

Good Tidings for Losers
Luke 2:1-20

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.” It all sounds pastoral and romantic in the King James Version, but in reality it was just working the night shift. Except that there wasn’t anyone to take over during the day shift. When you were a shepherd, you were on duty 24/7, no matter the weather. You had to put yourself between the sheep and the wolves and mountain lions, whether the sheep belonged to you or not. You even had to protect them from their own stupidity, keeping them from wandering off. Sounds great, doesn’t it?

Maybe that’s the way you feel about your job. Maybe you are as bored out of your skull as those shepherds were, as they stared out into the darkness for hours. Maybe you don’t see any room for advancement where you are. Maybe you’re just worn out by the same old same old, day after day.

And when you get home and turn on the news there’s not much else to be excited about, is there? Congressmen are at each other’s throats, and there never seems to be a compromise that will please anyone. Deficits and debts are out of control, but no one wants his taxes to go up or his own benefits to be reduced. Regulations choke out job creation, all the while crony capitalism spreads its corrupting tentacles everywhere. What can anyone do about any of it?

Joseph would understand our frustrations. He had to pack up and travel some ninety miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem just to satisfy the whims of the Romans that were occupying the land of Israel. Everyone hated the Romans, but the Jews had to do what they said.

Of course God’s people were no strangers to such suffering. The passage we read from Isaiah this morning was a common lament throughout the history of the people of Israel after the exile, as they were conquered over and over by different powerful kingdoms. They longed for their Messiah to come and drive out their oppressors, as they continued to wait for Him to appear and to bring justice to the world. In our modern political gridlock maybe you’re waiting for the same thing.

Or maybe you’re frustrated because you can’t keep your loved ones as safe and as prosperous as you would like. Joseph would understand. Mary was already great with child, very far along in her pregnancy, but she still had to take this stupid, pointless, and for her doubtless painful trip. Oh, and the journey was probably dangerous as well, as travel often was in the ancient world. The highways were all too often plagued with robbers. Without hotel accommodations, no one knew where he would be able to stay each night. And once they got to Bethlehem, Joseph apparently could command neither the wealth nor the reputation to provide a suitable resting place for Mary. A barn was the best he could do for her. He must have felt like a real hero.

Or maybe you are far away from your loved ones, either physically or emotionally. Maybe you feel all alone this Christmas. Mary and Joseph would understand. Even though Bethlehem was supposed to be Joseph’s ancestral home, he didn’t have any close family left

there – at least, not any close enough that he could presume upon their hospitality, even for the sake of his wife who was ready to give birth. All their real friends and loved ones were back in Nazareth. To make matters worse, Mary would not have her mama with her when she gave birth for the first time.

Maybe you're hurting or just tired out this Christmas. Mary would understand. How many of you ladies would like to walk to Natchez and back in the last months of a pregnancy? But after enduring what had to be a very long and hard trip, the time came for her to give birth to her first child. Now, she probably knew what to expect – after all, she had been with her cousin Elizabeth during the last three months before she had given birth. Perhaps Mary had even assisted with the delivery of the baby John, although a woman as socially prominent as the wife of a priest would probably have been under the care of an experienced midwife.

But Mary had no midwife to help her. And while it's one thing to know that terrific pain is coming, it's quite another thing to experience it. And even in these days of epidurals, giving birth remains physically exhausting – there's a reason they call it labor. But after it was all over, Mary didn't have a comfortable or even a clean place to rest. Her miracle baby may have been born, but she was still hurting and she was still in a stinky barn because she and Joseph were still poor and homeless because they were still living under a tyrannical government. The only people who showed them any kindness were those shepherds on the night shift. Losers – that's what the whole lot of them were, at least in the eyes of the world. Nothing but losers.

And maybe that's the way you feel today. Maybe in spite of all the tinsel and the glitter of the holiday season, or maybe even because of it, you feel like you've been left out in the cold. Maybe you are tired of grieving, or tired of hurting, or tired of being lonely, or tired of wondering how in the world you will ever get out of the mess you find yourself in. Maybe you see yourself in one way or another as a loser.

If so, the Christmas story is for you, especially for you. For think about it – to whom did God choose to announce the good news of the birth of His Son? It wasn't to Caesar Augustus in his palace in Rome. It wasn't to King Herod in his elaborate fortress only a few miles from Bethlehem. It wasn't to the priests in the Temple or to the scribes who knew the Scriptures so well. It was to the losers of society – it was to the shepherds that the angels told the story.

And the same thing is true today. People who think they have it all together usually have no interest in Bethlehem's Babe. Jesus Himself said the same thing – he didn't come to call those who thought they were righteous. Instead He came to call those who know they are sinners to repentance. It's no wonder that Jesus was more popular with tax collectors than he was with Pharisees. Those who know they are losers have always been more willing to look to the Lord.

