christ's promise:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16)

"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37)

I pray you will make that decision to trust Christ soon, and please tell me about it when you do, so that I can help you with the next step of developing a relationship with Christ.

But what if you don't identify with the shepherds? What if you identify with the social and religious elite, the gifted, the accomplished, the powerful? What does this mean for you? It forces you to rethink family. It forces you to recognize that in God's sight, you are on

the same level as everyone else. It forces us to recognize that in God's family you don't have a head start. In fact, anything that causes you to think too highly of yourself; anything that stimulates pride, actually puts you farther behind. If that's the case, then ask God to purify your heart and grant you true humility.

Finally, what did the shepherds do in response to what they had seen and heard? They "spread the word." How do we do that? We share the good news with our family. And who is our family? Well if we follow the Lord's example we must rethink family. And one way to do that is to ask ourselves who in our families, churches, school and neighborhoods are forgotten people? Who has been pushed aside to the edges of society? How do we respond? How do we respond to God's call in our lives? Are we willing to leave behind the comfortable and familiar to venture to places new to us? Are we willing to rethink family? God calls us individually and as a congregation to new places to mission and witness. We are to bear witness to God's love, compassion and concern. We are to bear witness to the birth of Christ again, again and again. This season, remember that the shepherds – the "forgotten ones," people of "low regard" – were God's special and honored guests. God cares for the poor. And so must we.