

Honor The Overlooked

12-9-2012

Luke 2: 8-20

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Do any of you remember the headlines in newspapers twelve years ago that seemed strangely ironic? "Bethlehem Cancels Christmas Celebration!" You've got to admit that has about the same oxymoron quality as one that would read "Vatican Pre-empts Pope's Easter Homily." The story went on to describe the devastating impact the bloodshed between Israelis and Palestinians had on the most famous of West Bank communities. After years of planning and untold dollars invested, major celebrations planned for the first Christmas of the new millennium were scrapped. The risk for tourists and Christian pilgrims wanting to make their way to the city of David was too high. Streets were deserted. Shops closed. Unlike the first Christmas, the inns and hotels remained empty. Hopes for a peaceful settlement of centuries-long prejudice posed little if any promise. In the weeks leading up to this peace-less birthday of the Prince of Peace, 200 Palestinians were killed. Not only was it not safe, there was anything but a spirit of celebration in the air. Sounds like it could be 2012, not 2000. I haven't read where Christmas in Bethlehem has been cancelled yet, but I wouldn't be surprised if it happened again this year.

What the newspaper account in 2000 didn't describe was the plight of the Palestinian Christians in Bethlehem. Dependent on tourism to market their olive wood figurines and other souvenirs, those believers struggling to eke out a living in the birthplace of their Savior had no recourse but to seek God's help. For years, they had lived with the uncertainty of political unrest and the resulting instability of the economy. But Christmas 2000 was worse than any time in recent memory. Their plight was strangely similar to the words of that haunting carol we sometimes sing this time of year. "In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan. Earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone. Snow had fallen, snow on snow, snow on snow. In the bleak midwinter, long ago." Though not so very long ago for these Christian merchants in Bethlehem, the first Christmas of the new millennium was a bleak midwinter to be sure.

Tragically, these Palestinian Christians were forced to sell furniture and family heirlooms in order to buy food to feed their children. Not exactly the sentimental scene pictured on greeting cards, is it. Consistent with the more familiar Christmas carol, the little town of Bethlehem lay still, no tourists, no business, no celebrations. But the silent stars moved across the black middle eastern sky to the occasional yet disruptive sounds of mortars and bomb blasts heard throughout the Promised Land. Consider the Palestinians who are followers of the baby born in Bethlehem. They are about as marginalized as the first century shepherds who tended sheep on the hills surrounding that same little town two millennia ago.

That's right. In their day the shepherds were a fellowship of forgotten people. These harvesters of would-be wool had no status. It's possible they had Rambo-like tendencies as they tended their flocks by night. But by day they sheepishly made their way toward town. They were the overlooked of their society.

In the culture into which Jesus was born, shepherds had very little chance of ever doing anything different the rest of their life. Unlike David, (who also was born in Bethlehem) your chances of tending your father's sheep

and then growing up to become king were as remote as netting a great catch of fish in the Dead Sea. Times had changed in a thousand years. Shepherds were anything but waiting in the wings for a royal robe.

In Michael and Stormy Omartian's Christmas musical "Child of the Promise" they've written a song that shatters our starry-eyed view of shepherddom. These shepherds were not George Clooney look-a-likes dressed in terrycloth bathrobes smelling Downy fresh. Listen to the realism in the Omartian's song "Nothing Ever Happens to a Shepherd."

"It's cold outside in this God-forsaken place and we're stuck here with a thousand sheep.

While life is exciting for everybody else, the highlight of our day is sleep.

It's lonely out here in this isolated job. Our position is without esteem.

We're socially challenged. We're society's scourge. We're not exactly every woman's dream.

Shepherds have a humble purpose. Of our fate few people care. Sometimes I wonder if God knows we exist. If he does he's forgotten where.

Nothing ever happens to a shepherd. Life is boring as can be. While exciting things occur all over the world, nothing ever happens to me."

What a poignant description of what it was like to be an overlooked member of first century Jewish society. No wonder it was unthinkable that God would choose a group of sheep herders to receive the first birth announcement pertaining to his Son's arrival. By instructing the angels to tell it to the shepherds the Creator knew what he was doing. God was making a statement. Nobodies are somebody to God. Those who spend their nights and days caring for sheep with matted wool matter, to God.

