

People Like Us

Luke 2:1-20

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 20, 2015 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:1-20, NRSV)

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In the days of the Patriarchs shepherding was a noble occupation. Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, was a shepherd. Moses eventually became a shepherd. King David started out as a shepherd. In those days if your kid came home from college at Christmas break and announced to you that he'd decided to pursue a career as a shepherd your response was likely, “Well, he could do a lot worse.”

All that changed, however, when the Israelites moved to Egypt. In an article entitled “Shepherd Status”, biblical scholar Randy Alcorn reminds us that in those days a great famine in the land drove the twelve tribes of Israel to leave their home in Palestine and migrate to Egypt where there was food. The Egyptians in those days were farmers and as farmers they despised shepherding because sheep and goats threatened their crops. Nobody wants a bunch of sheep hanging around your lettuce garden. Add to that, Egyptians considered sheep worthless, no good either for eating or sacrificing. Even shepherds themselves were thought to be dirty and unsophisticated, especially compared to the honorable, clean-shaven nobles of Pharaoh's court. The Bible confirms all this in Genesis 46:34 where we read, “All shepherds are detestable to the Egyptians.”

As you may remember, the Israelites spent 400 years in Egypt before God finally called Moses to deliver them back home. 400 years is a long time, more than enough time to see your own views and attitudes conformed to the prevailing views and attitudes of your surrounding culture. My family moved to the Bay Area from Denver when I was a kid and when we showed up we were all devoted fans of the Denver Broncos. Or so I thought. Sadly, it took some fickle members of my family only a few years surrounded by the red and gold hysteria of the 80's to begin cheering themselves for the 49ers. I have yet to gain back my respect for them.

The point is that we are too easily conformed to the patterns of the culture around us. That's what happened to Israel and their attitudes towards shepherds. By the time they returned to Palestine they shared the Egyptians prejudice against this once-noble profession. Then, as Israel became a nation and acquired more farmland, pasturing decreased and shepherding became a menial vocation for the lowest classes of people. Eventually, by the time of Christ shepherds had come to be despised across Jewish culture. Status-wise they were right down there at the bottom with tax collectors and dung sweepers. Jewish law at the time described shepherds as incompetent and untrustworthy. They were deprived of civil rights and could not even be admitted as witnesses in court.

The very practice of their vocation, which required significant times away from community and synagogue, exacerbated their separation from the wider Jewish community. Their constant handling of dirty animals meant they were nearly always ceremonially unclean. The disgust was so widespread that the Mishnah, Judaism's written record of the oral law of the day, included a passage that instructed people in those times that they should not even feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who had fallen into a pit.¹

Put simply, if you asked people in those days who most mattered to God, nobody would have said shepherds. I suspect that not even the shepherds themselves would have told you that they mattered to God.

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Here's a question I'll let you answer for yourselves. Who are the shepherds of our day? Who are the people who have been pushed to the fringes of society, even religious society, because popular opinion has declared that they are in some way less relevant, less important, less worthy, or just plain less? There are lots of people who come to mind for me, whole groups of people. Who comes into your mind? Who are the shepherds of our day who may even believe themselves that they do not matter much to God?

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Many of us make a point of setting up a nativity scene this time of year and most nativity scenes, like the one here in our church, include shepherds. We think nothing of it. They belong there. Right? No crèche would be complete if you didn't have at least one shepherd standing there with his sheep admiring the babe in the manger.

Understand, however, that no first century Jew would have thought this way. If this was truly the long-awaited Messiah laying there in the feeding trough that night in Bethlehem, the very last people anybody would have pictured standing around the barn were shepherds. And to suggest that they would have been *invited there by angels from heaven* could never have been believed, even by the shepherds themselves.

Video Clip – Watch at <https://skitguys.com/videos/item/our-coming-savior-the-shepherds>

Before the Jewish people were even the Jewish people, when there was only Abraham and Sarah alone, God made a promise. God promised this old childless man and his wife that he would bless him and make him into a great family which one day would bless all families on earth. In time, God revealed that this sacred covenant meant that one day out of Abraham's descendants would come one who would set all things right in this world. In the words of the prophet Isaiah, this Messiah would bring good news to the poor, healing to the brokenhearted, freedom for the captives, release for prisoners, beauty in place of ashes, joy instead of mourning, praise to overcome despair.² For hundreds and hundreds of years the Jewish people longed for this coming of the Messiah. But by the time of Christ, it had been 400 years since even a single prophet of God had spoken with any fresh news of his arrival. So many years had passed by without God acting on this promise.

