

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Luke 2:1-20

Sermon Title: "Come, Approach: You Are Welcomed" (Fourth Sunday of Advent)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

December 18, 2016

{SLIDE 1} Barbara Robinson wrote a book 1971 called *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. She tells the story about a Presbyterian church that is going to put on a Christmas pageant, but the star players in it are six delinquent children "who were engaged in misfit behavior for their age such as smoking, drinking jug wine, and shoplifting."¹ I won't go into the story itself, but I can describe the players who participate in the pageant.

There are the young children who play the angels, and the older children who play the shepherds.² Bigger boys, possibly three middle schoolers, may play the Wise Men. They would dress in their dad's bathrobes and wear fake beards. Mary is usually played by the one girl of the church who is sweeter-than-anyone-else, while Joseph is usually played by the minister's son. The baby Jesus is either a baby or young toddler whom a mother is willing to give up for the play, or a fake plastic doll wrapped in blankets.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Best_Christmas_Pageant_Ever.

² Barbara Robinson, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, 17-18.

This is how Barbara Robinson described the Christmas pageant in her book, and it isn't far from what other churches might do.

{SLIDE 2} Now, when a church puts on a Christmas pageant, we don't think much about the players. We expect them to be the children of the church, and maybe some of the youth. The young people play the parts for us to watch. But we never think of how those children represent the real players of the real Christmas story. The people of the real Christmas story were ordinary people. They were average people doing average things. Yet, they were invited to participate in the birth of a Savior. They were invited to put aside their ordinary lives to see something extraordinary.

God invited them to witness Jesus as a Baby. God welcomed people we might not think much about, people we might overlook, to come and worship the newborn King. The children and youth of our Christmas pageant are ordinary people putting on an extraordinary play. They are average just like we are, but they are welcomed to reenact the best a story that could be ever told. God invites them to tell that story for us, and God invites the children, the youth, and us

to come close and worship the newborn King, who will save us all.

{SLIDE 3} Look at the first seven verses of Luke 2. We go from the declaration of a Roman census to a young couple needing to travel to a hometown to the woman of the couple being “great with child” to the baby being born and wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. We discover from Luke 1 that this young couple is Joseph and Mary, and that Mary herself received a visit from the angel of the Lord. This angel Gabriel tells Mary that she will become pregnant and she will conceive a son, who is Christ the Lord. She willfully submits to the declaration and she carries the baby to term. Now they have to travel to Bethlehem for this census, and while they are staying in the barn section of somebody’s home, she gives birth. Joseph and Mary cannot live with the rest of the family, which would be a raised section of the home. They have to stay where the animals are, which would be a section of the home slightly lower than the area where family resides. Jesus’ first bed in a feeding trough.

Now, we have already been told in Luke 1 how special this birth is. It is an extraordinary birth, and

even an extraordinary way for God to enter the world and dwell among us. God doesn't just pop down like a royal adult but goes through the normal human cycle from embryo to baby. **{SLIDE 4}** It is quite a special thing that happen in the first seven verses of Luke 2, so we would think that the way to celebrate the event is to bring in some special people. An extraordinary thing has taken place, so we have to invite some extraordinary people to witness it. Who is in the town of Bethlehem at the moment? Any one special? Any Pharisee or Sadducee that everybody knows? How about a Roman official who happens to be overseeing the Roman census? If nobody is available, why not invite King Herod at the local royal dignity³, or maybe a letter could be shot off to Rome for the Emperor Augustus to read? Somebody has got to be in the area to witness this extraordinary. Somebody really important must be nearby to visit this most awesome event known to humans.

{SLIDE 5} Look who shows up? Look who's been invited to dinner? Shepherds keeping their sheep at night. We might not think much about this turn of events, but for those hearing the story for the first time it is a great shock to hear that shepherds are invited to

³ Maybe that would be a really bad idea, since Herod will discover the birth sooner or later and want to kill Jesus.

the most awesome event known to humans.

Since goats and sheep were the most important domestic animals during the time of Jesus, there were many shepherds who took on the role of feeding and protecting them.⁴ Sheep and goats are pretty stupid, and they need to be shown where the food and water is. Goats might be able to defend themselves better than sheep, but any wild carnivore could easily overpower either one and make a big meal from them. Shepherds needed to stay in the fields to watch over their animals. The ones that appear in Luke 2 are men and possibly young boys who sit in open fields sun up to sun down, making sure nothing happens to their income.

Now it sounds like shepherds were viewed as honorable people who do a decent job. They must have been seen as diligent, steadfast, alert, brave. Even though the general public knew about the occupation of shepherding during Jesus' time, most people did not view shepherds as diligent, steadfast, alert, brave. They viewed them lazy, untrustworthy, and dirty. A person cannot sit in a field all day long without getting bored, so a shepherd might lose track of one or two animals from time to time, and then the

⁴ *Harper's Bible Dictionary*, Paul J. Achtemeier (General Editor), cf. 941-942.

owner of the livestock is losing his income. If a wild animal comes to threaten the flock, a shepherd might hightail it the other way. They might flee while the animals are killed.