Remember the words Luke wrote in 2: 8-18 starting with verse 8: **And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, Do not be afraid. I bring good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This is a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests... When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told"**

You'd better believe they were amazed. It wasn't just what the shepherds had to say that left the crowds amazed, it was also the very fact that the shepherds were the ones who were broadcasting such network-worthy news. Of all people who would be privy to this kind of late breaking development, you'd expect a Dan Rather or Tom Brokaw or Peter Jennings; anybody but shepherds. There's a principle here. Have you seen it yet? God intentionally chose the shepherds as those who would initially be entrusted with the message of Jesus' birth. I don't believe it was a random choice. By having the angels tell them, He was honoring their worth. We have been called to do the same thing. When we share the good news of why Jesus Christ was born with those who are held hostage by prejudice, economic injustice or the consequences of bad choices in their past, we validate their worth in God's sight. Paying attention to the overlooked and undervalued of our society is a debt we owe that is long overdue.

But let me take this a step further. When we honor the "shepherds" in our culture by sharing secrets about God's love, we honor God by following his lead. That's what Jesus did. When the Christ child grew up and began his itinerant ministry as an adult, he followed the model his Father had set in motion. He hung out with the outcasts. He touched the lepers. He elevated the status of sinners and women and children. And get this, Jesus attempted to draw a picture of his purpose in coming to earth. What did he sketch? He called himself a shepherd. "I am the good shepherd," he said. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." I'm speculating here, but I

have a hunch that Jesus knew some sheep herders by their first name. No matter their occupation, whoever was lonely out here in this isolated job whose position was without esteem, whoever was socially challenged or society's scourge, those were the ones Jesus reached out to. How will you follow the example of the Good Shepherd and reach out in Christ's love to the overlooked, neglected, disadvantaged people around you this Christmas season?

It's easy for us, middle-class, white, "Christians" to look over the over looked. They aren't one of us. We aren't trying to be mean or ugly to any one, we just don't see them. Case in point: how many of you rang the bell for the Salvation Army this year? For that matter, how many of you have ever rung the bell for them. This isn't a hey look at me statement, just an observation on my part. I started ringing the bell for our church at Wal-Mart several years ago. The one thing I have noticed, year-in and year-out, was who gives. Who drops money in the little red kettle hanging by those little chains, on that little tripod? I would venture to say that 90% of the people who give, are the ones who can least afford to give. I would venture to say that those who give on a regular basis, have received some assistance from the Salvation Army at one time or the other in their lives. The people who look like me, who are dressed as well or better than I am, the people whose hair is cut just right, the people who obviously can afford to drop a few meager coins in the kettle, they tend to hang their head as they pass, or they look the other way as they pass. They are the ones who over-look, the overlooked. I was one of them. I did just that; I turned my head, I looked down, I pretended to talk on my cell phone as I passed. Then I rang the bell one Saturday morning. As I did, I observed the people who came and went at Wal-Mart. I observed who gave and who looked the other way. As I watched the people, I began to realize that I'm one of the ones who looked the other way. I also realized as I stood there and rang the bell, that I didn't really care how much money someone dropped in the kettle, I was concerned with did someone drop any money in the kettle. It has changed the way I give. Now, I can't walk by a kettle without dropping at least a few coins in. How many people depend on the Salvation Army, especially at Christmas, for a meal, or a gift for a child, or a coat because it's cold. Granted, there are a few people who abuse the system, but how many people really do need the help and receive it from The Salvation Army. How much more help could be provided if everyone who passed a kettle this Christmas would drop a few coins in, instead of looking the other way.

As we look back at the "cancelled" Christmas of 2000 in Bethlehem due to the fear of violence, let us make the effort to ensure that Christmas 2012 in America is not cancelled in our hearts or in the hearts of those who feel as overlooked as the shepherds of Bethlehem did years ago. God is still sending his angels who proclaimed in Luke 2: 10 & 11, **“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people... in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”**