



Pictures of Christmas

The Shepherds: Nobodies Who Received the Good News

We dress them up in clean robes and nice sandals. The boys look sharp in our Christmas program. But our nativity scene would be more realistic if we left the robes unlaundered, wore sandals with worn soles, and used shepherds who were half-addled from spending their days in the hot sun.

In the first century, shepherds were nobodies. They had no social status. Matthew tells about the Magi. That is more impressive: a group of wise men bringing gold to a new king. But shepherds?

Why does Luke focus on the testimony of shepherds? The word of a shepherd was not even accepted Jewish courts; everyone knew that shepherds were low-class and unreliable. Imagine a group of wild-eyed homeless men bursting into your house saying, "Follow us!!! We just saw some angels who told us that a new king was born in Orlando. Let's go see him!" I wouldn't follow them! Would you?

But Luke tells us that the angels' first message was a group of shepherds. The angel says, "Don't be afraid! I have good news for you. A baby is born who will bring joy to all people." The shepherds rush to Bethlehem to find the baby and then tell everyone what happened. "*And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*" People surely asked, "Why would angels give such important news to shepherds???"

Why shepherds? Luke wants us to understand that God cares about everyone, even nobodies. That is the amazing gospel of Luke. Luke loves to show that people were "amazed" at Jesus. And the amazement starts here at the birth - with a group of shepherds.

Pharisees aren't amazed by Jesus; they are annoyed by him. The bigwigs in Jerusalem don't come to bow to Jesus; they try to silence him. But the shepherds - the nobodies - are changed by Jesus.

This pattern will continue throughout Jesus' ministry. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, a nobody. He has to climb a tree to see Jesus because no one at the front of the crowd will make room for a despised tax collector. Jesus sees him and says, "Come down. We're having lunch together!"

And then there are the lepers.... A leper is a nobody. Everyone is afraid of lepers. They run when a leper walks down the street, shouting, "Unclean!" Jesus heals lepers, but he does something completely unexpected: he touches them. Jesus did not have to touch them to bring healing; he could heal with the power of his word. But Jesus knew that lepers needed a touch to confirm their worth. Since contracting this terrible disease, a leper would have never felt a human touch. A nobody needed to know that someone saw more than their disease.

All through Luke, the gospel is given to nobodies: shepherds, lepers, tax collectors. When I read about the shepherds, I remember John Newton, an 18th century slave trader who was transformed by God's amazing grace.

The captain of a slave ship is even lower than a shepherd. Newton was a wicked man who was proud of his wickedness. He later wrote, "I not only sinned myself, but I made it my study to tempt and seduce others to sin." But the gospel is for everyone, even a profane slave trader. John Newton was converted and became a preacher of the gospel. As he pondered God's mercy, Newton sang:

"Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me.
I once was lost, but now am found, was blind but now I see."

That is the amazing gospel of Christmas. God seeks people who are lost. The gospel is not just for "good people"; the gospel is for everyone. Whosoever believes on Him will have eternal life. Whosoever: that's everyone! Shepherds, tax collectors, lepers, John Newton ... and me.