You need to understand, therefore, that when Jesus was born that night in Bethlehem it was the great climax of human history, the long-last realization of God's promise *finally* coming to fulfillment. Nothing could be bigger. Heaven was breaking into earth. God was on the move at last to bless and his people and then bless and save the whole world through them. And the night the Messiah came the very first people God decided to tell were shepherds.

¹ Much of this background is from Randy Alcorn's excellent article "Shepherd Status" in *Come, Thou Long-Expected Jesus*, edited by Nancy Guthrie (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 85-89.

² See Isaiah 61:1-3

I think back to the most joyful and anticipated moments of my life – when my wife accepted my proposal for marriage, when my older two children were born, when my younger two children were adopted – the first people I called to share the news with were the people who were closest to me, my family and my best friends. Why in the world would God choose to send angels to announce the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to those who were as far away from God as any person in those days might possibly get? Of all people who might have first heard this news, why would God first send his angels to the shepherds?

I think the video gets it right in suggesting that even the shepherds themselves must have had a difficult time believing what was happening. “Is it really possible that God came into this world not just for people who matter but for people like us?”

Who matters in our world? It’s a question many people have been asking lately. There’s a whole movement of people within our own nation, in fact, doing their best to proclaim one simple message: “Black lives matter.” Now, I understand that we may all have different opinions when it comes to the motives or the methods of this particular movement, but what we must agree on is that we live in a culture where at least some people from certain racial backgrounds have come to believe that their lives are not shown the same dignity and worth as other lives simply because of the color of their skin. The reality that some among us feel the need to assert that their lives really do matter ought to at least cause each of us to reflect how our attitudes or actions, or inaction as the case may be, might have contributed to this sense of inequity.

Let me ask you again, who are the shepherds of our day? Who are the people who have been pushed to the edges of relevance? In some ways our world hasn’t changed all that much. How do the values of our culture send subtle or not-so-subtle messages that some people matter more, or less, than other people?

The very same day the deadly terrorist attacks took the lives of 130 people in Paris, similar attacks took the lives of 40 people in Beirut. Many in Lebanon expressed shock that such chaotic violence had reached as far as France, a country they believed to be much safer than their own. But as one reporter in the *New York Times* put it, “for some in Beirut, that solidarity was mixed with anguish over the fact that just one of the stricken cities – Paris - received a global outpouring of sympathy akin to the one lavished on the United States after the 9/11 attacks. Monuments around the world lit up in the colors of the French flag; presidential speeches touted the need to defend ‘shared values;’ Facebook offered users a one-click option to overlay their profile pictures with the French tricolor, a service not offered for the Lebanese flag.”

Elie Fares is a Lebanese doctor who responded this way on his blog, “When my people died, no country bothered to light up its landmarks in the colors of their flag. When my people died, they did not send the world into mourning. Their death was but an irrelevant fleck along the international news cycle, something that happens in those parts of the world.”³ Whether this Lebanese doctor and others who share his view are right or not, we at least need to recognize that the response of the world to these near simultaneous terrorist attacks has at least some people wondering if Lebanese lives matter.

Honestly, a report like that makes me want to go on the defensive. I’m not the kind of person who places greater value on one life over another life in these ways! Or am I? Still being honest, I imagine myself walking into a room where there are two groups of people. One group is made up of people others consider important, influential and charismatic. The other is not. One group is made up of people our world has labeled beautiful. The other is not. One group has found success in all the ways our culture defines success. The other group has not. One group has something that they can offer me. The other does not. One group will affirm my values and beliefs. The other will not.

And I’d like to tell you that that old familiar magnetic pull that used to govern my life in junior high school has faded with maturity, but it has not. There is still something in me that draws me to the one group and not the other, something in me that believes that in some way the first group matters more than the second.

³ “Beirut, Also the Site of Deadly Attacks, Feels Forgotten” by Anne Barnard, *The New York Times*, November 15, 2015. Online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/16/world/middleeast/beirut-lebanon-attacks-paris.html>

It's just one other way I have come to see that Jesus is so unlike me. So unlike us, really. You see, nobody in Jesus' day would have walked into a room and found themselves drawn to the group of shepherds in the corner. If a group of shepherds had been murdered, few people in the Jewish community would have stood with them in solidarity. And yet when God comes himself into the world it is shepherds, from among all people, who are invited to come and meet him first.

