

THE FIELDS: THE SHEPHERDS

Text: Luke 2:7-20

LHUMC 12/24/13

Stations of the Birth #5

I. Introduction

A. Imagine yourself in a field.

1. This is something that I should be able to do-- I spent some quality time in fields growing up
 - a) Hide-and-peek in cornfields.
 - b) Baseball with my cousins in a cow pasture. (You had to step carefully as you went after balls in the outfield)
 - c) We made up an entire par-three golf course in a field behind our house.
2. This field is a little different
 - a) Overlooking a small town
 - b) Very quiet except for a few sheep making some noise over here.
 - c) And over there we maybe hear the shepherds shooting the breeze around a fire after another day of work, another day of watching their flocks—maybe a few off-color jokes floating through the air.
 - d) The stars are shining brightly. In our time when there are so many bright man-made lights in the way, we can hardly imagine how bright those stars must have been. I do remember how cool it was to be out in the fields at night because you could see the stars so well.
 - e) It is a wide open space--there are no fences to hold us in (more on that in a minute).
 - f) What a beautiful place!

B. But if you talk to people down in the village, what you quickly find out is that no self-respecting citizen of the town would ever want to spend time here.

1. No so because of the place itself because it is a beautiful and peaceful place on a night like this.
2. The problem is the ones who hang out here.

II. Which takes us to those shepherds.

A. One of the things we've seen over the last few weeks as we've visited all of these out-of-the-way places is that as you might expect, places like that were inhabited by out-of-the-way people. As I said after we

met the priest Zechariah in week one, after that, culturally speaking, it was going to be downhill all the way.

a) You go to Nazareth, and you meet people like Mary and Joseph.

b) You go out in the hills of Judea, and you come across people like Elizabeth

c) Wonderful people living faithful lives, but until God made them part of His plan, each of them were on the road to oblivion—soon to be forgotten on the road of history

B. Tonight we go out to the fields outside Bethlehem and meet some people that weren't just out-of-the-way, they were preferably completely forgotten. If you'd ask anyone down in town about the shepherds, they would have said that "oblivion" was too good of a fate for them.

C. When we talk about "lowly shepherds", we can't imagine how low shepherds were seen back then.

D. As I've read descriptions of how they were described, I come across words like "shifty, lazy, smelly, and crooked". Why crooked? Because there were no fences, the shepherds pretty much took their sheep anywhere to feed—even to places well beyond the land owned by those that hired them. And needless to say, that didn't go over well with the wealthy landowners of the time.

E. The other thing I'm realizing about this place and these people who are here is that you'd think this was the last place that any self-respecting angel would show his or her face. And tonight we get a whole choir of them apparently.

1. The first reaction of everyone involved, from the shepherds right on down, would have been something like "Are you kidding? Did they get on the wrong flight path on their way down from heaven or something?"

2. What was that movie a few years ago? "Angels in the Outfield?" In the outfield maybe...in this field? No way!

3. When the angel first says, "Don't be afraid", I'm thinking that maybe the shepherds weren't so much afraid as flabbergasted that there would be angel in this place of all places.

F. We've been talking throughout this journey about how no one, not even those who were most anxious for a Messiah to come, would have ever had these places on their itinerary for where it might happen.

1. And with these unexpected places come the unexpected people that we find there. As my geographer son says, you can't ever separate the geography from the sociology of a place.

2. And tonight we have the most not just outrageous characters of all. As I said before, while Elizabeth and Zechariah and Mary and Joseph were at least people of faith, these shepherds—what can I say? Even if they had tried to come down into town to go to the synagogue, chances were they wouldn't have been let in. Who wants a bunch of shifty, lazy, smelly, crooked shepherds sitting just down the pew?
 - G. But here's the point—if we, on this journey we've been on, haven't yet figured out what kind of people God used to carry out his plan, to be here in this field tonight for the latest installment of the story should be like a two-by-four upside the head.
 - H. If we didn't get it back in week two when God told Mary that He favors all people, then when the angels come to the shepherds here with the good news of what has happened down in the village so they know it before anyone else, we should by now understand that this field is the ultimate symbol that God really does favor all people.
- III. I think there is more to this field than meets the eye in other ways as well.
- A. For me, this field becomes a symbol for anyplace that I define simply by my perception of the people who hang out there.
 - B. For anyplace that I have maybe been hesitant to go because of those kinds of definitions.
 - C. This field becomes a place where I need to be really careful before I start labeling people as “shepherds” and thereby forget that I too am far from perfect and that anytime I think I am, I need to remember that the angels came to the shepherds first.
 - D. And if nothing else, as we gather in this field, we learn once again that even today God has a way of sending angels to places we would never expect in order to include those people we would never expect to be included in his plan for the world.
 - E. So in a sense, it might not be going too far to say that as we gather with the shepherds in this place, it becomes a symbol for the kingdom that the child who is born this night promised to bring about.
 - F. A place where we join with people of all ages, nations, races, backgrounds, occupations, incomes, education levels, in this wonderful journey as those who have been given the good news of a Savior born for each of us.
 - G. So savor your time in this field. Remember that if we hang out with the shepherds long enough, we might hear the heavenly choir of angels for ourselves. Thanks be to God.