



WHO ARE YOU IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY? ... SHEPHERDS AND WISEMEN

FIRST
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH
SPARTANBURG

this way forward

Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:8-14

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

Imagine for a moment, you are in charge of the guest list for a prominent dignitary coming to town. Who would you include? Of course, Junie White, our Mayor, to offer a few words of welcome; perhaps Krista Newkirk, Converse President; or Allen White, from the Chamber; along with key businessmen to underwrite the event. The programs would feature the choir from Spartanburg High School and perhaps even a pastor, our very own Christi Brown, co-chair of the Interfaith Alliance, to offer the opening prayer. This list makes sense to *us*. It feels appropriate to the occasion.

Now, instead of a dignitary, it is the Son of God coming to town. We'd probably make a very similar list. Only God, the Father, had a completely different guest list:

- No mayor; Herod wasn't there.
- No businessmen; the wealthy landowners were not present.
- No educated elite; the Sanhedrin was left out.
- and No pastor; the priests weren't even invited.

But, we will invite the Shepherds, the ones who were ritually unclean, that no one wanted around, and Wisemen from another land, another culture, and another religion entirely. They will be welcomed by special invitation, a Star no less. God's list has none of the people on our list. Why are they so terribly different? The shepherds were such a shocking choice because their livelihood made them ritually unclean. Which meant, they couldn't come to temple worship. If other people interacted with them, they too would become unclean. There were purification rites the shepherds could go through but that meant leaving their sheep for extended periods of time which they could not do! Furthermore, to add insult to injury, it was the very sheep the shepherds cared for that were key components of the temple rituals.

The shepherds were left out of everything.

How many shepherds do we have here this morning? Perhaps, at Christmas time, and other times that is your part. The role people ignore. The one, the rest of the family, would rather not have around.

Perhaps, you feel like the one nobody talks to at the party. Maybe, in your family, you're the last of your generation and the rest of the family does not know how to approach you. Perhaps, you have experienced addictions and people are simply not sure what to do around you or you have followed a path that made your presence awkward at family gathers. They don't understand you. So, they ignore you. And it has become harder and harder to play that role again, each year.

The shepherds looked and smelled rough, too, like some of the people in our church neighborhood. Those who wouldn't be invited into our homes; whom we are afraid of. Those are the ones the angels made a special appearance to; those are the ones who should be in this place; they belong perhaps even more than me or you. They were given a special seat at the most special moment in history. Not the banker, not the priest or preacher; not the lawyer, not the mayor. It is to the shepherds God sent the angels to invite them to witness when God became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth. And because they witnessed these events, it was they who became the teachers to the world, not the elite of the day. And yet, the shepherds are not the only unusual teachers in the Christmas story.

But first a story....

Ralph Ellison was, an African-American, intellectual giant and thought leader in 20th century America. And, like all people, he is susceptible to the same snap judgements and prejudices for those of another culture. He wrote of such an experience in the essay, *The Little Man at Chehaw Station*. He tells of an incident when collecting signatures in a New York tenement building:

[I] was moving along the dimly lit hallway toward a door through which I could hear loud voices. They were male Afro-American voices, raised in violent argument. The language was profane, the style of speech a southern idiomatic vernacular, such as was spoken by formally uneducated Afro-American working men.

He hesitated to knock because behind the door a mystery was unfolding. A mystery, so

incongruous, outrageous, and surreal, it struck me as a threat to my rational sense of order. It was as though a practical joke had been staged, and its perpetrators were waiting for me, its designated scapegoat, to arrive. A joke designed to assault my knowledge of American culture and its hierarchical dispersal. These men which he assumed were uneducated, illiterate and ignorant were "locked in verbal combat" over which of two celebrated Metropolitan Opera divas was the superior soprano! Ellison could not imagine these men could possibly teach him about such culturally elite things, but their conversation made it clear they were his superior in this area!

2000 years before, three strangers, from the East, knocked on Mary's door. They are not fellow Jews (we know this since they had to ask Herod where to find him) and they offered Jesus 3 gifts. Unlike our gifts, these were not given to provide something practical or delightful, but to teach – to teach not only Mary but Jesus himself. Their gifts were intended to shape Jesus into who God meant him to be. Not only do their gifts teach us about who Jesus is, the gold signifies his kingship, the incense his priestly role, and the myrrh his sacrificial death. And these gifts would have taught Mary and, therefore, Jesus himself.

If we take this story at face value, imagine what Mary would have pondered in her heart concerning these gifts. At this point, she only knows that he is savior of the world, but she doesn't really know what that means. These gifts would have given her a more well-rounded picture that Jesus was priest and king, but even more, it would have opened her up to the pain this child would bring in her life.

Imagine someone (a stranger mind you) bringing a gift of embalming fluid at the birth of your child. Shock, bewilderment, anger (?) would surely be your first response. But, over time, worry would overtake all the other emotions. I imagine, since Mary seemed to have her eyes so focused on Jesus' call, that eventually she would have used these gifts to teach Jesus.

I don't remember Brazil even though I was born there. But, I do remember my mother and father's stories. Stories of children rifling through our garbage cans for food. Stories of medicine men curing my

brother Nato. Stories of frogs as big as dogs. And stories of God at work in fantastic ways. I was told these stories so often and with such passion they have become my memories and, so, Brazil is a part of me.

I think Mary must have done the same with Jesus. About three strangers, from a far-off land, appearing unannounced bearing three gifts. As Jesus heard these stories, I think it must have shaped him. This is why God sent them.

Earlier this month, we talked about the amazing notion that a sheep could offer the baby Jesus a gift. A mere sheep had something for the savior of the world and for us. This week, people from an entirely different world view than Jesus have something to teach us about his role in this world. Like those "Afro-American working men," that taught Ellison about opera. People, not of our faith or Mary's faith, opened our eyes to his sacrificial love that would come to pass.

I know in this world there are non-Christians whom God has sent to teach me about Jesus. They didn't use the name Jesus, but I have no doubt, in my mind, that in their heart of hearts, they knew him. Though, they did not know His name. Through being people of peace, they have taught me about his peace. Through being people of forgiveness, they have taught me about his mercy. Through being people of simplicity, they have taught about his servanthood.

Perhaps, the most surprising fact about the shepherds and the Wisemen of this world is, beyond all expectations, they are our teachers. The shepherds taught others about the angels and about who the baby Jesus was. The Wisemen teach us about his nature. God is always placing unexpected people before us to teach us.

Lord, give us the heart of Mary to receive your wisdom from the unexpected, and to ponder and treasure it all in the depths of our being. Amen.