

Hidden Figures: Shepherds (Advent 4)

Luke 2:8-20

December 22, 2019

First Presbyterian, Luling

You might say I have a little problem. I might call it a collection. I love Nativity scenes, manger scenes, creches, if you're fancy. I counted, and there are 38 of them, including ones that are ornaments on the tree. They are all shapes and sizes, out of all kinds of materials. Some pottery, some fabric, quite a few are wooden. They've come from all over the place, even a few from different countries around the world. I did some tallying up, and here is what I found:

Nineteen of them (or exactly half) only have Mary, Joseph, and Baby Jesus. I find this to be possibly a reflection of our culture, which values what we call the "nuclear family" over the extended family and community. But some of them are tiny, and there's only so much space, and these are ok. Some of my favorites are in this category.

Of the other half, 8 of them have both wise men and shepherds. So that's about 20% of the total that have what seems to me to be the full complement of characters. Most of those also include assorted animals and an angel.

But now we've come to the comparison that I was really interested in. How many scenes include wise men without shepherds, versus how many scenes include shepherds without wisemen? Or, to put it a different way, do my nativities seem to favor shepherds or wise men, Luke's birth story or Matthew's birth story?

Eight of them have wise men and no shepherds, while only three of them have shepherds without wise men present. They seem to favor wise men over shepherds, which was what I suspected. In addition, I have three ornaments that have the three wise men only, with no baby Jesus at all. Kings seem to get higher billing than shepherds.

Once I add an explanatory note, the difference will even be stronger. One of the sets that has both wise men and shepherds came from my grandmother, who purchased it for herself. It is made out of olive wood, from the Holy Land, though she got it somewhere else. She was disturbed that it had only wise men, so she also purchased a statue of Jesus as the good shepherd, with a lamb around his shoulders, and that serves as the shepherd for the nativity scene. So I think it might really fall in the category of "no shepherds, only wise men."

Of the three that have only shepherds and no wise men, the ones that favor the shepherds, one doesn't count, because it isn't complete. We were adding to it year by year, and I got shepherds and never got around to getting wise men or camels.

The other two with only shepherds come from other countries. One was made in Peru. And one comes from Thailand, if I'm remembering correctly. I bought them here in the United States. But I find it interesting that the only ones that have shepherds without also having wise men are from places with much different cultures than our own.

All of that counting and tallying and percentage figuring is to make it make sense that I'm claiming that shepherds are "hidden figures" of the Christmas story. It doesn't seem like they'd qualify as hidden figures, especially not as hidden as John the Baptist or the people in Jesus's genealogy. They seem to get pretty equal billing in the Gospels—they're right there in the thick of it in Luke's story, after all. They have more right to be in that manger scene than the wise men, who Matthew tells us showed up "after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea."

But we seem prone to overlook them, to rush right past their experiences to get to the gifts and excitement of the wise men. I'll speculate later as to why we do that, but for now, let's slow down and take a close look at what the shepherds experienced and what we might learn from them.

The shepherds were in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. None of that is surprising, because that's exactly what shepherds did, for months on end, night after night, watch over the flocks. Some shepherds owned their own flocks, and others were hired hands, watching over the owner's flocks. Sheep were important, providing food and material for clothing and shelter, so the job of a shepherd was important, but not exactly glamorous or prestigious. Necessary but not valued—I'm not sure that's exactly the right word, but I think they would be comparable to the garbage pickup crew, or people that work in meat packing plants. The ancient economy needed them, and they weren't actively ostracized, but people tended not to think of them, which was easy to avoid, because they were gone for months at a time. Picture how you might look and smell after a week-long camping trip in a tent, only without the tent. Then multiply that by a few weeks long and add in some sheep smell. Shepherds were dirty and stinky. They weren't at the top of the social structure, certainly not powerful or courted by the powerful.

