

We're in a series called, "Picture Perfect Christmas." We all have ideas of that perfect Christmas: music, trees, lights, gifts, quality time with family and friends. But we also feel the not-so-perfect elements of the season: stress, conflict, unmet expectations, grief, and loss can reach their peak during this season. We're reminded life isn't as perfect as we hoped it would be.

This is especially true for those who, for whatever reason, find themselves on the outside looking in. Filmmaker, Tim Burton, said this, "If you've ever had that feeling of loneliness, of being an outsider, it never quite leaves you. You can be happy or successful or whatever, but that thing still stays within you."

Let me tell you a story about a friend of mine — Ronald. My wife, Lynn, and I met Ronald four years ago in the context of our ministry as chaplains of the Giants. During the season we'd park in the employee parking lot and walk to the stadium. Our credentials allowed us to enter through a security gate only players and personnel were allowed to use.

On that path, we'd inevitably pass some men and women who were panhandling. We couldn't possibly stop and give to every single one of them, but one morning Lynn chose one particular man to give some money to. He was an African American man, an amputee who sat in his wheelchair with a cup and a cardboard sign asking for help. He was in the same place every week. For some reason, Lynn and I decided he was the one person we'd give to when we came to the ballpark.

We later learned his name is Ronald. Ronald's life started in Sacramento. His mother was an addict who handed him over to social services just days after he was born. Ronald then bounced around in foster care for seven years before a kind woman came along and adopted him. She became a mother to him, but when he was 17, he found her dead in their home from a cardiac arrest — she was just 38.

Ronald was all alone, and he's been alone pretty much ever since. He's 52 years old and has had a rough life. He accidentally shot himself in the head when he was in his early twenties. A few years later, he lost his leg in an accident while working on the Bay Bridge as an ironworker. As far as I know, he hasn't worked since.

The irony of the whole story for Lynn and me is that dozens upon dozens of times we'd go from putting a few dollars in Ronald's cup to meeting with members of the World Champion Giants. Minutes after encountering Ronald, I'd walk into the Giants

clubhouse where very few people were allowed. I'd interact with elite young athletes who thousands of people would pay serious money just to see them throw a ball around a field or hit one over the fence. I'd go from Ronald, the ultimate outsider, to Buster Posey and Madison Bumgarner, the ultimate insiders.

The strange thing is you can be rich or poor, successful or not, and still feel like an outsider. Think about what this looked like for a group of outsiders one reads about in the Christmas story. I'm talking about the infamous shepherds who were out watching their flocks by night when the angel greeted them, and the angelic choir sang to them. It all happened on the very night of Jesus' birth.

The Birth of Jesus (Luke 2:1-7)

The shepherds make an appearance in just one of the four gospels that chronicle the life of Jesus, and that's the Gospel of Luke. In the second chapter of his Gospel, Luke tells us Mary and Joseph lived in the region of Galilee, north of Jerusalem, in the small village of Nazareth. Nazareth was a "non-place," not even mentioned in the Old Testament. In those days, it was overrun by Gentiles and Roman soldiers. No wonder one of Jesus' disciples would later say, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?"

For the last six months of her pregnancy, Mary was there, no doubt expecting Nazareth to be the place her son would be born. But Luke tells us when Mary was great with child; Caesar Augustus sent out a decree calling for everyone to return to their hometown for a census. Joseph, being from the line of David, would need to return to Bethlehem. But Joseph wasn't about to leave Mary alone in Nazareth, so the two of them packed up and headed south for Bethlehem.

It was a long journey, at least a three-day trip, and the timing couldn't have been worse with Mary full term. Perhaps in the back of their minds was the ancient prophecy pointing to Bethlehem as the birthplace of the Messiah. Perhaps they saw God's hand in the decree, but it couldn't have been easy. To make matters worse, Bethlehem was packed to the gills with visitors because of the census. Usually, they'd stay with relatives, but Joseph and Mary were forced to try to find a room at an inn. Still, nothing was available, so they found shelter in what was most likely a cave or a stable for farm animals.

Don't be fooled by your cute nativity scenes. This wasn't a pretty sight. As they entered the cave, the smell of urine might have

knocked them off their feet. Instead of laying on a soft bed of hay, of which there was little in Palestine, Mary might have sprawled out on a bed of dry manure.

One of the best things about bringing a new child into the world is getting to share the joy with friends and family. You want to show him off to everyone. My father never had a daughter, so when my oldest daughter was born, his first granddaughter, he showed up at the hospital glowing with a pink bow tied around his head! That's what you want — everybody there, everybody happy.

It wasn't that way for Mary and Joseph. Most scholars don't even think the Wise Men showed up until months, or even a year or two later. The birth scene Luke paints, which he most likely heard from Mary herself years later, is very quiet and subdued. God's Son was born without any dotting relatives around; without any fanfare. This is like the Super Bowl played in an empty and silent stadium.

