

For about 30+ years this place where you are sitting was a bar. In fact, on a stage in this very area, bands like Foghat and .38 Special played to a packed room. So it was no surprise when, about a month ago, someone from outside the area checked-in to the church on Facebook, tagged a few friends and commented about it. Because they tagged the church I was able to see the conversation as admin of the Facebook page.

One of them immediately said something I hear all the time when people outside the church start talking about actually showing up to church...one of the guys said, "Better be careful or the roof will fall in on you!"

What a statement to make...I have invited people who immediately say, "If I were to show up the roof would cave in!" I don't know where that idea came from, but I know it wasn't from God.

Maybe it came from the person's misconceptions about God...they think he is ready to zap them at any moment because of their sins, and they are certain he will zap them if they come close to his "house."

Maybe they got it from some Christians who made them feel like they had to clean up before they could come into the presence of God. I had a group of people question what kind of church I was pastoring if I let a particular kind of person in...they knew he was using drugs and it was ridiculous that a church would let him attend!

And because I sometimes find it hard to be a good Christian, I told them they could stick it!

We are in this message series called Gathered Around the Manger, and we are looking at various characters from the story of Jesus' birth or the time around it. This morning we are looking at a group of people that the mental image you and I have of them is completely wrong!

Luke 2:4-8

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Shepherds...you and I have some pretty positive thoughts about shepherds. I mean we don't hate them. Most of us probably don't know any shepherds. We like their pie. We know about the stories of God being like a shepherd, King David being a shepherd, and

Jesus teaching about the Good Shepherd...but in the first century shepherds were not well thought of. They were the bottom rung of the Jewish system...right alongside tax collectors and dung sweepers.

Let's just imagine their physical appearance and presence...they have spent weeks out in the fields and deserts...dirt caked around their toes and on their cheeks...probably not many showers out there...they have lived with the sheep and sat around countless campfires...They have a wonderful smell...it's like a potpourri of week-old sweat and sheep dung with a smokey aftertaste.

And I don't know if you have ever been around the groups of people, especially guys, at the fringes of society where they no longer have to worry about "respectable" society... the language...the jokes...Especially if you consider that they weren't welcome in any Jewish religious setting

Judaism cleanliness laws excluded many people groups from entering the Temple area, and shepherds were one of those unwelcome groups. These men worked in the fields, watching over the sheep that would be used in the sacrifices at the Temple, but their occupation made them unclean and therefore unable to enter the Temple...

They couldn't receive the benefits of the sacrifices, they were unable to hear the Scriptures read, they were unable, according to the Jewish beliefs, to be in the presence of God—because God's presence was in the Temple. They were separated from God and from "normal" Jewish people.

The Mishnah, Judaism's written record of the oral law, describes shepherds as "incompetent"; another says no one should ever feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit.

The first century Jewish writer Jeremias tells us shepherds were deprived of all civil rights. They could not fulfill judicial offices or be admitted in court as witnesses. He wrote, "To buy wool, milk or a [baby goat] from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would be stolen property."

These were not and are not people that polite society wants around. Most of you would not feel comfortable around shepherds. These are the people that might, because of their lifestyle or the opinion of others might never step foot into a church believing the roof would crash in on them.

But what we see come to see through the shepherds is that

God invites the outsiders into His presence.

Luke 2:9-16

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 that will cause great joy for all the people.

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, 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 heaven,
and on earth peace to those 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.

I find it very interesting that when God became part of our world, He did not send His angels to the house of the high priest. He did not send His angels to the any of Pharisee’s homes. He did not send His angels to the homes of any of the good, Temple-going folk. God sent His angels to this group of rowdy, course, dirty-joke telling shepherds who smelled like sheep.

These shepherds, whom the religious leaders had barred from Temple worship, were the first people God invited to worship Jesus at the manger. With all their pains and problems, they were invited into the presence of God.

