

McCabe United Methodist Church
Shepherds: Characters Surrounding Christmas (part 4)
Luke 2:8-20 * December 18, 2011
Pastor Rick Fossum

This is the fourth message in our Advent series called the *Characters Surrounding Christmas*. During the past three weeks, Pastor Ray and I have talked about angels and Joseph and Mary. Today, we look at the shepherds and the part they played that first Christmas Eve.

Why shepherds? Why were shepherds the first ones to hear the *good news* of Christ's birth? Why not someone else someone more worthy.

One day, a young man, driving a brand new, expensive BMW, happened to see shepherd taking care of his sheep. The young man decided to have some fun with the shepherd. He leaned out the window of his fancy car and asked the shepherd, **"If I tell you exactly how many sheep you have in your flock, will you give me one?"**

The shepherd looked at the man, then looked at his flock and shrugged his shoulders and said, **"I guess. Why not?"**

The young man parked his car, pulled out his GPS satellite navigation system, scanned the area, opened up his lap top, made a few calculations and said, **"you have exactly 186 sheep."**

"That's right," said the shepherd. **"You can have one of my sheep."** He watched as the young man selected one of the animals and put it into his car.

Then, the shepherd said, **"If I can tell you exactly what your business is, will you give me back the animal?"**

"Okay. Why not," the young man answered?

"Clearly, you are a politician," said the shepherd.

"That's right," said the young man, **"How did you know?"**

"Well," the shepherd said, **"it's pretty easy. You showed up here although nobody called you. You want to get paid for answering a question when I already knew the answer. Plus, you don't know anything"**

about my business. Now, give me back my dog!”

One of my favorite Christmas books is *The Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. It's a great story that gets read every year, about this time, by people everywhere. I know it's fiction, but it's such a wonderful story with a powerful message.

The *Christmas Carol* is about a miracle. It's about one man's transformation. Scrooge was his name.

Before the miracle, Scrooge was one of the most cold-hearted, tight-fisted, mean-old men you ever met.

What made Scrooge a cold-hearted, tight-fisted, mean-old man, is hard to tell. It could have been Belle. Scrooge had loved Belle. He planned to marry her, but then she broke off their engagement one Christmas night when she said, **“Scrooge, you fear the world too much.”**

It could have been Scrooge's father that made him a mean and grumpy man. His father wasn't a good father. It could have been the death of his sister. Like I said, we don't why he was so mean and grumpy and stingy, but he was.

And then, one Christmas Eve night, something happened and Scrooge was never the same again. He was visited by the Spirit or ghosts of Christmases past, present, and future and he was transformed into a better person.

Something similar happened to a bunch of shepherds on the first Christmas eve a long, long time ago. The shepherds weren't mean and grumpy and stingy like Mr. Scrooge, but they weren't exactly society's finest either. Their story begins with these words:

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. Then the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”

-Luke 2:8-9

Every year, about this time, we hear about shepherds. We sing about shepherds in some of our Christmas carols. Young people play shepherds in our Christmas plays. Shepherds show up on our Christmas cards and in the nativity scenes we have at home.

I've never met a real, live shepherd before, but I do know that the shepherds of old were some of the messiest, smelliest and dirtiest people you'd ever want to meet. They were outcasts. If Israel had a social ladder to climb, shepherds would be on the bottom rung.

And then, something happened. For some reason, and only God knows why, an angel sang to them. The angel broke into their lives suddenly and without warning. **"Do not be afraid,"** the angel sang, **"I bring you good news, super news of a great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the little town of Bethlehem a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."**

And just like that, a whole choir of angels showed up and started singing their song, **"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to all."**

It was God doing a new thing in the world. It was God breaking into life on that first Christmas Eve and choosing the shepherds to hear the good news first: *Jesus Christ is born today!* Why shepherds? Why not someone else more important? Why not the shepherds?

It was God's way of saying to the world, **"This new born Child, this Son of mine, is born for all people from the richest of you to the poorest, from the most beautiful of you to the not-so-beautiful, from the most powerful to the least powerful, Christ was born for you."**

One Sunday morning, a pastor asked all the children to come forward for the Children's Time. That day, a lot of people were in church which meant a lot of kids came forward. The whole area was full of kids. She ended her message to the kids by saying, **"and God loves you and you and you"** and she pointed in different directions.

A little girl, sitting far away from the pastor, was worried because she didn't think the pastor had pointed in her direction. In a small, tiny voice, she asked, **"What about me? Does God love me?"**

It's a good question. What about you? What about me? Does God love us? Have you ever felt like an outcast like the shepherds of old? Have you ever been lost or lonely? Have you ever felt like no one care about you? Have you felt that you weren't good enough or worthy enough? Have you ever been searching for something, but you don't know what it is? What about you? What about me? Does God love us?

“Yes,” the pastor replied, **“God loves you. God loves all of us.”**

This is the good news. It's during all parts, when we ask, **“What about me? Does God love me? Does God care?”** It's during these part that God responds by breaking into our lives telling us, **“Yes, you do matter. Yes, I care about you. And yes, I love you exactly the way you are.”**

And this is the Christmas message, isn't it? The shepherds, Scrooge, you and I, we all matter to God. When Christ was born on that silent night a long time ago, it was God doing a new thing. It was God breaking into our world once and for all. And it was telling us, **“I am with you. Always, I am with you.”**

It's my hunch that the shepherds were never the same again and neither are you and I the same once God breaks into our lives. God in Christ and only God in Christ can give us the courage, strength and faith we need to face this day and ever day.

May God bless you and may you all have a Merry Christmas.