

The Crowd

“Here and now, he connects you.”

Luke 2:8-20

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Loners

This year the hunt was good and we were en route from North Country, prize white spruce bound to the roof of the SUV. Midway, we stopped at a Meijer's. I walked through the doors first and waited some minutes for Laura to catch me. I was a bit tired; 'wanted to get home and the business of setting up the tree.

A woman in a red jacket and a name tag gave the greeting. “Welcome to Meijer's!” The smile on her weathered face was broad, genuine: it evoked a spontaneous smile in return. I couldn't help it.

As I waited I watched others as they entered. Young and old, couples and singles, someone dressed in fine clothes, someone who looked like they'd just stepped in from the woods: but it was, every time, the same as if choreographed.

Blank faces at best; maybe some were stressed from too much season with more of the season to come; little sign any were much aware of surroundings. The sound of the automatic door, rush of cold breeze mixed with a little swirl of snow ...

Then the smile; the warm, “Welcome!” and the automatic smile in return. It was like the wandering were welcomed home; loners became a crowd.

Probably most bought more than expected.

Meijer's knows what sells.

As I watched these little transformations it occurred to me how, in some way, most people are loners one way or another. In some way: poor. Somehow powerless. Often invisible.

Shepherds

For all their quirks, bad reputation, and isolated way of life, maybe the shepherds weren't so unusual after all.

The year Jesus was born had no advent. There wasn't a house decoration that went up. No lights. No Christmas trees. No concerts early in the month, blessing peoples' spirits and preparing the mood. Probably there was more resignation than expectation. Life was hard; and whoever would have thought it could ever change?

I think they watched their flocks no differently than they would have watched them in July. It was their job; and they were watching them like they had watched them day-after-day, year-after-year.

No doubt they would have been pleased to have a different life; for life wasn't really very good for them. They were unbelievably poor. The sheep they watched belonged to someone else. And shepherds were accused of sometimes stealing their masters' sheep; which might have been the case, so they could keep their families from starving. So, they were shunned, kept outside the circle of true community as surely as they were told they had no share in God's Kingdom.

Whatever was happening in the political world would have been of no consequence to them. Poverty makes ideology and theology insignificant. That was their life: hand-to-mouth; little or no hope.

So they sat, un-expectant on the hillside, feeding a few sticks on their fires to take the chill out, hearing the sounds of the herd and the sounds of the night... but probably not paying much attention.

That's when the heavens burst with the glory of God. Imagine. This the smoke filling the tabernacle, the pillar of fire, the hovering cloud, the burning bush. And they were stunned.

And in the midst of this rain of glory stood the Angel of the Lord bringing them the very presence of God and putting the Presence to words.

FEAR NOT! FOR SEE, I AM BRINGING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY FOR ALL THE PEOPLE: TO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR WHO IS MESSIAH, THE LORD.

How's that for a sign to see when all the resources are spent? How's that for a message from God at a time when the world is still torn apart now by years of terror and

war, that God is already hard at work making peace? How's that for a promise in the face of lost jobs, crumbling public services and municipal bankruptcy, and corporate crisis: that God is already smiling at you? Because a child is born: you can come home.

*I am bringing you good news of great joy for **all** the people?* Many of us hurt now for good reason. Some of us are gripped by physical and emotional pain to-be-sure. In the face of these things: *to you this day is born a Savior.* But not only to you; it's to the uninsured parents of a sick child living in Northwest Detroit and to family members on the South Side torn apart by immigration technicalities. It's to the drug addict and to the fourth generation welfare recipient and to the shepherd in Afghanistan that the Savior is also born to this day.

Each brought in from the cold and welcomed home.

With you and me.

Connected with the whole lot of us. Connected to the crowd.

Born this day in the City of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord...and this shall be a sign: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. That's it. No halo over his head. No cattle made capable to speak. Not necessarily a baby that doesn't cry.

Just a child like any other child, lying in a manger like any other crib made by common folk of the time. Just a baby: completely vulnerable and dependent on his parents' care. That's how God comes to us. Because a baby is not a theory. There is nothing abstract about a mother caring for a newborn.

The truth that God has come to dwell among us and be our salvation comes, finally, in a real person. The person of Jesus. Something absolutely astounding in the midst of the ordinary.

It will be through the person that God reaches us. It will be through the very human love that God will reach us outcasts and the outlandish loners and bring us home with the power of holy love. It will be through his human acts of healing and forgiving and finally dying that God will bring us all the miracle of eternal life.

Sacredness in the commonplace: a newborn laid in the manger's straw is ever to be the convincing sign that God will be with us in our everyday hurts and hopes; and not just when we see the skies burst open with Heaven's glory.

Every day there is the manger among us. The visitation of God is not far-fetched. It's God smiling at the door, welcoming us loners like a bunch of shepherds gathered in a stable. It's God smiling at the door welcoming all of us home, making loners into God's Crowd.

Grace

I listened to the folks of a Northwest Michigan church tell their stories of Christmases of old. One-by-one, they went around the table telling their tales of days gone by, of trees lit with real candles and the breads and meats cooked on wood-fired stoves.

About midway around the room woman with deep wrinkles and thinning gray hair took her turn. She said it happened right there in Frankfurt, not much after the turn of the last century when she was just a little girl. The Methodist Church was going to have its Sunday School Christmas pageant and word had gone all over town that auditions were going to be held for parts in the play. They thought it a good opportunity for evangelism: maybe get some families that didn't know Jesus to find a church home.

It backfired; maybe. When the day for auditions finally came, it was among the newcomers that a particular little urchin of the town showed up. His mother had died when he was very young; and though his father did the best he could to care for the lad, he owned the general store and was hard at work late into the evening. With no one to watch over him, the boy took to the streets and learned how to live a hard life, influenced by the roughest of characters. Already, the boy was a well-known trouble-maker whose language was rough and whose ability to follow directions doubtful.

"What is he doing here?" they thought. And they had a dilemma. But grace prevailed even among the proper church-ladies and they warily gave him a part: the angel who would announce Jesus' birth to the shepherds.

Rehearsals went surprisingly smooth. The boy showed up to all of them, on time. They were satisfied with the interest he showed and the way he received their confidence. He took his part seriously; learned his lines and rehearsed them as he should. He seemed to be changing. But still, they held their breath, fearing the worst.

The night of the pageant arrived and people filled the little church. The sanctuary was dark and the music of carols could be heard down the snowy streets of the town. Then the pageant commenced with the angel's visitation to Mary and the journey of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. They were turned away from the inn and found their way to the stable where Mary gave birth.

Lights shown on the platform as the boy stepped into the open clad in a white robe and wings. "Fear not!" he said; then stopped. "Fear not!" he began again and there was silence. His face tightened and the church ladies moved to the edge of their seats. He'd drawn a blank; now: what next? "Fear not!" he said again, a growing edge to his voice; and silence.

Then he stomped his foot and he shouted. In his utter frustration, it was a curse. He took the Lord's name in vain. "Jesus Christ!" he said.

Then silence before the hushed crowd. Gradually, his drawn face relaxed. Sparkles lit his eyes and a broad smile grew across his impish face.

He spoke again. "*Fear not!*" he said, "*For see, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Messiah, the Lord.*"

Isn't it just like God to turn a curse into a prayer, then answer it? Isn't it just like God to provide the grace to lead proper church ladies to take the risk and let a problem child in?

Isn't just like God to announce the dawn of salvation to the ones who deserved it least and needed it most?

Isn't it just like God to stand at the door with a smile that makes our hearts smile and belong?

And, isn't it just like God to give us Christmas and to fill our hearts with peace?