Well, sort of, there were those shepherds.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "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. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2:8-20

The Story of the Shepherds

The story of the shepherds is a familiar one. The shepherds actually get more attention in Luke's narrative than Mary or Joseph. They're out there with their flocks at night. All of a sudden, an angel, most likely our old friend Gabriel, stands before them surrounded by a blinding light, which Luke describes as "the glory of the Lord." The shepherds are scared stiff. Of course, Gabriel is

used to that by now. He got the same reaction from Zechariah and Mary when he appeared to them. And once again he tells them not to be afraid. Why? Because he comes with "good news that will of great joy for all the people."

The original word for "good news" is gospel. Though today we often associate, "gospel," as a Christian term, the word existed before this night. Fifteen years before the first Christmas, Rome officially declared that gospel to have come through Caesar Augustus who they believed was a savior who'd put an end to war and bring peace.

But Gabriel declares something subversive. He says this good news of great joy isn't about Caesar but someone else. He says, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Let me offer a more literal translation of that verse: "Born to you today, Savior, Messiah, Lord, in the city of David." It's like bam, bam, bam: Savior, Messiah, Lord. Not Caesar, but a baby boy!

But where? And how will they know it's Him? There'll be a sign. They'll find a baby wrapped in cloths. Savior, Messiah, Lord, wrapped, bound, constrained, limited, in a feed trough.

This was big news! The shepherds sensed it, but heaven knew it. As the shepherds puzzled over this, suddenly a hoard of angels appeared, praising God. It's like millions of them had been hiding right behind some heavenly door, and once they heard the words: Savior, Messiah, Lord, they couldn't hold back any longer. They burst out in a spontaneous eruption of joy and praise: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." It was a short song, but the lyrics spoke volumes. Glory to God in the highest — not in the highest degree, but in the highest place because he is the Most High God. But He's way up there, so what does this mean for us who are way down here? It means peace for those with whom he is pleased. Caesar can't bring peace, but this baby boy can.

Then the angels left, and the shepherds must have stood there in stunned silence. "What do we do now? Well, what are we waiting for? Let's go to Bethlehem and check this out." There's no debate; no procrastination. They don't decide to sleep on it. They don't go to the local library for research. They know what they saw and heard, and so they say, "Let's go and see for ourselves!" They certainly knew the prophecy about Bethlehem. It wouldn't be hard to find him there. Scholars estimate only about 300 people lived in Bethlehem at the time. So, off they went, and sure enough, they found the baby boy, swaddled in cloth, lying in the feed trough. So at least Mary and Joseph get to share their joy with a few smelly shepherds. Mary, for one, treasured that, and she pondered over what it all meant.

Then what did those shepherds do? Well, they spread the word. They weren't preachers, they weren't missionaries, but that didn't matter. They'd heard something. They'd seen something.

That something was good news for the whole world. Eventually, though, they went back to their sheep. But they were different. They went back giving glory to God and praising him for all they'd heard and seen.

The most surprising thing about this story isn't what the shepherds did but who they were.

But, honestly, the most surprising thing to me about this story isn't what the shepherds did but who they were. You see, shepherds spent most of their time in the fields away from society and had no influence to speak of. They were considered lower class, largely unnoticed by those in power. Shepherds were known to be socially inept, hygienically challenged, and culturally reviled.

Most likely, these particular shepherds had the job of caring for the animals that would be sacrificed in the Temple to atone for the sins of the people. That meant they'd constantly be handling dirty and sometimes even dead creatures, which would render them unclean and restricted from Temple worship. To make matters worse, they couldn't keep the Sabbath because sheep need constant protection. All this added up to them being regarded as untrustworthy and irreligious. You've heard people say, "She cusses like a sailor." In those days there was a saying, "He lies like a shepherd."

Do you see what I'm talking about? This Most High God, this God of blinding glory, stooped and came to the lowly shepherds. These angels didn't bring the message of Christ's birth to insiders. They didn't appear to first century VIP. They came to the least significant, least respected, least likely people in the community. That's why Gabriel announced that he came to bring good news "for all the people," not just the socially and religiously acceptable people. That's why he said, "a Savior has been born to you..." In other words, to you shepherds! To you who are on the outside looking in.

No wonder years later the apostle Paul would say to followers of Jesus at Corinth,

"Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him." 1 Cor. 1:26-30

The bottom line is, though these shepherds spent most of their lives on the outside looking in, they'd not be outsiders to this good news of Savior, Messiah, Lord.

And do you know what? These shepherds even exemplify as much as anyone else in the Christmas story what it means to be a disciple (follower) of Jesus.

- We're called to be people of faith and to act on that faith. The shepherds are models of faith — they believed the angel and acted on that faith by going to Bethlehem.

- We're called to spread the word about Jesus. The shepherds were the first to do that — they're models of telling others what we've seen and heard; living as His witnesses and shining His light on a dark world.

- And we're called to be worshippers, responding to the Most High God who lavishes his grace and love upon us. The shepherds had a worship service when they returned to their sheep later that night.

Those who spend most of their lives as outsiders looking in are not outsiders to this gift.

