

**Advent 3: More Love
Angels Among Us: Do not be Afraid
Dec 18th, 2022**

Scripture Reading *Luke 2: 1-20*

REFLECTION: This is a Story About...

This is a story about exclusion. Exclusion of a woman who is pregnant in old age, Exclusion of a woman who is pregnant too young. Exclusion of a man who must leave his home, his community and travel to the town of his ancestors. Exclusion of a family who are on the outside of this community, there is no room for them. They have no place.

I expect that if we took a moment each of us could come up with a time in our lives when we've felt this exclusion. Where we've felt like we were on the outside looking in, because of who we are, where we're from, or where we've come too. We can relate to Elizabeth, Mary, Joseph because we've been there. Maybe not their exact circumstance, but we know how it feels to have no place.

Luke's gospel is about the marginalized, the oppressed, those who suffer, and those who have no place.

This is a story about exclusion.

Because of this it's no surprise that the very first people to be told of Jesus' birth were the lowest of the low. The shepherds.

Shepherds were (and still are) excluded from society for many reasons. First, they had the dirty, smelly job of looking after animals. They were at the very bottom of the class system. Shepherds had less value than the animals they cared for. Animals were provided for families – food, milk, leather, wool.

Although the passage we read today says the shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks, it's unlikely they owned those animals. If a person had enough money to own a flock of animals, they had the money and status to hire someone to watch those animals. They certainly wouldn't soil their hands with such dirty and dusty work.

And because they spent most of their time out in the wilderness, out of touch with their societies and communities, they were also under-educated and perhaps didn't keep up with social norms and niceties. We might call them bumkins, yokels, a lout or a boor.

Culture and status meant everything to the roman empire, where you where in class level only mattered if you kept those who were below you, below you. And shepherds didn't have anyone below them. Not even the animals.

So why did the angel choose them? Why didn't the heavenly host appear before the temple priests? Or the kings and rulers of Jerusalem?

Because this is *not* a story about exclusion.

Because God wanted to make it clear that the good news being brought by the angel came to all people. To everyone. The Messiah wasn't here just for the elite and the rich. The Messiah didn't come just for those who society deemed worthy and admirable.

No, this good news was for all the people, to bring hope to the marginalized, peace to the oppressed, joy to those who suffer and love to the excluded.

"Glory to God in the highest heaven and peace on earth to all whom God favors." Sings the angels. All whom God favors! and if we've been paying attention who does God favor? The afterthoughts, and the easily forgotten and dismissed.

And this good news will bring great joy to all the people. Everyone. This is a story about inclusion.

The shepherds hear this and are terrified. In some translations the line is 'they were sore afraid'. And it is terrifying, the shepherds know they're looked down on. They know society doesn't care about them. They know they don't belong and here's an angel from God telling them they do.

How can they accept that they are worthy of this most gracious gift of love? What have they done to deserve this? To quote Mary, from Chapter one, how can this be?

But unlike the angel in chapter one, this angel doesn't explain why they've been chosen. Somehow, the fact that they're just there should make the reason self-evident. The presence of the angels before the shepherds is the proof that they are the ones God favors.

And if this is a story about inclusion, then guess what. We're the ones God favors too. This good news that will bring joy to all the people means us too.

No matter what we might believe about ourselves. No matter if we feel out of step with the world around us, or like we're on the outside looking in. The angel is speaking to us.

Imagine an angel appearing here among us, "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to each of you. Glory to God and peace on earth to you, whom God favors."

How do we look at ourselves and accept that we are worthy of this most gracious gift of love?

I understand the shepherds' fear. I'm afraid to believe that about myself. Macrina Wiederkehr, one of my favorite writers as a poem: *I will believe the truth about myself, no matter how beautiful it is.*

When I say this I am sore afraid. I feel it in my bones, an ache and a fear and a sense of awe, that I've opened myself up to the unconditional love of God and I am afraid.

Do not be afraid, the angel says. But I am.

This will be a sign, you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

That's the sign. A baby. Not the angel in the sky or the glory shining all around or the heavenly host of I don't know how many angels appearing in the sky praising and singing. Nope, this boisterous, over the top, extravaganza out in the fields is not the sign.

The baby is. The most vulnerable, gentle and defenseless being we can imagine is the sign. A baby, something we need to care for, keep warm and nurture. A baby, so fragile we will pick him up slowly and hold him to our hearts. And when I think of this tiny helpless life, this miracle I feel it in my bones, the ache, the fear, the awe and the love that is so beautiful it can't be believed.

That is God's gift, a reminder that we are loved in this way. No questions, no exceptions, no exclusions.

We look at this baby who brings together all the excluded ones, including ourselves. We enter the stable and join together, connected to one another through this precious child.

And we long to care for this baby. To protect it and nurture it and hold it close to our hearts. This baby looks up at us with perfect trust and love, because this is God in human form. And God sees us as we truly are God believes the truth about us, no matter how beautiful and is asking us to believe it too.

While we hold and nurture this baby, we hold and nurture ourselves. This baby is a reminder to be gentle with ourselves, to hold ourselves warm and close to our hearts, because that's what God does.

After the angels visit the shepherds, they say to each – lets go see this thing that has happened. They don't question the message, they trust it. They believe the truth about themselves.

The gospel tells us that they then spread the word concerning what they were told and all who heard them were amazed. They took the message from the angels and became the angels among the people. They are the angels among us.

This is a story about inclusion. This is a message for all the people. We are the angels among us. We have heard the winged messengers speaking – Do not be afraid. Glory to God in the highest heaven peace on earth to all whom God favors.

That's you. And you, and you and it's me. The angels bring hope to the marginalized, peace to the oppressed, joy to those who suffer and love to all people. Like the shepherds we are invited to spread these messages far and wide. Like Mary we are invited to treasure them up and ponder them in our hearts.

Because of God, we will believe the truth about ourselves, no matter how beautiful. May it be so.