

Outsiders

2022-12-24 | CHRISTMAS EVE II
REV. ZSÓFI SCHMIEDGE



READINGS

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

You can find the readings in NRSV and CEB translations by clicking [this link](#).

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It's Christmas Eve.

And here we are - with friends or family or faith community. Gathered to worship and celebrate God and what God is doing in the world.

Yet, leading up to this night, I found myself thinking about outsiders.

Perhaps because this is a year of being in a new community for my own family. Perhaps because I have often felt an outsider at Christmas since I was in my twenties.

Perhaps it's because I've been having a number of conversations this month in particular about how devastated, disconnected, disoriented, or disappointed people are feeling in the midst of this busy-making and merry-making season.

Whatever the reason, I feel as though at some point in everyone's life, the Christmas story might feel a little more routine and a little less enchanting. The characters become overly familiar: a census, an engaged pregnant couple, shepherds in a field, a messenger angel, a heavenly chorus, and a newborn baby. So many people are acquainted with the story – but from a distant level of editorial summary or synopsis. So many people claim to know it. And yet, something tickles the back of my mind – do we actually truly know what the story contains? What does it mean for us to be inside this story?

This gospel of Luke's version of this story is a simple and to-the-point telling of a birth story. And when we look a little deeper, within the simplicity of that story we discover a couple of really important things.

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night," we read.

But the history and context of that sentence might be lost. Bishop Craig Satterlee of the ELCA said this:

"By the time of Jesus, shepherding had become a profession most likely to be filled from the bottom rung of the social ladder, by persons who could not find what was regarded as decent work. Society stereotyped shepherds as liars, degenerates, and thieves. The testimony of shepherds was not admissible in court, and many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from their city limits. The religious establishment took a particularly dim view of shepherds since the regular exercise of shepherds' duties kept them from observing the Sabbath and rendered them ritually unclean. The Pharisees classed shepherds with tax collectors and prostitutes, persons who were "sinners" by virtue of their vocation." [Craig Satterlee. "Commentary on Luke 2:1-14[15-20]" *Workingpreacher.org*]

These shepherds, doing a particular job necessary for society, who are the first to hear the Gospel, are a people who are made into outsiders. Outsiders are usually people shunned by those on the other side of an established 'decent and upstanding religious folk' line.

But, outsiders are also often a people who have lived through periods of being consumed by grief, anger, devastation, disconnection, disorientation, or disappointment. Outsiders are often complex people who are struggling to get a boost within a system that is working against them. It's frighteningly easy for outsiders to be marginalized, minimalized, and forgotten by anyone around them.

Except, I think, by God.

A messenger of God arrives and shines the glory of God on these ignored, stereotyped, shunned, outcasts of society. The first people to hear the news of this special birth are the ones we call lowly shepherds.

Because God doesn't abandon or ignore anyone.

I love the next part of this story so much. Those shepherds, who may have been a little slow to trust – even *God's word*, decide among themselves that they should confirm what these messengers of God had told them. How incredibly human.

And what do they find? Mary and Joseph and a baby – just as they were told.

Once the vision was confirmed, the shepherds told everyone what had happened to them out in the field - they told the story of their own experience of God. They told a story of inclusion.

Not just Mary and Joseph and a baby.

Everyone.

There is a community around that little family. Jesus was born into a community – surrounded by love and extended family. And they were amazed at the reach of God's involvement.

Because God doesn't abandon or ignore anyone.

Way back when, when creation was done, and humanity sent out into the vast world, God was there. I like to believe it to be in a way like any parent who wants to be there for the special events of their children, God was there. And as time passed, God looked all over the earth: "surveyed humanity and realized how grim and difficult our days could be, how confused we get about our identity and place, how many painful things we do to each other out of that confusion and insecurity..." [David Lose. "Christmas Eve/Day C: Keep It Simple" *in the Meantime*]

So, in unimaginable love, God reached out. And got involved.

First humanity received the gift of the Law, then came the prophets and kings – mediators and messengers of God's Word. And time and time again, one of the realities of humanity continued to rise up.

There always remain these people among us who are made into outsiders: shunned by those on the other side of an established 'decent and upstanding religious folk' kind of line. People who have lived through periods of being consumed by grief, anger, devastation, disconnection, disorientation, or disappointment. Complex people who are struggling to get a boost within a system that is working against them. People who are marginalized, minimalized, and forgotten by anyone around them.

So, God decided that a much more personal touch rooted in relationship was needed. God puts this incredibly large love letter in a tiny, frail, helpless, human body.

This Incarnation, God born into the world human, roars an important message about who we are.

Who you are is important.

Who you are is worth God's time.

Who you are deserves a community to surround you and love to uplift you.

God made this incredible decision to become a fleshy human being, reaching out to every single other body so that we can all come to truly know that God doesn't abandon or ignore – God loves. We are loved. We are precious.

God needed us to hear and know that everyone in the whole world isn't going to be left out of God's loving. Especially the ones the world continues to make outsiders: "those who don't feel loved or lovable; those who regularly feel like they're on the outside looking in, those who feel forgotten, and those who wonder what the point of

life is.” [David Lose. “Christmas Eve/Day C: Keep It Simple” *in the Meantime*]

Because of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, we are all heirs, the beloved of God.

Every person is important. You are important.

Every person is worth God’s time. You are worth God’s time.

Every person deserves a community to surround them and love to uplift them. You deserve a community to surround you and love to uplift you.

Back in the gospel of Luke, Mary saw what was happening around her and committed it all to memory, considered it all carefully. May we too come to truly know the promises of the Christmas story deep within our hearts. When the shepherds had seen and confirmed this incredible gift of love with their own eyes, they returned home, praising God and, I think, telling everyone – sharing the good news – about the wonder of God’s love.

May we go and do likewise. Amen.