But God didn't just announce such good news to losers. No, in the Person of Jesus Christ, God came to be with us losers, and to share in our poverty and oppression, in our pain and loneliness. He came to be with us in the midst of our dead-end jobs and our frustrations and our fears. And because Jesus Christ has come to share in all these things, He understands them in a personal way. That means that when we take our problems to Him in prayer, we can be sure

that He knows what we are going through. What a wonderful comfort that is at Christmastime, and all throughout the year.

But why doesn't Jesus do something about all our problems? Instead of coming as a helpless baby and having to share in all his parents' sorrows, why didn't the Messiah show up in the way that everyone expected Him to – descending in a fiery chariot from heaven, or flashing like a blaze of glory across the sky?

Well, how did the shepherds react when they saw that powerful and holy angel, that messenger of God? Such a sight was enough to fill them with fear. They couldn't handle what Luke calls the glory of the Lord. But the shepherds weren't being especially cowardly. All the Israelites did basically the same thing when they heard God speaking to them from the top of Mt Sinai – they were so afraid that they ran away. Even the prophet Daniel, the man whom God had saved when he was thrown into the lions' den, fell on his face when an angel came to speak to him. No sinful human being can stand being in the presence of pure holiness.

So, isn't it strange that when the same shepherds showed up at the stable they could somehow handle the sight, not just of an angel of God, but of God Himself – for that's Who the Baby in the manger really is, after all. They could gaze in wonder at the Baby, for in Jesus Christ, God somehow cloaked His power and holiness in flesh, revealing His glory to us in a way that we can behold, if not understand.

But when the angel appeared to the shepherds, he told them that this Baby had indeed come to solve all their problems, even if not in a way that they might expect. Somehow, this baby born to impoverished parents was the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David Who would rule over all the world forever. More than that, this otherwise ordinary-looking Baby was somehow at the same time the Lord God Almighty. Somehow, this Baby lying in a manger would be the Savior of the World, the One Who would somehow bring peace between God and the earth, extending God's goodwill even to sinners like us.

Now, the shepherds had no real proof that any of these things would happen – all they could see was a baby lying in a manger. Moreover, at the end of the story, the circumstances of the shepherds' lives had not changed at all. They were still on the night shift, still working the same long hours for the same low wages, with little prospect for advancement. Mary and Joseph were still poor and homeless, and they were all still living under the oppression of the Roman government. They were still losers in the sight of the world. But as the shepherds headed back to their sheep, they were nevertheless glorifying and praising God.

Why did they do such a thing? What business did losers like them have to be so joyful? It wasn't just because they had heard what the angels said – how many others have heard the Christmas story and refused to believe it? It wasn't even because they saw a baby in the manger – we've all seen babies, after all. It was the connection between what they had heard and seen. Remember, the angels had told them they would find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in the manger. And so, when they saw such an improbable sight, they believed what the angels said about the baby – they believed that this baby was, all appearances to the contrary, the Messiah, the Lord. And so they rejoiced because they trusted that God would keep the promises

He made through the angels. They rejoiced in the hope that the Baby would one day grow up to be their Ruler and their Savior – even if they couldn't see their salvation just yet.

Well, what about us? Like the shepherds and Mary and Joseph, we may still feel like losers, tired and hurting, poor and lonely. We may know what it means to long for justice in the face of corruption. We may not have seen much change in the difficult circumstances of our lives, and we may not expect any in the days to come.

And yet we've heard the same story that the angels told the shepherds. We've heard that the Messiah, the Son of God, the Savior of the world was born to Mary on that first Christmas. And because we've heard the end of the story, we know a lot more than that, don't we? We know how God planned for Jesus to save the world. We know that Jesus didn't just come to share in our sufferings – He came to suffer for us. He came to bring forgiveness to us by dying for us, by taking on Himself the penalty that all our sins deserve. And we know that He came to bring new life to us by rising from the dead on the third day and by ascending into Heaven. We know that He promises to fill all who trust in Him with the power and presence of His Holy Spirit. And we know that Jesus has promised to come again one day to take His people to Himself and to bring justice to the world.

We know the story. We know what the prophets foretold and what the angels and the apostles have said. We've seen the evidence of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection. We know what Jesus has promised to do.

So, now the same choice faces us that faced those shepherds so long ago. We can choose to believe only what we can see with our eyes, only what makes sense to us. We can go toiling on our way, with painful steps and slow, focusing only on the difficult circumstances in our lives. We can go on acting like losers.

Or will we trust the promises God has made to us? No matter what the world may say, no matter how little sense it makes, will we place our trust in Mary's baby, as our Savior, the Messiah, the Lord? Will we rejoice in resurrection, expecting His justice and His mercy even as we look for His certain return?