

“Expect The Unexpected: Wrong Witnesses”
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Luke 2:8-20

Matthew 2:1-12

The other night I was out to dinner with some friends, and at one point, we happened to be talking about people in entertainment, and what we liked or didn't like about them. We talked about movies - what movies we liked or didn't like. We talked about television - the shows we watch, why we like those shows or don't like them. We spent a good amount of time talking about shows on the Food Network, and which ones we like or don't like. It was amazing, the diversity of opinion around the table - some of us like Paula Deen, while others can't stand her; some of us like Rachael Ray, while she makes others nervous; and we also had opinions on Ina Garten and Giada DeLaurentiis.

Now, I don't think we were an unusual group - I mean, most of us have opinions about things. We know what we like and don't like, we know how we want things to be.

Which got me to thinking - if we were the ones to set the stage for the birthday of the Messiah - I'm pretty sure we would not have chosen the witnesses God chose - the shepherds and the wise men. I mean, they just don't quite fit - do they?

It's the birthday of the Savior of the world, so wouldn't it make sense, to surround Him with the best? The best people, the ones that have it together, the ones who know who He is, and why He has come? Wouldn't it make sense that Jesus' welcoming committee be the cream of the crop, the elders of the faith who had anticipated His coming, and looked so forward to it for generations?

Doesn't that seem like the way God, in human form, should be welcomed into the world?

Yet, God, in His infinite wisdom, and for ways far beyond our understanding, chose otherwise. God's cast of characters wouldn't have been on anybody's top ten list. Shepherds and scholars from far away? Who would've picked them? They seem like the wrong witnesses for the Son of God, don't they?

Shepherds - One Bible commentary said that theirs was “a despised occupation at that time. Although the reference to shepherds evokes a positive,

pastoral image for the modern reader . . . in the first century, shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flocks on others' lands." (New Interpreters Bible Commentary, The Gospel of Luke, p. 65)

And another pastor told even more when he wrote, "The shepherds were from a different social strata. The shepherds were not only dirty, and smelled like sheep; due to the constant demands of their flocks they couldn't observe all the meticulous hand washing and rules and regulations required by the Jewish religion. And, to make matters worse, their flocks kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time so that they could not be made clean in the eyes of the Jewish law. For these and other reasons (he continued), shepherds were despised and mistrusted by people. They were thought to be crafty and dishonest, and people ascribed to them an uncanny ability to make off with things that did not belong to them. Their reputation was so bad that they were not even allowed to bear testimony in a court of law. They were looked down on as being part of the lowest class of the lowest class of their culture." (On-line, Redland Baptist Church)

Now, I ask you - are those the kind of people you would pick to form the welcoming committee for the King?

And then there were the wise men. Now, granted they were nothing at all like the shepherds - nothing at all like them. Yet, in their own way, they too were outsiders. You see, they were Gentiles, not Jews. They lived outside of the land of the chosen people. They were scholars, and put their faith in astrology and other sciences. That same commentator who called the shepherds "shiftless," said this about the wise men - "The Magi are Gentiles in the extreme, characters who could not be more remote from the Jewish citizens of Jerusalem in heritage and world view." (New Interpreters Bible Commentary, The Gospel of Matthew, p. 145).

Now, I ask you - are those the people you would pick - people who literally are from the outside - are those the people you would pick to form the welcoming committee for the King?

It seems, on face value, an odd assortment of individuals that God chooses to come to see the baby born in the manger, doesn't it? It would be easy for us to second guess God, and be critical of these choices. The poet Ann Weems seems to agree with that, in her poem "Had We Been There," which goes like this:

"Into the stable they straggled, poor and dirty, hardly suitably dressed for polite society.

Had we been Joseph, we would have feared robbery.

Had we been Mary, we would have feared germs around our newborn.

Had **w**e been God, these are not ones we would have chosen to first come and

see the child.

After all, they showed a certain carelessness about the rules of the church.

And yet, God-chosen, they came to kneel and worship Him whom we would later call the Good Shepherd.

Perhaps (she concludes) we could brush up on our humbleness.” (Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*, “Had We Been There)

I think, perhaps, she is right. We should brush up on our humbleness, and we should thank God that God chose whom God chose to witness the birth of His Son. Because in that choice, God said volumes to the world in that day and age, and for all the days and all the ages to come.

First of all, in that choice, God showed the world that His love is boundless and boundariless. It doesn't matter to God what the world thinks of people, or how the world categorizes people, or how the world determines who's important and who's not important. It doesn't matter to God where one lives or what one does for a living. It doesn't matter to God the color of one's skin, the language one speaks, the job one does, the money one makes, the marital status one has - none of that ultimately matters to God. God's love is boundless, endless, unqualified, unconditional. When God chooses the shepherds and the wise men to come to the cradle, He says to the world, I love you all.

