

The Shepherd Channel

Luke 2:8-16

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on December 13, 2020

Sometimes when I read the Bible, I come away thinking that maybe God needs to take a good marketing course. Time and time again God seems to pass up the most effective means of getting the message out and chooses something that is loaded with problems instead.

The Christmas story is a perfect example of this. God has some pretty incredible news to get out. The Messiah is born. And God does prepare a pretty amazing ad for the event. God lines up a whole multitude of angels to sing a piece from the Messiah—they are rehearsed and ready to go along with an incredible light show. Coke never had such an ad. But of all the channels God could have chosen to run the ad, God chooses the Shepherd channel.

The Royalty channel, which everybody watches, finds out about the event quite late and then only by accident when some wise travelers let the news slip. The People's channel, which has a huge audience in prime time never runs the story at all, and all you can find on the local news is pictures of the huge crowds and some unusual astronomical activity. There's not even a mention on the Temple channel, to which all the Messiah-seekers are tuned every night. The huge, elaborate angel chorus singing Glory to God is seen only on the seldom-viewed, often-laughed-at Shepherd Channel.

What was God thinking? Why tell shepherds? In first-century Israel shepherds could not even be witnesses in a court of law. If somebody robbed you in the field and 35 shepherds saw it and could name the attacker, it wouldn't matter. Their testimony would not count. They were just shepherds. The only other ones to get the news were foreign astrologers who happened to be channel surfing that night and saw the light show. Is that any way to get the Word out?

Apparently God thought so, which leaves us to wondering what we are missing. For one thing, the Gospel of Matthew tells us what happened when the news finally hit the Royalty channel. The King gave orders to slaughter every baby boy under 2 years of age. While the shepherds rejoiced at the news, the King was afraid of the news...this baby was a threat to his throne and had to be eliminated. So perhaps leaving the initial ad off of the Royalty channel was not such a bad idea.

But surely God could have gone to religious broadcasting. What of the Temple channel? Actually, the Temple channel was offered a chance to show the event, since the angels appeared to shepherds who were keeping the Temple flocks just outside of Jerusalem. But their cameras did not have any more interest in shepherds than the rest of the stations, and the evening was already booked with teaching and prayers by important holy people and reports on Temple income. No need to look to the riff-raff when they already had all the answers to the mysteries of God broadcast nightly from 7-9.

And what of the People's channel and the local news? Why not clue in the general population? The Messiah was coming for everyone, after all. Yes, but Jesus was going to be a very different Messiah than anyone was expecting. The people were quite ready for a Messiah...a king that would come and free them from Roman oppression. Palestine in the first century is a Roman province. Israel is an occupied country in Jesus' time, and the people live under oppressive conditions. They want to be self-governing, as they were just over 60 years before Jesus' birth. They remember that Moses freed the people from the Egyptians and the Messiah, the new Moses, they expected would free them from the Romans in the same way.

But that was not what Jesus came to do. "My kingdom is not of this world," he would later explain to Roman authorities. Jesus came to free people from spiritual bondage...to bring a freedom that could not be taken away no matter what foreign nation might technically rule the place. But inner freedom wasn't what most people wanted...except for maybe people like shepherds. You see, it didn't really matter to shepherds who ruled the country...Rome or Israel...Republicans or Democrats, or whoever else might come along. They weren't going to count no matter who was in charge.

Shepherds knew that political freedom is a thing of privilege. Political freedom simply means that the attitudes and values of the culture are allowed to flourish. If you have a job that the culture values; if you have a physical appearance or lifestyle that people admire; if you have the money to buy your way through the obstacles; then you have an interest in political freedom.

But if you fall into certain categories; if your own people don't find you valuable, you don't get freedom from a change in government. What difference did the American Revolution make to slaves? Shepherds knew that real freedom had to spring from someplace else, and any savior that shows up as a baby in a feeding trough would understand that. So they hurried to see and came away rejoicing. I think God gave the message to shepherds because shepherds were some of the only ones able to both understand and appreciate what Jesus was coming to do.

