

Luke 2:8-20

The Shepherds

As we saw with Mary yesterday, the great stories of the Bible often take place in un-extraordinary human situations, with specific individuals in the communities of which they are a part. So here, while angels announce the news, normal shepherds are caught up in God's big plans, and have their lives turned upside down as they endeavour to follow the call of a mysterious God.

A normal night out on the hills around Bethlehem. Clear skies, sheep bleating, perhaps a small fire alight. Then suddenly, the skies explode with light and the ambassador Angel for God Almighty appears out of nowhere.

The shepherds were terrified. Actually, it's the usual experience of people confronted by angels, we hear about it throughout the Christmas story with Joseph, Zechariah and Mary. Angels are not what we see on greeting cards or the walls of a Basilica. They aren't cute and cuddly like Raphael paints them. In the Bible on meeting an angel, people fall to the ground, cover their eyes or have to be told 'Don't Panic!'

That's because God's angels are army legionnaires, they are imposing figures, like the one at the entrance to the Garden of Eden with a flashing sword, or the one sent to defeat the bad-angel over Persia in answer to Daniel's prayers. They were not to be messed with soldiers sent out on heavenly errands, with authority to act, armies to defeat and such. People likely expected it it didn't bode well if one turned up and knew your name. A bit like being called to the principal's office. So...

the angel said to the shepherds, "Do not be afraid...I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!"

Phew! That's a relief. Good news. But NOW there's a multitude of heavenly beings filling the sky singing. A little overwhelming for a couple of farm hands. Their ears would have been ringing, their pulse would have been racing, sweat would have been dripping from their forehead and their hearts leaping out of their chests.

Before, during and after the heavenly anthem. And then just as quickly as it started, it's over. Clear skies, but still pounding hearts.

They look at each other. But they don't go back to the sheep, they don't stop to ask 'What about the sheep?' They got the message. Something big is happening. Let's check it out. And they go.

The presence of a choir of angels is just the sort of fanfare one would expect for royalty, and certainly for anything announcing an activity of God Almighty. The message is: the new king of Israel has arrived, he is of the blood line of David, born in David's city, the Messiah - the long awaited deliverer has been born! Hooray ! There's a coup in the wind, the Emperor will be deposed, the Romans will be run out of town! We will be liberated!

But despite the royal bloodline and the declaration of fulfilled prophecy over the infant, the child is born of a poor unwed woman from a hick country town, and the first visitors to the Christ child were shepherds. The riffraff who lived on outskirts of society, not dignitaries. The sign to look for is not displays of power, not thunderbolts and lightning, it's a baby wrapped in a bunny rug in a bed of straw. Stranger and stranger. What is God thinking? This isn't how the story is supposed to go! Where's Almighty in this?

Would WE believe the message if the Saviour had arrived in our time, in a homeless shelter or in the back room of the house of his third cousin twice removed in Colac, and the first visitors were dairy farmers?

Would we only accept him if he was delivered respectably by the best midwives in the Royal Women's; or with the press corp waiting outside and the trappings of a royal birth like Prince George or Princess Charlotte? God overturns our expectations and unsettles our sensitivities, and the Saviour enters our world in a most ordinary way - not in the palace of kings, but in a spare room, in company with livestock, and in a manger laid. It's unsettling but it makes us pay attention.

So how did the shepherds make the top of the guest list? Luke reminds us that Jesus is a descendant of the house of David via his step-father Joseph (Luke3:23-38). David is the quintessential shepherd turned king. This new son of David draws together everything the Scriptures had ever spoken about God being the Shepherd of his people, their nurturer and protector, their rescuer and guide, including casting him in the likeness of the favourite king of all - the rags to riches King, the humble godly leader of Israel.

Still, shepherds are hardly the ones we would expect to be entrusted earth-changing news, even now. Yet they are the ones who are led to his birthing place, the ones who leave rejoicing and telling the good news to everyone they meet.

Mary sang about this in her song: God loves to lift up the downcast and fill the hungry with good things. Shepherds, like the fishermen Jesus would gather around him, are just the sort of hard working ordinary folk, that people overlook and take for granted, that he likes to work with and entrusts with tasks of significant responsibility. That's good news - for we are riffraff, most of us are ordinary at best, most of us are NOT dignitaries.

Paul speaks about God's quirky ways, when he writes to the Christians in Corinth:

Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are. (1Corinthians 1:26–28)

Back to the story. The shepherds are on the way. Bethlehem wasn't a big place, so perhaps they asked around, and you know how the grapevine works amongst the lower levels in society - it's better than the official channels. Mary and Joseph had been looking for a place to stay, locals might have been able to point the boys in the right direction.

Now, to be fair, after travelling looking for lodgings heavily pregnant, travelling inconveniently away from home to register at the Census, and giving birth amongst the livestock, Mary and Joseph were probably not up for visitors. I imagine that aside from being exhausted, like most new parents, they were relieved, and caught up in the awe-filled moment of new life, wondering where this would all lead.

Knock at the door. Enter the first visitors. Not freshly shaven and showered with a bunch of flowers, a soft toy and chocolates...fresh from the fields, smelling like sheep, sweaty from the rushed trip across the hills, ears still buzzing from their recent encounter.

God has not come in the way his people expected, he came just as a baby, open to attack by vengeful kings, vulnerable to illness, having to cope with siblings and eat his vegetables.

This child is one of us and born for all people: young mothers, children and carpenters, shepherds and tax collectors, prophets and angels, wise men and simple, the faint-hearted, the curious and the brave. Not just the educated and powerful - though they also receive an invitation. Whats more the peace and goodwill of Christmas is good news for us all, it meets us where we are: in the fields, in the nursery, at home or displaced, in the company of loved ones or isolated.

And this peace is not the Pax Romana, an enforced peace at the point of a sword held together with oppression and corruption. It is the fullness of Hebrew peace (shalom, Luke2:14): a sign of God's favour encompassing the whole of life, bringing contentment, restfulness, joy, relationships in good order and the environment in rhythmic season and prosperity. This is a peace the world cannot offer, but it comes as a gift from the Prince of Peace.

'Who would have suspected that this baby born to Mary in David's city could bring us peace? That this baby's consistent, persistent, ordinary obedience to God would have an extraordinary, revolutionary impact?' We would have planned something far less risky, more glamorous and sensible, and we wouldn't have entrusted it to nobody's.

Maybe God chose these simple, down to earth, unlikely parents and shepherds because he guessed they would trust him and stick to his plan: not try and rationalise his message

away, or get on with something more important, or reason from the Scriptures why it should not be played out this way. They just accepted what God said and followed instructions, leaving behind their responsibilities and expectations. Just like the disciples leaving their nets at the invitation of Jesus.

An openness to God and courage to walk in obedience without many guarantees. Uncomplicated faith and trust in God over and above understanding the situation. It's beautiful and inspiring and it worked.

This Christmas, take some time to reflect and delight in simple faithfulness, give thanks it when you see it in front of you and live it out in your own life. Give thanks that God's upside down plans prioritise the poor, brokenhearted, captive, imprisoned, mournful, despairing, robbed and wronged people, and ordinary people just like us.

Treasure up and ponder what the Lord has shown you, savour the special moments he gives and trust in him who has come to dwell with us, as one of us. Be quick to respond to him without trying to figure it all out. And may we all be filled with joy in knowing Jesus as Saviour and Lord, and be able to share that what we have experienced for ourselves, is just as we had been told.

Resources: Feasting on the Word Year B, Luke.