

Expansive Inclusion (Luke 2:8-18; Matt. 2:1-12)

Whenever I hear these stories of the shepherds and the wise men, my initial thoughts don't go to a hillside near Bethlehem or camels lingering outside by the house. What comes to mind first is the number of children's Christmas pageants I have either been in or seen over the years. And it always seems to follow the same pattern—the youngest children are the sheep, the older children are the wise men, and the group between them are the shepherds. The sheep were always cute and they always wandered. The wise men were always serious—they never smiled, probably because they were concentrating on keeping the crowns on their head and not dropping their gifts. And the shepherds were always kind of unruly—they were hustled onto the platform, took up their spots, and invariably began to jostle each other and those around them. It always seemed like the shepherds were just bit players—as though they didn't have anything important to do—they just needed to be seen.

I don't know if that's how it was originally—I doubt it. But I do know that the visit of the shepherds and wise men were two separate occasions—they weren't jostling for space in the manger scene, but it is true that they were two distinct groups. And neither of them were bit players. In the accounts where they appear, both have strong supporting roles to the main event. We tend to mash these two events together, though they occurred at different times, weeks apart at the very least and perhaps as much as a year. Different as they were, there is something common to both, and though they share a common element, each reveals something different about the event itself.

Our Advent theme, as you'll recall, is expect the unexpected—which, of course, is a bit of a contradiction in terms, but you get the idea. And I doubt there was anything more unexpected for a group of shepherds outside of Bethlehem than to suddenly have an angel appear in the night sky, filling it and surrounding them with brilliant glory, and speaking to them about the birth of a Savior, the messiah who is the Lord. Then, as Luke tells it, the skies were suddenly filled with a great company of the heavenly host who burst into praise for God announcing peace on earth to those on whom God's favor rests.

This is the kind of thing they might have imagined happening in a magnificent setting, the splendor of the Temple, or the awesome heights of a mountain top. It's something they would have ordinarily heard about...eventually, or witnessed from a long way off. Shepherds were not the upper crust of society. They weren't, as some have suggested, disreputable or unruly—they were simply outside the stream of typical life because their work kept them out in the fields with the sheep. If biblical history is any guide to their contemporary situation, there's a good chance they were young—the task of watching sheep was historically assigned to the youngest child. On the other hand, these might have been seasonal workers who worked at maintaining flocks to supply the demands for sacrificial sheep at the Temple in Jerusalem, just 6 miles up the road. Either way, shepherds were common laborers, a lowly lot considered, for the most part, unimportant and likely the last to know of whatever happened in town.

And yet, God sent the angel to them—not to Priests in the Temple, not to the ruling class in Jerusalem, not even to the villagers in Bethlehem, but them—the least informed, probably not well off, and typically overlooked. This wasn't accidental—it's not like the angels got the wrong group, but let's see how this plays out. It wasn't incidental—like the shepherds were the only ones awake at that time so it's them or no-one. God did this intentionally, so what was God up to?

I wonder if we don't find some indication in Mary's song, a chapter earlier in Luke, which she voiced at the house of Elizabeth and Zechariah reflecting on what her situation revealed about God—"The Lord has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." She seemed to grasp that what God was doing through the birth of her son would mean a transformation of the world, a structural overhaul of society. The powerful will be brought down and the lowly lifted up, as Isaac Villegas recently suggested.

This was the remaking of the world, not storming the palaces, but a grass roots movement that inverted the paradigms on which the systems of the world were built. Instead

of the rich and powerful, God announced the beginning of that transformation to the poor and powerless, not to the proud and connected, but to the lowly and excluded. Instead of them being the last to know, God made sure the shepherds heard it first, they were included from the beginning—news of great joy for all the people—your salvation, your rescue has come. Unexpected to be sure, but welcomed. The shepherds were exactly the right group, for when they went to Bethlehem to verify what they had been told, they spread the word—the people hearing them were amazed. But, the following verses tell us, Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. For her, it was another confirmation that God was on the move: the transformation was underway, the lowly are leading out. Later in life, when Jesus began his public ministry, his approach followed that same track—he reached out to common folk, not the power-brokers. He called common laborers to be his disciples. He went to the suffering, the oppressed, the needy and connected them to the grace of God revealing God's mercy and love. The message was clear: the ones who were generally overlooked, disregarded, or even held in contempt by the religious elite and society in his day were not overlooked, disregarded, or held in contempt by God. Rather they often had clearer insight into what Jesus offered and eagerly received his grace and truth. They who had been systemically excluded were included in Christ.