I also think God gave the message to shepherds because in this upside-down Kingdom of God where the first are last and the last first, shepherds are some of the most valuable and admired people around. The major figures of the Hebrew Scriptures—Abraham, Moses, David—all were shepherds. Remember that the work of a shepherd is grueling and dangerous. The Christmas story talks about shepherds "abiding" in the fields. That means they lived there. They didn't lay around in fields all day and then go home and get cleaned up for bed. They lived outdoors, day and night, with the sheep. And they smelled like it.

They also were required to protect that sheep at all costs...even at the cost of their own lives. In the book of First Samuel, the young David reminds King Saul that as a shepherd he has killed both lions and bears with his little slingshot. If a wild animal got a sheep, the shepherd was required to go after it and do everything possible to rescue the sheep. To prove that you did everything possible, you had to come back to the owner with some piece of the dead sheep...an ear, a leg...something that you wrestled away from the wolf or lion or bear that took it. If you didn't have a part of the animal to show, the cost of the animal came out of your paycheck.

The most valued occupation in God's eyes, and the best preparation for leadership of God's people seems to be the shepherd...the person who spends every hour of every day willing to risk life and limb to save a sheep. And sheep aren't even smart or rare or adept at much of anything. Trust me on this. I used to have sheep. We're not talking risking life for thoroughbred race horses or endangered species or even the family dog. We're talking sheep. Risk your life for a sheep. Daily. All your life. When you can do that, you will know all that is necessary to receive the news that the angels brought.

God brought the news to shepherds because that's the job Jesus came to do. Jesus calls himself the "Good Shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep." God dying for human beings is qualitatively similar to human beings dying for sheep...few people understand why anyone would do something like that and fewer still would ever think of doing it themselves. And yet here is God setting the example. None other than almighty God shows up as a baby of poor parents, born in a stable, and calls himself—not a king or a sage—in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus objects even when people call him "good." He refers to himself as a shepherd who has come to find, save, and die for sheep. Shepherds would have no trouble understanding what this Messiah was all about. God told shepherds because God has a shepherd's heart.

So where does that leave us? What channel are you watching this Christmas? Maybe it's the Royalty channel and the news of Christmas brings a severe threat. If this story is true...if God was born into the world as a poor baby and grew up to teach things like loving enemies, giving wealth away, and giving up high places to wash the feet of others...if all that is really true, it might require more than I want to give. I might have to give up things that make me comfortable. I might have to hang out with people I think are despicable. Don't want that news on my channel. Things might get ugly.

Maybe it's the People's channel where people who once had influence dream of past glory, and the information gets misinterpreted. Hey, Zebediah! Guess what? Great news! God has come to make sure that the right party gets back in office. No more sidelines for you and me...no more policies that hurt us and help somebody else. We're going to be back in power. It's about time!

If it's the local news you're watching, you probably won't have time to deal with it—there's just too much happening. I can't believe they're showing this on the news! I don't have time to worry about what's happening to homeless people in stables, for heaven's sake. I have a hard enough time keeping up with news at the courts and the palace and the temple. Those things affect my life. This has nothing to do with me. Where's the remote?

Watching the Temple channel, are you? Boy, this teaching is great! I'm going to get every book this guy ever wrote. Look at all the people who come to hear him...look at...Hey! What are they interrupting this for? Great...farm hands have a hallucination and for that they interrupt the teaching of God. They're probably smoking that weed. Poor folks in a stable? No, sorry, God deserves our best and God blesses those who truly worship Him. Maybe when those folks really find God, they'll be able to afford better than a barn to live in. This thing has false religion written all over it.

If you're going to really hear the Word that became flesh on Christmas, you need to get the news from the Shepherd channel. We need to hear the news from the perspective of the despised and rejected—from the poor and disenfranchised; from those who have no hopes of fame or fortune under Republicans or Democrats. We need to hear it from them because we need to be reminded that fame and fortune, power and control are not what the Kingdom of God is about. The way of God, the narrow gate, is about daily stepping up to give your life for a sheep. It's about learning how to be free on the inside when you are outwardly sitting in chains. It's about learning where to find joy when your world falls apart. It's about feeling rich with nothing at all and knowing that you are blessed of God even though the world spits in your face.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.

Herod trembled and resorted to murder. Most people took no notice at all. But the shepherds understood, ran and found the babe, and came away rejoicing. It was broadcast all over the Shepherd channel. What channel are you watching? Amen.