

---

You're Invited!  
Martin Grove United Church,  
December 25, 2016  
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Luke 2:8-20

During Advent this year we had “Advent Group” meetings here at MGUC. The meetings only went for 3 weeks, but in those 3 weeks we discussed Matthew’s nativity story, Luke’s nativity story, and our own stories around Christmas. I found the groups quite interesting. I particularly enjoyed learning about other people’s traditions around Christmas and how we wait for Christmas in our families, in our churches, and in ourselves. And it’s always interesting to remind ourselves which of our traditions come from the biblical stories, and which ones come from other places.

Like many people, my initial knowledge of the nativity story came less from the Bible and more from my memories of Christmas pageants and TV shows like “A Charlie Brown Christmas”. It was not until I entered Emmanuel College and was invited to read the biblical text more carefully that I realized that the story in Matthew and the story in Luke are amazingly different from each other. For example, I had not realized that only Matthew mentions the magi. And only Luke mentions the shepherds. What is going on here? Is it possible that both Matthew and Luke knew different parts of the story of Jesus’s birth, and each one only wrote the part of the story that they knew about? Possibly! But I believe that something else is at work here.

There is a pattern to what parts of the story only Matthew tells and what parts only Luke tells. Matthew’s story is dominated by men. Matthew’s story has King Herod. Matthew has the magi. And in Matthew, the angel that comes to announce the coming birth of Jesus speaks to Joseph, not to Mary. On those points, Luke’s story is almost the complete opposite. In Luke, the angel comes to Mary, not to Joseph. And, the important message of Jesus’s identity is given - not to rich, foreign men, as in Matthew - but to shepherds in Luke.

And why shepherds? Shepherds at that time were amongst the poorest of the poor. They did not own many possessions. They did not own land at a time when land

---

was a requirement of wealth. With few exceptions, shepherds would not have been well-educated. But perhaps that was Luke's point. Perhaps Luke was making the point that in Jesus, God came to all people, including the poor, the weak, the marginalized - not just to the rich and the powerful. That in itself is "good news".

But however we want to interpret the story, the story says that there were shepherds - plural. Whenever I read the story I always imagine them sitting around a fire, telling stories. For a reason that I can't explain, I always imagine that the shepherds were having dinner together. And then an angel appears and makes an incredible claim about who and what the shepherds will find if they just leave their safe circle and go on an adventure. The angel invites the shepherds to gamble - to exchange something that is known - a pleasant evening with friends and family - for something that is unknown - a journey to find a baby. It's a bit like those of us here - we gave up the comforts of spending Christmas morning in front of a tree in our pyjamas to gamble on finding something worthwhile in church today.

For the shepherds, the clues for how to find the baby require searching and asking others along the way. Today I suppose the angel would simply tweet their message and give GPS coordinates, but in Luke's story the shepherds are being invited into - what for them is - the unknown.

I always wondered - did *all* the shepherds go to look for Jesus? Or did some of them stay behind to watch the sheep? And did they go right away? Of those who went - did they all come back? Did some of the shepherds remain with Mary and Joseph for a time? Did some of the shepherds stay away from the flock and continue to travel to tell others about what they had seen? Of those who came back - how were their lives changed - if at all? And after the shepherds went and saw, how did they react? The biblical text tells us that they were rejoicing and praising God, but I can just imagine some of the shepherds - perhaps like modern-day teenagers - who just could not see what was so exciting about a baby, and who would have been entirely unimpressed with "the sign" that the baby was wrapped in cloths, just like every other baby.

But I suppose the thing I wonder about the most is whether or not I would have gone to see the baby if I had been one of those shepherds. Would I have gone right

---

away? If the angel had appeared to me at a critical time - say just after I placed the turkey on the table and my family and I were just sitting down to eat Christmas dinner - would I jump up and leave? And if I did go, I wonder if I would have returned. Whether I would have praised God because I was so amazed. Whether I would have been disappointed to see a heavenly promise turn out to be just a human baby.

In one sense, the shepherds were invited to do something very special. As Luke tells it, the shepherds were invited to see Jesus. But it was more than that. The shepherds were being invited to go and see the messiah, the Lord, a saviour for the people. They were invited to go and see God in human form. The shepherds were invited to meet the divine in a human baby.

And in that sense, we are all like the shepherds. Because we also are invited - on a regular basis - to meet God in human form. That's because humans are made in the image of God. We can meet the divine in each other. When we hear Luke's story we are invited to consider the strangeness of finding God in a stable. But really, that should not be much of a stretch for us. We find God in all sorts of strange places. I am not actually surprised that the shepherds could find God in a stable. If we can find the divine in each other, then we can find God in all sorts of places - at the mall, in hospital, in prison, in our homes. And if we can find God in those places - where else might we find God? Do we feel free to look for God all over, or do we expect to only find God in church. And do we feel that we have to wait - to wait until we are invited - perhaps by an Angel - perhaps by a minister - perhaps by a friend - to go on a journey to look for God ourselves. And if we are waiting for an invitation, what would that invitation look like? What sort of invitation would we recognize? What sort of invitation would you recognize?

When we are driving down the highway and see a hitch-hiker on the road, do we ever sense that we are being invited to meet God in human form? Do we stop and pick up that person in the hope of meeting God through that person, or do we drive on past because we are afraid, or too busy to get involved.

When we are waiting in line in a store - something we may have done a few times recently - do we ever imagine that if we talked to the stranger beside us that we might find God in our midst? While waiting, do we feel invited to engage with God? Or do we

---

stay in our own, safe, world, and ignore strangers who are close at hand?

When we meet strangers on our own streets, speaking languages we don't know and with names that we can't pronounce - do we see that as an invitation to experience God in our midst? Or, do we fear the unknown person with the unknown background?

When we take public transit - and find ourselves crammed in with others - do we see other passengers as the possibility of the divine in our midst, or do we see them only as an inconvenience, people who block us from living our own lives in peace.

Advent has been a time of waiting for the birth of Jesus. But Christmas is a time of invitation - a time to be invited to experience God in fresh and powerful ways - in ways that perhaps we don't expect. In ways that perhaps are hard to recognize. This year, as we leave Advent behind us for another year and enter into the adventure called Christmas, I hope and pray that each of us will be open to hearing that invitation, open to meeting God in many different times and places.

This Christmas, consider yourself invited!

*Amen*