

"Love Knows Your Name"

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Christmas Eve, 2024

Texts: Isaiah 9:6 and Luke 2: 1-20

At the very least they were thought uncouth. Some even thought them dangerous. Others thought them commoners, while still others thought them undesirable. They were clearly essential workers of their day, and they were people that were likely kept at arm's length by those of higher status, which was nearly everyone. They were not accepted except as an economic necessity. Who were they, you ask? Well, they were those who were "not in anyone's wildest imaginings expected at the birth of a divine dignitary." Any guesses? They were the shepherds.

In the words of Kelley Nikondeha, "The shepherds of the first advent might be akin to migrant farm workers of today, those laboring in fields all around us -- nearly unseen and certainly under-appreciated, yet absolutely essential to the economy. Invisible, they are the ones most susceptible to deep exploitation by the systems they serve, which don't protect them in turn. But they make an appearance in the first advent -- and in every manger scene since -- visible and central in God's vision of peace.

We see and speak of shepherds each year at Christmas. They are commonplace in the story today. A story that we continue to water down and miss the central point. God is always operating on the margins. That doesn't mean that God doesn't come to all people, but it does mean that God comes to **ALL** people. While we dress fancy and make sure that we've been good and not on the naughty list, God shows up with the multitude (which really the Greek means army) of angels to sing good news of glad tidings to--you guessed it--shepherds. Probably not all that religious, and certainly not serving in the temple court. They had dirt on their hands and at least dirt under their fingernails. They didn't have time to dress up to visit the manger, but it wasn't the first time they'd seen a child laid in a manger. For them, it might have even been fairly common. But no matter how you slice it, it was critically important that the shepherds be there.

The story of the first Advent, according to Luke's gospel, "is the story of God pushing boundaries of respectability in pursuit of another kind of peace. An ordinary priest (Zechariah) crushed by imperial economics receives an angelic visit amid his service in the temple. A pious, barren woman of later years is with child (Elizabeth). A young girl from Galilee, possibly abused and from a region where many women and girls faced bodily trauma, is told by a divine messenger

that something is about to change (Mary) (*The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, Kelley Nikondeha, p93)."

Nikondeha continues, "The Spirit is moving farther and farther from the centers of power and propriety toward those victimized by the empire. And then God reaches deep into the social fray, stretching all the way to a band of shepherds. The whole society is embraced by Emmanuel -- God with *all* of us, right down to the lowliest shepherd! (Ibid)"

Kayla Craig, in her commentary on this passage, writes, "Jesus' humble birth in a manger, celebrated by the heavens and earth alike, underscores a radical reordering: In God's [reign], the last are first, the humble are exalted, and the meek reign." Is it any wonder that the shepherds ran around telling everyone they could -- spreading news of great joy.

And what was the great joy? That unto *us*, which includes every them ever named them, and every us, was born in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Jesus wasn't born to someone else, some other time, or in some other place, Jesus was born to shepherds, the child of a couple with a really rough start to their life together. This is radical! This is what peace looks like! This is what God does when we're looking in the halls of power for the answers to life's

problems. God shows up in the least-expected place, at the least expected time, and most of all to the least-expected people.

Think about it this way: In the Incarnation of Jesus God decided to be born. God could have chosen to be stardust, or wind, or dirt. God could have stayed far away, tucked among the cosmos. But instead, God decided to be born -- to a teenage Galilean girl in a precarious marital situation, vulnerable to oppressive Roman powers. God decided to be born in a place rife with conflict, in a harsh economy, in a divided land. **God decided to be born, to come as close to us as possible** (emphasis mine). The writers of our material from Sanctified Arts then go on to say, "And so this is a God who knows every human vulnerability and emotion. This is a God who knows each and every one of us. On this Christmas Eve, may this be good news to you: God knows you. This story is for you."

Most of the time we're told "it's not all about you", and maybe that is true, but in this case, that's completely wrong. God wants us to know that no matter how small or insignificant we feel (or have been made to feel), we are intimately known and dearly loved by God, each of us a unique patch in the quilt of humanity (Kayla Craig). "Our individuality is not lost in the vastness of creation, but is cherished and celebrated by the One who calls us by name."

Whether we like it or not, "the angelic proclamation was political and provocative; it likely alleviated one kind of anxiety but incited another...God's peace initiative entered troubled times and disarmed the fears of those who were often made victims of that trouble (Nikondeha, p100)." God chose the very people we overlook at best, and look down upon at worst. God reminded us that God doesn't operate the way we do, and God doesn't look to the powerful for salvation, hope, and renewal of a broken world. No, God looks to people like the shepherds -- people like many of us -- not important by the world's standards, but all important to the one through whom the world came into being.

But there is a second part to this Christmas story. It wasn't just that God made the announcement through the angels and everyone went home to bed. Instead, the shepherds who heard the word then went to see if it was really true. And it was! Then, they went to tell everyone the Good News that over time led to you and I here tonight.

Nikondeha tells us, "[The shepherds] were emboldened by being included in God's peace plan. Once invisible, they were chosen to be among the first to witness God's work. No longer would they speak in hushed tones, keep quiet, or stay out of sight. They spoke of what they witnessed to everyone they met as

they made their way back to the fields outside of Bethlehem. (102)". They began to carry out the work that God had started. And sometimes we forget that it was only a start.

"We'd like to imagine that when advent dawned, peace came swift and sure to our troubled landscapes. But God's peace comes more like yeast. It develops without hurry, interacting with its environment as it activates and gradually permeates the dough. There is plenty of time to proof the dough, and sometimes multiple rises are necessary to get the dough ready for baking -- and eating. This is what peace feels like: something that develops slowly over generations, with our active engagement. It is far from a quick fix...[it is] part of the unfolding hope the angels sang of on the outskirts of Bethlehem that silent and perilous night. Their song has given us hope for all the perilous nights since."

And so, the shepherds remind us of what God is really like, and who really belongs to this turn-the-world-upside-down embodiment of love. The main characters are exactly those most often excluded. They are the people who are most often told they don't belong. It's a story about you and about me in a world that often tells us we don't belong, or that we're not good enough. It's direct action by God to remind us that we are loved and we are partners in God's peace

initiative. Love knows your name. Love reminds us that "unto us a child has been given." Not to some, but to all of us.

Receive this blessing:

God knows you completely and loves you fully. As you draw near to Jesus, rest assured that you are not a mere face in the crowd but a beloved child of God, known and called by name. In light of this glorious truth, may you be a bearer of peace and a harbinger of love today and forevermore.

Merry Christmas! Amen.