But they are the chosen audience, for the heavenly host, for angels that filled the sky with their heavenly light and glory. Luke is already telling us that this baby, this good news, is for everybody, because the news's first announcement in public is to dirty and stinky shepherds, regular, everyday people, doing hard work. Those angels didn't sing to the teachers in the Temple, nor the Roman rulers, nor the rich landowners. They sang to the shepherds, good news of great joy to all people.

The angel promises the shepherds that there will be a sign that what the angel has told them is true: they'll find a perfectly ordinary baby, wrapped in perfectly ordinary cloths, in a perfectly ordinary way. The only thing about this baby that is different is that this baby will be lying in a manger. This doesn't seem like much of a sign, frankly, from a God who could fill the sky with heavenly host. They seem to be the sign, but in case the shepherds need confirmation, this perfectly unremarkable baby will be it.

The shepherds believe the angels; in fact, much like Joseph, they don't ask any questions, just head out for Bethlehem. I imagine that it was helpful to have some other people who saw the same fantastic, unimaginable thing you just saw, a sky full of angels, to confirm that you saw what you saw. They arrive quickly and found Mary, Joseph, and the baby, just as the angel had said. This was their sign, and confirmed the good tidings of great joy, that this baby was a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

Mary and Joseph don't say anything to the shepherds. They don't say, "here's our baby. He's the Messiah. Would you like to hold him?" They don't ask why the shepherds have come. They don't ask when the shepherds have last had a shower. They don't ask or tell anything, they just receive the shepherds and receive the shepherds' news.

What a relief it must have been to Mary and Joseph both. Of course, they were as captivated by their new baby boy as any pair of parents would be, but truth be told, he looked and sounded and seemed just an ordinary baby to them. There was nothing to point to that demonstrated that he was the baby the angels had told them each about. But the shepherds confirm that, indeed, this ordinary-seeming baby, is the one who will save the people, the long-awaited Messiah. Mary and Joseph had not been making things up, those dreams really had been appearances of God's messengers the angels, and everything they had been told about their baby son was true. It's all confirmed by the dirty, stinky, lowly shepherds, of all people.

Luke says the shepherds made known what the angel had told them and all that heard them were amazed. The shepherds are the first preachers, the first evangelists, the first to tell the good news to all people. They hear the good news, they interpret the very ordinary baby as a sign of something extraordinary. Luke isn't just telling us that this child is good news for poor people; he's showing us, by giving the shepherds this honor, of being the first to hear and share the good news.

The shepherds returned to their shepherding, returned to their ordinary lives doing the most ordinary of work, but they were changed, full of amazement and glorifying God for all they had heard and seen, and for all that had been entrusted to them.

Now I'm ready to speculate about why we seem most comfortable when we leave the shepherds out of our nativity scenes, out of our Christmas stories and celebrations. I'm speculating that we aren't comfortable with their social status as lowly shepherds. We're more comfortable—maybe just more accustomed to--rich people being the ones we look up to, the ones who are trusted with news to share, the ones we listen to. We aren't used to speaking to the garbage collectors, much less welcoming them any closer to our homes than the curbside pickup. We aren't comfortable listening to the meat packers; I think most of us would rather avoid thinking about the conditions of their lives altogether. We are more comfortable and more accustomed to listening to celebrities and rich people, or at least people as well-off as we are, for news and truth.

I will further speculate why we are a lot more comfortable with the wise men than we are with the shepherds. The wise men bring gifts while the shepherds arrive empty handed, with nothing but the message from the angels. Having something to give in return for the gift of the Messiah makes us more comfortable than simply receiving him as a gift of grace, which make us squirmy.

In this case, I think we would do well to imitate Mary and Joseph, who welcomed the unlikely messengers into their lives, who listened to what the shepherds had to say, who received the message the shepherds carried and believed that it was from the same God who had spoken to them, who did not dismiss them or underestimate them or wish they would go away. Mary and Joseph heard good news from the shepherds, the ones that God entrusted that good news to. May we welcome and listen to the shepherds among us.