

Angels Among Us: This Will Be a Sign **Luke 1:26-35, Luke 2:1-20**

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When I was a little girl, my brother was usually the first up on Christmas morning. As the oldest, he took responsibility for waking the rest of us - well, the kids, that is. Of course, we hadn't slept much anyway, so it didn't take long for us to put on our robes and slippers and be ready to head downstairs to the Christmas tree. There was a tacit understanding between us that we would all go down to the tree together. All for one and one for all. We were not, however, supposed to wake our parents. So, we would stumble down the stairs, suppressing giggles and shushing each other as we made our way to the living room. And there she was - our beautiful Christmas tree. Ten feet tall and almost as wide with ample room for presents underneath. Oh, and the presents! We would spend what seemed like an eternity waiting for Mom and Dad to get up and sizing up all those packages. No snooping was allowed, so we could only inspect the loot from a distance, trying to guess what each one might be. Ultimately, all of our gazes landed on whichever present was the biggest. What was it? Who was it for? Who was the lucky one who would get the biggest present of all?

Of course, our expectation was that the biggest one was also the best. Isn't it interesting how early in our lives we are conditioned to believe that bigger is better? It's one of many dichotomous beliefs we learn as children about what is good and what is bad. Big is good, small is bad. Rich is good, poor is bad. Power is good, weakness is bad. Young is good, old is bad. Clean is good, dirty is bad. These beliefs become deeply embedded in us and define our expectations for how the world should work. Yet, as the story of Christmas shows us, we worship a God who continuously defies those expectations.

Take, for example, the shepherds - the last people you would expect to first receive the news of Christ's birth. Here in our 21st century world, it can be hard for us to imagine what that night was like for them. Somewhere in the fields outside of Bethlehem, sheep grazed between clusters of rocks as they perched on the edge of a hillside. Watching over them were society's outcasts, the shepherds, considered uncouth and unclean. After all, their job was to fend off flies and dodge manure as they wrangled their sheep from pasture to pasture. They spent their nights on guard for hungry wolves and bears and thieves - anyone who might steal a sheep under the cover of night.

Those threats may be why some of the shepherds were awake that night when the sky suddenly brightened and an angel appeared before them. We can understand why they were terrified. As untouchables, they would never expect someone to visit them - especially not an angel. Yet, the angel reassures them saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."

Though they spent their lives on the very fringes of Jewish society, the shepherds still would have known of the Messiah. The prophecy had been passed down for generations. One day God would send someone to save the people of Israel, to release them from captivity, so that they might live as God's people, faithful and free. Naturally, they anticipated a warrior - a

seasoned soldier, powerful and strong, who would lead armies into battle against the empire of evil and oppression. When the angel announced the Messiah had come, the shepherds' hearts must have leaped with joy.

So, imagine their shock when the angel says, "This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Wait. What? A baby? A baby in a feeding trough was the Messiah? This was their sign? How was a baby born to peasants in a stable going to free them from the brutality of the Roman Empire? How could a baby save them from all the misery and oppression in their lives?

Yet, the miracle of Christmas is that in a radical act of humility, God defied all expectations and came to live among us - not as a warrior, king, or conqueror, but as a human in our most vulnerable state. A baby - tiny, helpless, and totally dependent on the love of his parents to survive. But maybe that's the point. God comes to us as a baby born in a smelly stable to teach us the power of love when it is unhindered by human expectations.

It's an appropriate start for a Messiah who would spend his life turning his world, and ours, upside down. This baby, grown into a man, would teach that the last will be first and the first will be last, that the meek will inherit the earth, that God favors the poor and the marginalized, that to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must become like children.

One of my favorite Christian authors, Rachel Held Evans, writes:

"If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus - Jesus, who was born as an oppressed minority in an occupied land, Jesus who was an immigrant, Jesus, who surrounded himself with the poor, the sick, the marginalized and the "untouchables," Jesus who was criticized by the religious for hanging out with sinners, Jesus who treated women with dignity and respect, Jesus who taught his disciples to love their enemies, to give without expecting anything in return, to overcome evil with love."

Like the people of Israel, we, too, sometimes pray for a Messiah to save us from the brutality of the world. We live in a time of war and poverty, anti-semitism and homophobia, white supremacy and racism. We wish for the leaders of our country and our world to use their power to end oppression not sustain it. Yet, the story of Christmas reminds us God often works not through the big and the powerful but through the small and the ordinary. Through dirty shepherds guarding their sheep, a young woman pregnant out of wedlock, a carpenter with a big heart, and a tiny baby who changed the world with his love. And God, of course, God works through us when we carry God's love into the world.

It just goes to show good things come in small packages. Amen.