And the angels make it clear that this will cause great joy for ALL people. Not just the Jews. Not just the goody-too-shoes. Not those who have it all together.

Don’t get me wrong, just because someone is on the fringe or an outsider doesn’t mean they are automatically in...but I have noticed that people on the fringe, at the end of their ropes, who have nothing to offer are much more receptive to God’s voice than those of us who think we have everything together or attempt to fit into “normal” society.

I don’t know if you have ever met someone who is just happy to be invited in. They are almost annoying with their “Thank yous”, but they are genuine. So many times, outsider or insider, we can stroll into God’s presence believing we have everything together. We are confident, self-righteous...anything but humble and recognizing what a privilege it is to be invited into the presence of God. One of the best prayers I ever heard was from a drug addict who simply prayed, “God I don’t have anything, and I need you all of you!”

I don’t believe the shepherds took this opportunity for granted. They couldn’t just enter the presence of God. They didn’t get angelic visits on a regular basis. And now they are being offered something they didn’t deserve, but longed for and needed.

It would do us good, during this holiday season, to sit and reflect on the fact that we are so very privileged to be invited in... So often we lie to ourselves and think we can handle things by ourselves... that we have everything together... in reality, we are all desperately in need of the love and forgiveness God offers to those who will humble themselves and accept it.

We get to invite other outsiders into His presence.

Luke 2:17-20

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.

Evangelism is a scary thought. We get all kinds of images in our heads from people standing on street corners to a high pressure sales technique to being obnoxious and telling everyone within earshot about Jesus.

It is interesting a few years ago, a man named Guy Kawasaki, a marketing and technology expert, popularized the use of the word “evangelist” in the technology area; specifically at Apple. He believed that if someone really liked a product and was excited to use it they would tell people around them and that made them an evangelist.

I am a “place and food” evangelist... I love to talk about places to eat, places to see, and things to do. I want to go out and experience life, and if I find a great place to eat, visit, explore, whatever... I want to tell other people about it.

Now, let's say you are a shepherd that has been rejected and dumped on by society. You are not allowed in the Temple; into the presence of God. But you get this invite, and go exploring, and when you get there you discover that everything the angels told you about was true. You see the most amazing child, and really sense that you have been in the presence of God. What would you want to do?

Of course, you would run excitedly to every friend and family member... you would tell every stranger on the street what had just happened to you and what you saw. One thing always seems to happen when people truly discover Jesus... they want other people to know about him and they tell them.

When was the last time you felt so excited about Jesus and what he was doing in your life that you just had to tell someone? Have you ever felt that way?

I know there is a lot explaining that we have to do, and a lot of forgiveness asking we have to do on behalf of some other Christians. I, personally, get tired of saying, “No, I'm not that kind of Christian.” But the call is still there for us to experience and know the love and forgiveness of Jesus to the point where want to tell others about him.

I know it's easy to settle into everyday life and faith, but as Thom Rainer says, "When Jesus becomes routine to us – that is, our passion for Him has settled into mediocrity – we won't readily tell others about Him."

During this Advent season, it is good to remind ourselves that we are invited in to this Good News...invited into the loving presence of God who wants to forgive us and restore us...and that we are then tasked with being the hands and feet of that Good News to the world around us.

Conclusion

Jesus spent his entire life reaching out to the unwanted and unwelcome members of society...tax-collector/traitors, adulterers, prostitutes, Samaritans, even to the Pharisee. People rejected, sent away, those who were lost, broken, hurting—He was the way for them to enter the presence of God.

And He continues to invite those of us who will listen to enter God's presence, and then works through lost, broken, hurting people like you and me to tell other lost, broken, and hurting people about His love and acceptance. His church is supposed to be a place that invites, welcomes, and loves those who have been rejected and hurt, the smelly and unlovable, those who tell dirty jokes and fill their speech with curse words.

It shouldn't be an excuse to stay broken, but as Matthew 9:12-13 says, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners." NIV

Jesus continues to call the sick and the sinners through His Church