From the very beginning of his life on this earth Jesus made it abundantly clear that he was going to move among the lowly and ordinary and even despised people of our world. All lives matter to God and so Jesus, the incarnation of God, lived a life which in every way expressed this truth. His birth announcement was sent to lowly shepherds. Simple fisherman and tax-collectors became his closest friends. The most notorious sinners of his day sat as guests around his table. Even after his resurrection, it was women to whom he first appeared, women whose status was so low that their testimony, like that of shepherds, was not admissible in court.

On the flip side, if you were somebody in Jesus' day who imagined that you mattered a great deal because you were important and righteous and deserving and ought to be treated as such, the sort of person who told yourself, "God must naturally be fond of me because how could God not be fond of me" – well, you were not a person Jesus made much effort to pursue. As he put it himself, "It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."⁴

And we'd like to think that in our day we've got this all figured out but I'm not so sure. The people in our day who are the very last people we think Jesus would ever be drawn to are the very people he likely is first reaching out to embrace. Let that sink in for a minute. Who are the people you imagine are furthest away from God? Unless he's changed his ways, those are the people towards whom Jesus is still drawing near.

Here's the kicker. If you are like most people, one person in the world you sometimes have a hard time imagining matters to God is you. Do you realize that? I really do believe that most of us at some point ask along with the shepherds, "Is it really possible that God came into this world not just for people who matter but for people like me?"

As much as anybody, it was the self-righteous religious leaders of Jesus day who hated the shepherds and other untouchables. But do you ever wonder why? In a twist of irony, I believe that those who told themselves that others didn't matter to God were motivated to do so by a deep fear that in the end they themselves might not matter to God. Remember, the lives of these people were consumed with right living. They poured their whole selves into living in the ways they imagined would earn them God's favor, driven by a longing to demonstrate to God that they did, in fact, matter.

My friend, Walter, told me this the other day: whenever somebody ridicules another person it's actually just a dishonest way of praising themselves. I see this in myself. I bet you see it in yourself as well. The tendency in me to look down on others by imagining that in some way they matter less is always driven by a fear in me that perhaps I am the one who matters less. And though it never works, we trick ourselves into thinking that if we diminish the significance of another it will in some way increase our own significance.

But Jesus came to set us free. Of course, part of his message to us is that all lives matter to God, no matter who they are or what they have done or even what they think of God. They matter. But I'm not sure we'll ever be able to embrace that message until we first come to realize and truly believe that we ourselves matter to God, that no matter who we are or what we have done or not done or even what we think about God, we not only matter to God but are loved by God beyond measure. Could this be why Jesus was forever linking our love for God to our love for others? Could it be that we will never be free to love others and to see that they matter infinitely to God until we come to see that we are loved by God and that we matter infinitely to him?

I can only speak for myself in saying that the times in my life when I have experienced the deepest sense of peace, peace with who I am and who others are and who God is, those are the times when I have truly come to accept that *I* matter deeply to God. Not because of what I have done or even because of who I am but because of what God has done and because of who God is.

⁴ Luke 5:31-32

Honestly, I don't always believe this. It's a day to day struggle. Probably like it is for you. But when we do, by the grace of God, come to believe that this truly is how God sees us all, it is then that we are set free.

Is it really possible that God came into this world at Christmas not just for people who matter but for people like us?

Amen.

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The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Re-read the familiar passage from Matthew Luke 2:1-20. Is there something here that you never noticed until now?
2. God announced the birth of his Son first to shepherds who were among the most detested people in Jewish culture of the day? Was point was God trying to make?
3. When, and why, have you ever been so overwhelmed with joy or curiosity that you, like the shepherds in this story, set aside all regular responsibilities to go and see and celebrate something God was doing?
4. The angels proclaimed to the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" What do these words mean to you?
5. Who are the shepherds of our day, those who have been pushed to the margins and made to feel they do not matter as much?
6. Do you always live in such a way that demonstrates a belief that all people matter greatly to God?
7. Do you believe you matter to God? Why or why not?
8. What good news do you long to hear this Christmas?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

Why do you think that God invited shepherds to be the very first ones to come and see the baby Jesus?