

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. In those days, shepherds were on duty 24/7, no matter the weather.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. For whether the sheep belonged to them or not, they had to drive off whatever predators came calling – how would you like to face down a wolf or a mountain lion with only a staff? Oh, and shepherds even had to protect the sheep from their own stupidity, as they had a tendency to wander off. Sounds like a great job, doesn’t it?

Well, maybe you feel the same way about your job, or about your life in general. Maybe you are as bored out of your skull as those shepherds must have been, as they stared out into the darkness for hours. Maybe you’re just tired of the same old same old, day after day, and maybe you don’t have any real hope for advancement, or even for much of a change.

And when you get home, the news from Washington isn’t much better, is it? Yet another coronavirus variant has case numbers and hospitalizations increasing, even here in Mississippi. Cargo ships bob helplessly off the California coast while many store shelves remain empty. Debts and deficits are out of control, but no one wants his taxes to go up or his own benefits to be reduced. Russia and China’s authoritarian regimes are flexing their muscles. Congressmen are at each other’s throats, and no one seems to have a clue about how to fix any part of this mess.

Joseph could certainly understand our frustrations with dysfunctional government. After all, 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. But such suffering wasn’t anything new for God’s people. All through the Old Testament, they had been conquered over and over by different powerful kingdoms. Yes, for hundreds of years they had been longing for their Messiah to come and drive out their oppressors, waiting for the Son of Man to appear and to bring peace and justice to the world, the way Micah described in our responsive reading. And in the midst of our modern political gridlock maybe you’re waiting for the same sort of deliverer, for someone to just make everyone else sit down and behave.

Or maybe you’re disappointed this Christmas because you can’t provide for your loved ones the way you would like to. Joseph would understand that too. Mary was already great with child, very far along in her pregnancy, but he couldn’t protect her from having 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. And once they got to Bethlehem, Joseph apparently had neither the wealth nor the reputation that could command a suitable resting place for Mary. A barn was the best he could do for her. Oh yes, Joseph would understand our discouragement.

Or maybe this Christmas you are far away from your loved ones, either physically or emotionally. Maybe you feel all alone. Mary and Joseph would both understand. After all, even though Bethlehem was Joseph’s ancestral home, he didn’t have any 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. No, 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. Yes, Mary and Joseph knew all about loneliness.

Or maybe you're hurting or just exhausted this Christmas. Mary would understand. The ninety or so miles she and Joseph travelled would be like walking to Natchez and back – how many of you ladies would like to do that in the last months of a pregnancy? Worse yet, while Mary was already worn out from such a long and hard trip, the time came for her to give birth to her first child, with no epidural and probably no midwife to help her.

And after it was all over, Mary didn't have a comfortable or even a clean place to rest. Her baby's conception may have been a miracle, but she was still hurting and she was still in a stinky barn because she and Joseph were still poor because they were still living under a callous, tyrannical, foreign government. The only people who showed them any kindness on that horrible day 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 parties and the tinsel and the glitter of the holiday season, or maybe even because of it, somehow 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 being sick 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 working the night shift.

And the same thing is true today. People who think they have it all together usually have little interest in Bethlehem's Babe. That's why Jesus was much more popular with the tax collectors than he was with Pharisees. In fact, Jesus made it clear that He hadn'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 those who know they are losers who have always been more willing to listen to the Lord.

But God wasn't satisfied with just announcing the good news to losers like us. No, in the Person of Jesus Christ, God came to be with us, 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 situations and our frustrations and our fears. And because Jesus Christ has come to share in all these things, 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 really, all throughout the year.

Okay, 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, flashing like a blaze of glory across the sky, commanding all the angels of heaven to drive the Roman legions back into the Mediterranean Sea?

Well, how did the shepherds react when they saw a sight like that – a sky filled with an army of powerful messengers from God? They were sore afraid, which means they were filled with fear. They just couldn't handle being in the presence of what Luke calls the glory of the Lord.

But the shepherds weren't being especially cowardly. Back in chapter 1, the priest Zacharias and the Virgin Mary were both afraid when Gabriel showed up to talk to them. That's because human weakness simply cannot endure the presence of divine power, just as human sin cannot endure the presence of divine holiness.

So, isn't it strange that when the same shepherds showed up at the stable they somehow managed to gaze not on an angel of God, but on God Himself – for that's Who the Baby in the manger really is, after all. Yes, they could draw near to Jesus without fear, for in Christ, God somehow cloaked His power and holiness in flesh. God thus revealed His glory to us in a way that we can behold, if not fully understand.

But the angel told the shepherds that this Baby had in fact come to solve all their problems, even if not in the way that they probably expected. For even though this baby had been born to powerless, impoverished parents, He was in fact 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. The infant lying in a feedbox for animals would somehow be the Savior of the World, the One Who would somehow bring peace between God and the earth, extending God's grace and 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 their 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 all still losers in the sight of the world. But as the shepherds headed back to their sheep, they were nevertheless glorifying and praising God.

So, how could such poor, powerless people be so joyful? It wasn't just because of what they had heard the angels say – for how many others have heard the Christmas story and refused to believe it? It wasn't even because they had seen the baby in Mary's arms – we've all seen babies, after all. It was the connection they made between what they had heard and what they had seen.

Remember, the angels had told them they would find the baby in a manger to give them a sign – proof that the rest of what the angels said was true. And so, when the shepherds did in fact see such an improbable sight, they believed the rest of the angels' message. 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. 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, frustrated and discouraged. We may still be waiting for the difficult circumstances of our lives to change, and we may not in fact see much improvement anytime soon.

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. Moreover, we know just how God planned for Jesus to save the world. For 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 perfect and complete justice to the world.

Yes, we know the whole 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 that means the same choice faces us that faced those shepherds so long ago. Will we choose to believe only what we can see with our eyes, only what makes sense to us? Will we go toiling on our way, with painful steps and slow, focusing only on the difficult circumstances in our lives? Will we 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? Will we bow the knee to Him as our Messiah, the Lord? Will we rejoice in His resurrection, expecting His justice and His mercy even as we look for His certain return? We've heard what the angels have said. Will we believe them?