

Good News. Great Joy. All People.**Luke 2:8-20****Sunday, December 18, 2022**

In recent years, churches have done a lousy job of sharing who the shepherds of the Christmas story were. How have you heard shepherds described in Christmas sermons or teaching? Describe for me their character or their reputation.

Modern sermons speak of shepherds in such a bad way. We're told that shepherds were despised, or outsiders, or smelly, or dirty, or rough company, or people of poor reputation.

I don't know why we believe these descriptions because Scripture disagrees with all of that.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, people who started as shepherds became leaders of the nation. Who are some examples? Jacob started out as a shepherd – a very smart one. Moses started out as a shepherd – he went from leading sheep to leading people. David was a shepherd – a very brave shepherd. He rescued his sheep from a bear and from a lion. All Old Testament references to shepherds seem positive. Being a shepherd might be a humble beginning, but that humble beginning is required training for good leadership in Israel.

In the New Testament Jesus speaks often of shepherds and of sheep. Jesus said of himself, "I am the Good Shepherd." If shepherds have a bad reputation, why would Jesus say he was a good one? He wasn't saying "I am the good smelly outsider of a bad reputation." Jesus was the good shepherd, doing a job that was already respected.

We've already discussed what misconceptions we have about shepherds. When you hear about the people being described as sheep, what are we told to assume about sheep?

The common misconception is "sheep are so stupid."

Time and time again, when Jesus mentions sheep in a parable, do you know what the sheep are? Sheep are loved. The shepherd leaves 99 sheep to save one. The shepherd rejoices and throws a party when he finds a lost sheep. Sheep know the shepherd's voice and follow the shepherd. With the shepherd, sheep know they are safe and know they are loved.

So, the shepherds that the angels appear to, based on the rest of the Bible, seem to be reliable people with a respected job. In the parables of Jesus, shepherds are people who care about their work. And most of all, the shepherds love their sheep and keep them safe.

At their very worst, shepherds were ordinary, everyday people. They are common folk.

And their ordinary, everyday-ness made them the ideal people for the angels to declare the arrival of Christ. Elite, sophisticated people might ignore shepherds. But everyday people would find shepherds to be trustworthy messengers.

Darrel Bock writes, "There are no more 'normal Joe's' in ancient culture than shepherds. They represent the lowly and humble who respond to God's message, for their vocation is seen positively in Scripture. Thus, heaven meets and greets the average person through the angelic announcement to these . . . figures."

Who better to receive a message of "great joy which shall be for all people." Shepherds already represented your everyday "all people." The everyday person receives the message that there is a joy that will be available to all people, then shares that message with other everyday people.

Joy is available – to everyone -- through Jesus. But too often we think we must jump through the right hoops to find it. Maybe by being really religious I'll finally find joy. Religious people can carry themselves like only they have access to this great joy that Jesus offers. But in Jesus coming to earth we are told from the start about great joy available for all people. Joy is available to us as a gift, not something we gain by earning it.

We turn ourselves inside out looking for joy. We do all kinds of religious rituals looking for it. We add things to our lives, cut things out of our lives. We get needy with other people looking for joy, hoping that our connection with them will give us the joy we are looking for.

But Jesus invites us, everyday people, to find joy in him. Like sheep, the shepherd wants us to know we are cared for and know that we are loved. The Shepherd wants us to know that he has come to us to give joy to us – the joy of being known and loved by a God with us in every situation.

Joy is not for the super spiritual or for the people that have their lives all together. Joy is for everyday people. The angels, the shepherds, and the manger remind us that Jesus gives us "good news that will cause great joy for all the people."