The shepherds show us those who spend most of their lives as outsiders looking in are not outsiders to this gift. It shouldn't surprise us. This baby grew up and demonstrated over and over again that He came for outsiders. He defined his mission this way: I came to seek and to save that which was lost (Luke 19:10). I did not come for those who are well, but for those who are sick (Luke 5:31).

- And so when an unclean and grotesque leper approached him, a man people didn't even want to be downwind from, he reached out and touched him.

- And so it was he included among his own closest disciples a man named Matthew who was a despised traitor of his own people; a wealthy tax collector, notorious for cheating others.

- And so it was when a woman caught in the very act of adultery was brought to him he refused to condemn her like the religious leaders and instead freed her to go and sin no more.

- And so it was he welcomed and made time for small children who in his day were to be seen and not heard.

- And so it was he even kindly offered a morsel of bread at the Last Supper to the one who'd just betrayed him.

The truth of the matter is, the distinctions we make between insiders and outsiders, winners and losers, sinners and saints are minuscule compared to a holy God. It's like this: I once read that proportionally the surface of the earth is smoother than a billiard ball. The heights of Mount Everest and the troughs of the Pacific Ocean are very impressive to those of us who live on this planet. But from the view of the Milky Way or even Mars, those differences matter not at all. That's how we should see the petty differences separating insiders and outsiders. Compared to a holy and perfect God, the loftiest Everest of human importance is the same as a molehill.

You see, we all stand before a holy God in need of grace. Romans 2:11 says, "There is no partiality with God. He's not a respecter of persons." In fact, we're all by nature outsiders to His family.

It doesn't matter what your annual income is, the color of your skin, your marital status, or your religious affiliation. Paul put it this way, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). Sin makes all of us outsiders to a holy God. But here's the good news: this baby who was bound in cloth and lying in a manger would one day, three decades later, be bound, put on trial, and nailed to a cross for your sins and mine.

Perhaps these shepherds would one day comprehend the full story. These men who saw hundreds of lambs bound and slaughtered for sacrifice each year would come to see that this bound baby in the manger was the lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world. And he did that so we who are outsiders might be in on everything. Listen to how Paul put it in his letter to a group of gentiles who'd just come to know Jesus as Savior, Messiah, Lord:

"It was only yesterday that you outsiders to God's ways had no idea of any of this, didn't know the first thing about the way God works, hadn't the faintest idea of Christ... Now because of Christ—dying that death, shedding that blood—you who were once out of it altogether are in on everything." Ephesians 2:11-13 The Message

And you know what happens? When we say, "yes" to God's invitation, we become insiders to the love and the grace of God. And when that happens, there's nothing we want more than to reach out and bring more of those on the outside looking in to be "in on everything." Like the shepherds did!

Look around! People are starving for grace. And here's the tragedy: in many cases, the last place they expect to find it is in the church. And so we must speak our message clearly and loudly: He's Savior, Messiah, Lord. Those who spend most of their lives as outsiders looking in are not outsiders to this gift!

Let me finish my story about Ronald. After four years of passing by Ronald on our way into the ballpark, saying, "Hello, God bless you," we heard Ronald had just lost a loved one. So, we decided to stop and express our condolences, and Lynn took the initiative and told him our names and that we served as chaplains for the Giants.

The minute she said that he lit up and said, "I just got news from the housing authority that I'm going to get my own apartment. Would you come and bless it? I've been living in a motel for years, and I'm so excited to have my own place, but I want it to be safe; I want God's blessing on it. Would you come and pray over it?" We said that we'd be honored.

It took him longer than he thought to finally move in, but a week ago Friday Lynn and I had the joy and the privilege of driving up to Hunter's Point to bless Ronald's studio apartment. When we drove up, he was waiting for us out front with a big smile on his face. We went inside...believe me, it wasn't much, but for him, it was a palace. And we had a wonderful time there. We even were able to provide him with some much needed furniture and appliances thanks to John Helin.

But not long after we entered his apartment, I asked him, "Ronald, do you know Jesus as your Savior?" Again, his face lit up, and tears came to his eyes, and he said, "Oh, Pastor, He's everything to me. I'd be so lost without him. I'm a miracle!" And then he went on to tell us his story.

Ronald is just one example that those who spend most of their lives as outsiders looking in are not outsiders to this gift! You might be rich or poor, old or young, married or single, native-born or immigrant. Like the children's song says, God's love is both deep and wide! Wide enough to include all of us. God invites all of us to open this gift. If you feel like an outsider to the love and the grace and the welcome of God, know that through this bound up baby boy, this Savior, Messiah, Lord, He's inviting you in. You're not an outsider to this gift.

Father, we thank you for this gift of a Savior. Lord Jesus, we thank you that though you existed in the form of God, you did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped but emptied yourself and became a man, and not only that, you humbled yourself and died on a cross. Holy Spirit, we thank you that you are drawing people to the Father, inviting those on the outside looking in to receive this gift of grace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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