One preacher said it like this: “Christ came for everyone - rich or poor, educated or illiterate, near or far, Jew or Gentile. Christmas is not just for one segment of society or the people who live on only one part of the planet, no, it is for us all. You may be unimportant in the eyes of most people or you may be very important; you may be a mere cog in the machine at your place of employment or the CEO. You may be near Christ - raised in a Christian home - or far from Him - raised in a home or culture where the name of Jesus is never even mentioned. None of those things matter for the simple reason that Jesus did not come to be the Savior of some. He came to be the Savior of all humanity.” (On-line, Redland Baptist Church)

So first, God's choice of the shepherds and wise men said “I love you all.” But secondly, I want to suggest to you this morning that God's choice of them also showed and still shows that there is a special place in the heart of God for those who find themselves on the outside looking in. I don't know about you, but I think God weeps at the way we arbitrarily call some people “insiders” and others “outsiders” according to our definition of what's important and what makes one worthy. I think God weeps over that, and I think scripture shows us over and over again, how it's to those people - the outsiders - that God constantly reaches out.

Remember Jesus reaching out to Zaccheus, a tax-collector ostracized by

others? And remember the first person to whom the resurrected Christ appeared? Mary Magdalene - called an outsider by so many.

I think God has a special place and a special tenderness in His heart for outsiders, and unless you're one of those rare people who doesn't know what it's like to be an outsider, then, what God did in choosing the shepherds and the wise men, is good news for you too.

I would suspect that there are a lot of people here in this room today who know what it's like to be an outsider. I mean, some feel like outsiders because they are outsiders - people who weren't born and raised here in Elkton - and so, they feel like they're not really, truly accepted. Others feel like outsiders because well, the church seems like a family place, filled with happy couples with children by their sides, and well, they're single. And others feel like outsiders because, while everybody else seems to be able to take part in all of the activities of the church even if it costs money, they're struggling to make ends meet and suffering silently. And still others are outsiders because they have their doubts about the faith, and they look around and think everybody else has no doubts whatsoever.

I think, at one time or another in life, everybody has a taste of what it feels like to be an outsider, and what it feels like, frankly, is bad. So what better news could there be for us, today, or any day, for that matter, than that the God in whom we believe, the God in whom we put our trust, has a special love and care for those on the outside looking in - and will, in fact, make a place for them.

Finally, I think perhaps the best news of all, in this story of witnesses to the birth of Christ, is this: that God is a seeking God. God doesn't just love all people, God constantly seeks after us, wooing us, calling us to Himself, calling us to the love that He offers to pour upon us.

The shepherds were out in the fields, and God sought them out, called to them, with a choir of angels.

The wise men were pouring over their studies, and watching for signs, and God sought them out, sending a brilliant star to draw them in.

You and I, and all of humanity, go about our daily lives, and God sent a baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, to love us and live for us and die for us and save us.

I want to close with a story of something that happened to me a number of years ago - but something I shall never forget - something that illustrates so well how much God loves us and seeks us.

It's something that happened between me and an outsider - an outsider to the

faith, that is. He is, by his account, an atheist, but I'm not sure about that. At any rate, a person in my former church came to me one day and told me that he wanted to give a Bible to a friend of his who was in the hospital. The friend was not a believer, but he wasn't opposed to it either - so this man wanted to give him a Bible and a list of some passages he might want to read. The parishioner asked me to come up with that list.

So I went to work on it. I listed all those passages you might expect, beginning, of course, with the 23rd Psalm.

As it happened, I met up with my friend, the alleged atheist, and on a whim, I told him the project I was working on, and asked his opinion on my choice of scriptures. Immediately, he looked at the first passage on my list - the 23rd Psalm - and said "wrong."

"Wrong?" I cried. "How can that beautiful passage possibly be wrong?"

And then he said the words that I shall never forget. He said, "People who are struggling to believe, people who are on the outside looking in, don't want to be told that God is leading them anywhere." Instead, he said, "write down the story of the Prodigal Son. That's what that man needs to hear. That no matter where he is, or what he has done, no matter how far outside he seems to be, God will welcome him home with arms wide open."

I shall never forget that, and now, you see, why I don't think that person is an atheist at all. He gets it, he just won't let it get him, but one day, he will.

Our God is the God who welcomes all home with open arms, but more than that, who seeks out all of His children, and loves them unconditionally, fully and completely.

The next time you look at a nativity scene, look especially closely at the wise men and the shepherds. For as you do, you will see God's amazing love in action - a love that breaks all boundaries, a love that reaches out to all. Thanks be to God.

Amen.