Some people viewed shepherds as thieves. If something went missing, it must have been that shepherd who came by with his sheep and goats. He must have been hungry, and instead of carrying his own food he had to steal mine.

Shepherding might have been a common occupation, but the general public looked down on shepherds. They were lowlifes. They were untrustworthy and unnoticeable.

{SLIDE 6} So, look who's coming to dinner? Look who shows up. The so-called lowlifes. The perceived lazy and untrustworthy and dirty.

Those shepherd that Luke writes about are in a nearby field. They are wide awake, or maybe some of them are sleeping. Who knows? But all of them are awake, when the night sky lights up. It is as though the sun just rose and made a personal visit. Brilliance surrounds them, and they are alert and scared to death.⁵ They have no clue what is going on.

⁵ Cf. Luke 2:8-9.

{SLIDE 7} Angels show up, adding to the terror of these shepherds. We can only wonder where the sheep and goats are. Did they take off running, or are they are scared and paralyzed as the shepherds. One of the angels speaks, telling them all to be at peace. “Do not be afraid,” the angel says with joy in its voice.⁶ All the angels are celebrating with songs of praise. They have all come to announce the birth of a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. The angels tell the shepherds where this Savior is. They lay out the map, they describe what the Savior will look like, and then they burst into song that fills the sky with sweet music.

{SLIDE 8} And then the angels vanish. And the light that is as brilliant as the sun goes away. Everything is enveloped in darkness once more. It takes a few minutes for the shepherds’ eyes to adjust.

But they know what to do next. They do not remain afraid. They do not spend hours in animated discussion about what in the world just happened to them. They don’t even go off to see if their animals are safe or alive or anything. At least Luke doesn’t tell us that the search for their sheep and goats.

What they do next is search for the Christ Child. They replay what the angel told them, and they figure

⁶ Cf. Luke 2:10.

out which way to go.⁷

Because they have been invited. These so-called lowlifes. These so-called lazy and untrustworthy, thieving people. The general public may not think much of them, but God does. God makes sure they get the invitation to visit his Son Jesus. They are the first ones outside of Mary and Joseph to receive a formal invitation to the birth. Not the Roman officials. Not the King of the land, and not the Caesar of the empire. Lowly shepherds. Hardworking shepherds. They are invited. They answer the invitation and run with haste to the town.

{SLIDE 9} Jesus will do this throughout his life on earth: invite everyone and anyone to know him more intimately.

When people come to him from all over the region, looking to be healed of their diseases and possessions, Jesus has compassion on them and welcomes them to come close.⁸ When a leper approaches Jesus, saying that he believes that Jesus can heal him, Jesus says that he is able and willing. When a woman crashes a party just to get to Jesus' feet, in order to bathe them with her tears and dry them with her hair, Jesus

⁷ Cf. Luke 2:15.

⁸ The following may be found (at least) in Luke 4:40-41, 5:12-16, 7:36-50,

doesn't push her away but forgives her of her great sin. When a desperate father pleads with Jesus to help his son, which the disciples weren't able to do, Jesus takes command and restores the family's harmony.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus welcomed everyone to come close. No matter what their problems were, whether they could speak to him or see him or not, Jesus invited everyone and anyone to know him more intimately. {SLIDE 10} Jesus invited the Pharisees and Sadducees to get to know him. Even though they were somebodies, who had power in their hand and pride in their hearts: Jesus invited them to approach him and know him as Savior. The Pharisees and Sadducees only wanted to debate about his authority. They wanted to question what kind of person he was, and if he really could heal and forgive sin. They missed the opportunity to get to know Jesus like other had. Jesus kept inviting them, although they were refusing the invitation.

{SLIDE 11} How strange it must have been for those in the house, when the shepherds knocked at the door. How strange for these supposedly dusty and dishonest persons to approach the Baby Jesus and

offer him worship. How strange for them to tell the story of what happened, and for Mother Mary to look at Father Joseph and wonder what sort of parenthood they just got themselves into.

It may have been a weird scene at the place of Jesus' birth, but it is not so weird to us. For nowadays we have children dressing up as shepherds with crooks in their hands that could injure somebody. We have children dressing as Wise Men with fake beards and bathrobes. We have a young boy playing Joseph and a young girl playing Mary, and angels running around with metal halos and cardboard wings. And it is not strange to us at all, because we know we are all invited to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Shepherds and children and the old and the broken: We are all welcome to approach the manger, laying aside our sin and marveling at the sight of glory and compassion and life. Come and behold him, born the King of Angels. Come and get to know your Savior.

Assurance of Pardon

Hear the good news: The Christ Child is coming. There is no stopping him. There is no diverting his way. His arrival is inevitable. He is coming to our hearts. And he brings with him light for our darkness. He is able to fill our brokenness and make us whole. He is able to forgive our sins, and offer us life eternal. Thanks be to God, amen.