

Luke 2:8-14
Adoration
Rev. Jonathan P. Cornell
12-18-16

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!"

The story of Advent is a tense one, filled with unlikely individuals being used for unlikely, but miraculous purposes. You'll notice that virtually every one of them is a nobody, from nowheresville. These are people who have gotten used to blending in with the crowd, not rocking the boat, and just remaining content to float along in whatever stream they were in.

I mean, take Mary and Joseph, for example. Mary has an encounter with the angel Gabriel who tells her, "Mary, listen up, I have some insider info that I got from God Almighty that says you're going to miraculously be with child and it's from the Holy Spirit." What do they do next? Pack up and go pay their taxes and fill out the census form—just like everybody else.

Today, the Shepherds are just out minding their business in the fields when all of a sudden an angel choir explodes on the scene, and what do they do after they hear the news? "I guess we should go and see what it's all about."

Not exactly the kinds of people you would imagine would be caught up in visions of rapture.

In this way, there is such a lack of pretension with this event. The people God uses in this earth-shaking story are so...regular. And yet, what the angels say to them is the most joyous news anyone has ever heard.

Now, what exactly did the shepherds do to deserve this great joy? Not a thing. They didn't work for it, plan it, or earn the joy. It just broke into their ordinary night. That's the way joy comes, only as a surprising grace. In the words of Frederick Beuchner, "Happiness turns up more or less where you'd expect it to—a good marriage, a rewarding job, a pleasant vacation. Joy, on the other hand, is as notoriously unpredictable as the one who bequeaths it." No one achieves joy. We just receive it as it breaks into the routine of our lives. And that is what Christmas is really all about.

"This will be a sign for you," the angel continued. "You will find a child in bands of cloth lying in a manger." How many mangers had these shepherds seen? Lots! Only this time, the ordinary manger would be holding their Savior. The ordinary suddenly became extraordinary because it was now filled with salvation.

Now to be clear, when Christ enters your empty manger, he doesn't give you the love, fulfillment at work, or good health you were missing. He gives you God. **That is always the biggest surprise of all. Because when your communion with God is restored, you are startled to discover a joy that frees you to live with or without everything else.**

When the Holy Spirit shows up in your life, He brings with it the truth and reality of who God has created and wants you to be. Whether He finds us this year feverishly trying to make everything perfect, because that's who we think we're supposed to be, or whether He finds us floating along, convinced that true happiness, that joy could never find us and that all we could ever hope for is just a good enough life—Jesus comes to us to set us apart and tell us who we are and whose we are.

The good news of great joy this morning is that laying in the manger is the source of all contentment and purpose our lives could ever need. When the angels joyfully tell the shepherds to go to Bethlehem, what they were doing is giving them *X marks the spot* for where you will find your place and your identity in the world. Instead of scurrying around trying to make a name for ourselves, worrying whether we will ever find the purpose and contentment we're looking for, God comes and gives it to us in a person.

There's a story I love told by a pastor named Joel Baker. He tells of how his grandmother had come to this country early in the last century. She was a teenager living on a farm in Austro-Serbia.

He said, "My grandmother's father was an abusive man who used to beat her. One day she was told to take a few of the family cattle to town and sell them. So she did. And seeing this opportunity and fearing for her life she took that little bit of money and ran away. She boarded a ship for America.

"When she arrived at Ellis Island the passengers were put in two parallel lines with hundreds of people in each line. An immigration official came by checking documents. Of course, my grandmother had none. The official had a block of chalk. So he put a white X in chalk on my grandmother's arm, meaning she was to be de-ported immediately. The message of that X was, 'You shouldn't be here.' She had no documents, no passport, no family, no friends, and no status."

He said, "My grandmother's name was Barbara Slobovic. Across from her in the other line was a stranger named Theodore Daizy. When the immigration official left, Theodore Daizy reached out with his hand and brushed that white X off my grandmother's arm. When they got to the head of the line, Theodore Daizy said to the official at the desk, 'She's with me.' Within a few weeks they were married, and today their grandson is a Presbyterian pastor in Florida."

You and I were born with an X. So on Christmas night long ago, God reached down through his son and he wiped away the X and he said, "You're with me."

At Christmas, God makes us his own, he gives us our place in the world. It's gathered around a humble stable in worship and peace.