

## **We Need a Savior**

*A sermon preached in Christ Church, Aspen, by the Rev. Bruce McNab  
Christmas Eve. 8:00 and 11:00. December 25, 2009. (Text: Luke 2:1-20)*

Last Sunday we had our annual Children's Christmas Pageant. It was lots of fun. It was a hoot, really, because we were welcoming new, walk-on pageant cast members right up to the very last minute. We told people to bring their neighbors' children, or family from out of town. All would be welcome; and they were! These extra kids, these "walk-ons" could be either shepherds or angels, because we have plenty of shepherd and angel costumes. Some say that this was our "best Christmas pageant ever," which reminds me of Barbara Robinson's book by that name. Perhaps some of you have read it.

*The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* tells the story of a church youth group, who are putting on a Christmas pageant. There's just one problem: the Herdman kids. The Herdmans are the most misbehaved children in town, and they are all going to be in the pageant. The church people are outraged that the pageant director has decided to even let Imogene Herdman be Mary. —But wait a minute. There's a reason the angels came to the shepherds. Shepherds were dirty and difficult, yet they were the first to hear the news of Jesus' birth. Barbara Robinson made no mistake in giving the Herdmans a last name that has to remind us of shepherds.

If we read Luke's story of the birth of Jesus and pay attention to which characters appear most often in the story, we notice that although the Holy Child is the main character, there is at least as much and maybe even more in the story about shepherds than there is about Mary and Joseph! (And the Wise Men aren't mentioned at all.) The herald angels were sent to announce the birth of the Son of God to some shepherds, and to nobody else.

Shepherds were not regarded as decent, upstanding citizens back in those days. They were smelly because they slept in the sheepfold with their animals. And they were notorious for working on the Sabbath. They were also suspected of pilfering lambs from the flock and giving the owner a false count of how many had been born. They were not allowed to be witnesses in court, because they were usually penniless and everyone assumed they could be easily bribed. Nice families didn't want their sons to grow up to be shepherds or their daughters to marry one.

Nevertheless, the Herald Angel appeared to just these people and said, *"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."* The good news of great joy is for all people, but the emphasis in this verse is on the pronoun "you". *"...To you is born this day...a Savior."* The Savior is born, not "to Mary and Joseph." ...Not "to Israel." ...But "to you." Christ was born *for them*. For shepherds! The "sign" of the baby lying in a manger was for *them*. —Why did the angel say that Christ was born for *shepherds*? ...For dirty, poor, uneducated, disreputable hired hands? I think there's a mystical reason.

I think the shepherds in the Christmas gospel stand for both the physically poor (who have no worldly resources) and the poor in spirit (who recognize their own inner poverty). They are the group that Jesus later would say are *"blessed, for theirs is the kingdom of God."* They were people without pride, people who knew their own lowliness. They were the ones who most felt the need of a Savior. And they were the ones already primed to believe that God could do something totally new and unprecedented —which the religious authorities had already decided was impossible.

The shepherds stand for *those who know they need a Savior*. —But what *is* a Savior? And do we need one?

What do we need to be saved from? Let's try anxiety. Let's try fear. Many people are anxious or even frightened today. The future seems less certain than ever in our lifetime. Two years ago the economy plunged into the worst recession since the 1930s. The US auto industry was almost destroyed. Many other businesses closed their doors. The media tell us we're moving out of it, but millions of people are still out of work and that isn't going to change much very soon. People in our area who used to be able to make a living from one job now need to have two jobs.

Until recently our consumer culture offered its own secular "salvation experience," but that disappeared with the recession for most people. Until a couple of years ago, if people weren't happy, or things weren't the way they wanted them to be, they could make themselves feel better by spending some money ...getting some new toys. —It was like taking a kind of drug. It didn't really offer a long-term solution, but it felt good for a little while. Now, however, most of us can't afford the consumerist culture's form of salvation.

The angels told the shepherds, "*To you is born this day...a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" Are we ready to identify with the shepherds? Have the experiences of the last couple of years humbled us enough? Are we sufficiently poor or poor in spirit, now, to be able to recognize that we need saving? I think we are. And we don't need "a savior-figure," like a charismatic politician of either the left or the right. We need the *real* Savior, whose birthday is the reason we're here tonight. We need Jesus. And here are some reasons why, for us as a nation and for us as individuals:

- On the national level, we need to be saved from a moral collapse rooted in self-indulgence and a pervasive sense of entitlement. We need to be saved from the kind of polarization that's eating away at our respect for each other, our shared sense of identity, and our consensus about what "the common good" really means. We need Christ the Savior to be born afresh in our nation, and give us a new vision for how to be our best selves, a vision we can learn from his own tolerance and compassion. This is the birthday of Jesus, God born among us, a human being —the most *humane* and *gentle* being the world has ever known. His gentleness and humanity can touch any heart, whether we're Christian, or Jewish, or Muslim, or claim no religion.
- In the private realm, many of us suffer not only from economic anxiety, but from pains that stunt our souls: inconsolable grief, a concealed wound, spiritual emptiness, or a secret fear. These gnaw at our hearts. We try to keep up appearances, but many of us are masking agonies. We need a Savior who can touch the bruised places deep inside us and give us hope. False hope is advertised in every glossy magazine, but genuine hope is hard to come by. We need a Savior who can make it possible for wounded souls to look to the future with faith. We need Jesus. He said: "*I have come in order that you might have life in all its fullness.*" He was talking about life *now*, not just in the sweet by-and-by.

Yes, we need a Savior, right here, right now. You do and I do. The herald angels are still singing, calling out to us, poor, lonely shepherds. We can hear them if we'll stop crying and listen: "*To you is born this day a Savior...Christ the Lord.*" We can meet him tonight, just the way the shepherds of Bethlehem did, because he didn't come just that one time, long ago. He comes again, if we will turn to him and pray.

The timeless truth of Christmas is this: *God believes in us*. That's right. God believes in us. He risked himself on us. He entered our world as the dependent child of a peasant family, born to an illiterate girl from Nazareth twenty centuries ago, and he is still "God-with-us" — God who will never forsake us, even though

we have gone after idols. We are precious in his sight. He believes in us, and *he loves us*. He loves us, and he will not give up on us.

The angels told the shepherds: *“This will be the sign for you: you will find the child ...lying in a manger.”* A baby found in such unlikely a crib was the sign which the angels said would prove the truth of their message.

I have an idea. Why don't you make a manger for Christ tonight in your heart, as you stretch out your hands to receive him in Communion? Let this reaching out be a sign from you to Jesus, a sign of your faith, a sign that you know the TRUTH of the words we sing so glibly in a familiar Christmas carol: *“No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.”*