The Magi also encountered something unexpected. They were likely from a class of perhaps Persian society that evolved from the wise men in Daniel's time during the Babylonian exile. By the time of Jesus, Magi were astronomers and astrologers—observing and trying to determine meaning from the night sky. They were also interpreters of dreams, as their ancestors were in Daniel's time. Additionally they were scholars of a sort that had access to sacred writings they also tried to interpret. A phenomena caught their attention in the sky, and perhaps they attributed it to an oracle handed down from the time of Balaam, who in Numbers 24:17 spoke of a star coming out of Jacob, a scepter rising out of Israel. That may be all they had, but that and the stellar anomaly was enough to send them in search of what they concluded to be a new dynasty arising in Israel. They intended to pay homage due to the unique sighting.

This was probably a group of several—the magi themselves, servants, perhaps some kind of security detail, more than three—who journeyed over the course of perhaps 40 days guided by this particular star. It made sense for them to head to Jerusalem. Where else would one expect to find a newborn king of the Jews? They might have imagined some kind of a royal reception, maybe a banquet, perhaps even the beginning of a diplomatic alliance. What they encountered was nothing of the sort. Herod, the reigning king, had no clue about what they were asking. Instead of being royally received, they were directed to a little village down the road—that was unexpected. But they were happy enough to continue their search, and the star led them in that direction, so in short time they were at the house where they found the child—Jesus—with his mother, Mary. Whatever they had otherwise expected, what they encountered was proof enough that they were at the right place. They presented their gifts and worshiped him. How odd that foreigners would arrive and pay homage. But again, God had orchestrated this moment. What was God up to?

In one sense it represents further confirmation of the identity of Jesus, for the Magi are directed to Bethlehem on the basis of a prophetic word from Micah. More insight comes from deep within Isaiah, chapter 60 where the vision of a restructured society, a kingdom—using models the people of that time were familiar with—would be established when the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light...bearing gold and incense and proclaiming the praise of the Lord. For Mary, it was another confirmation of her song—“he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones...” For the moment, the nations had come. And the gifts they bore would likely support Mary and Joseph as they fled into Egypt when warned in a dream that Herod was on the move to kill the child, for in that child Herod saw his throne threatened. Through the visit of the Magi, we see confirmation, provision, but also the strong hint that what God was doing in Jesus wasn't limited to Israel alone. The nations were to be included in the great transformation God was pursuing through Jesus.

So what bearing does all this have on us? What if this is God prompting us to reconsider the focus of our attention? What if God is asking us to remember where the great transformation began—among the lowly, the dispossessed, the vulnerable, the outsiders? I wonder if God might be prodding us to reflect on how imbalanced our systems have once again become. To whose cries for justice are we deaf? Who is invisible to us? Who are we disregarding? As followers of Jesus, we are, in a sense, capable of acting in an angelic role—they are messengers of God’s good news, as are we. Who is our message directed to? To whom have we embodied the good news of Jesus—acting in their stead, connecting them to the grace of God? It seems that every generation of Christ followers learns this lesson anew in their time, for over time we can become comfortable with what brought us to faith, and we pass this along—when we do—to people who are asking different questions than we did. We’re active in ministry in ways that have made sense to us, but may not make sense to others. I wonder if God is directing us back to the lowly, and telling us that the life of meaning we seek is found in connecting grace to people in ways that make sense to them. The religious elite in Jerusalem at the time of Christ’s birth may not have put much stock into mysterious stars—but that connected to the Magi, and God was pleased to use a means of capturing their attention leading them to Jesus in ways they understood. What’s connecting with the people of our time? What captures their attention?

Is it possible that God is using an ancient, familiar story to remind us of how wide, how long, how high, and how deep the love of Christ is, and how that reach extends beyond what we currently experience? And if we begin to consider this, will that bring us to the threshold of participating in the unexpected move of God towards expansive inclusion that glorifies Christ? I hope so—do you? AMEN