

The Gift of the Shepherds:
Looking For What The Sign Points To
Luke 2:8-20 (MSG)

Jesus was a preacher. Preachers sometimes reach back and make use of family memories, family stories to make their points. I wonder if Jesus made use of the stories his Mother told him about the strange things that happened when he was born. Maybe tweak them a bit—turn them into a parable every now and then.

At one point Jesus asks, “If a man owns a hundred sheep, and one of them wanders away, will he not leave the ninety-nine on the hills and go to look for the one that wandered off?” The answer is supposed to be Yes (I think) but it seems to me like a terrible investment strategy. You’ve got 99 sheep and you leave them defenseless to predators or liable to get stuck in the bramble or too close to the edge of a cliff—just to go out and try to find one scrawny, insubordinate lamb?

In another instance, Jesus looks at a crowd and has compassion on them, “because,” the scripture says, “they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd.” Could be a bit autobiographical, maybe his mother and father told him about a crazy bunch of shepherds who left their flocks behind in order to scour the village for a glimpse of Jesus, back when he was just born.

Talk about gifts. You can’t question the passion of the shepherds and their willingness to go all out--on the way to find a babe, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. Once they get a glimpse of the glory of God and hear about a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, they just leave their fields, leave their sheep without a second thought. If you asked them why, they’d probably say: “Are you kidding me? We get to be the first to see the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. We have directions from a heavenly host. It’s a no-brainer.” I doubt a single one of them even bothered to look back.

Think through what it must have taken for those shepherds to leave their entire flocks behind. It’s a risky thing to do.

- It would be like a parking lot attendant leaving a lot of luxury cars unobserved indefinitely in the heart of the city.
- It would be like the night nurse leaving her patients without someone to respond to their call lights-- without anyone to cover for her.
- For these men it was the equivalent of giving up what they spent their lives guarding and tending—the sheep which they were paid to keep an eye—whose safety was their sole responsibility.

Their livelihood depended on their success because each of those sheep represented an investment of time and energy from their own family, usually from their entire village, or possibly from a hard and demanding Master. Leaving them unattended was an incredible act of faith—an incredible gift of confidence in God’s promise and the belief that *what* they would find in that manger would far outweigh what they were watching over in those fields.

Think about it from the perspective of those sheep. Put yourself in the shoes of those little fluffy lambs who might also have witnessed the glory of God but not understood why their cries were not being heeded, where their protectors and providers had gone to.

Great philosopher and action star, Bruce Lee, is teaching a young student a lesson in *Enter the Dragon*, and he stretches out his arm and points with his finger to the sky. The boy looks at Lee’s finger. Lee says, “It is like a finger pointing a way to the moon. Don’t concentrate on the finger or you will miss all the heavenly glory.” In other words, the sign is there to point out the important thing. Don’t confuse the sign with what it points toward.

That’s an important point because sometimes it is not clear what the signs around us *are* pointing to.

Some signs seem to mean one thing, but mean something entirely unexpected. For instance, we got a call from our son Zachary who was studying in Philadelphia. He told us he was in the police station in handcuffs. Then the phone call got cut off. Okay, here’s a sign or a word picture—your college student son, in handcuffs in a Philadelphia police station. It took a few barely discernible, broken-up calls to discover that as part of an Underground Shakespeare group, Zach tried on a pair of handcuffs only to discover no one had a key and that these were police issue handcuffs and he’d gone to the station to see if he could get some help. The image or sign inside your head that ages parents by a factor of five years for every five minutes was not at all what in any normal world it would have or should have been.

So when the angel of the Lord declares that the sign that is given to the shepherds is to look for a baby, lying in a manger, the shepherds might have been just a little confused. It could be that the manger is just an arbitrary sign—like a unique tracking number for a UPS delivery or directions to turn left at the statue of Moses at the center of town and then it’s the third stable on the right—signs that can’t be missed. But even though these were men who knew their way around feed troughs, it’s a weird identifying sign to look for.

Some signs are arbitrary and have nothing at all to do with the thing toward which they point. On the other hand, some signs are so closely tied to that toward which they point that the two can't be easily separated. Especially for those of us who love and follow Jesus. For instance:

Consider a Cup and loaf. It is hard not to see these things together as anything but the body and blood of Christ. It is a sign of sacrificial love.

Or a Towel and basin. Again, we see that, and immediately remember how Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. It is a sign of servanthood.

And then there is The Cross. There is no way to separate this Roman method of execution with the one who willingly died upon it. It is the ultimate sign of hope and forgiveness.

And for the shepherds and for us today, there is the Manger—we see it as an impromptu crib--a humble way to enter this world. It was a sign then of how shepherds might identify Jesus. It is a sign now of the word made flesh, of the miracle of Christmas itself.

But it is the angel who offers that sign and it is tied to the first expression of the gospel.

“I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord...peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

And then the angel continues:

This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Jesus himself is the true sign. He is the sign that God is with us. He is the long-expected Messiah, but more than that, he is also Lord. He is our Savior—a savior who brings God's peace to God's people. There is no light between Jesus the sign and the God he points the way to. In fact, the expected formulation of verse 12 should have been “he is the Messiah of the Lord.” But the angel makes it clear this is the Messiah—comma—the Lord. He is much more than what God's people were expecting.

Brothers and sisters, if you are a disciple of Jesus, a follower of Christ the Lord, then you too are called to be a sign. We're called to be a sign of His presence—a

sign of the good news. Our calling is to be a sign that is so closely tied to who and what we point toward that to the world cannot separate us.

God needs witnesses. God has become one of us in order to save us from ourselves. And what is a witness but a walking talking sign. But what in the world does that mean for us today? Consider the wisdom of my good British buddy, Clive Staples Lewis.

The rule for all of us is perfectly simple. Do not waste time bothering whether you 'love' your neighbor; act as if you did. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking less.

You do what you proclaim to be true and then you it becomes true in you. Act toward others as if God is in our midst and God will become known for being in our midst.

In recently months, I've come to believe we don't need any more committed stances on religious or moral questions. I have grown a little weary of so many Christians convinced that it is all about right thinking all the while neglecting right living. The generations that are coming up behind us don't care much about our stances or our doctrine. They want to see the evidence—they want to witness our declarations lived out in our daily behaviors. You and I need to be a sign that the good news of Jesus has come for all people.

So this is what I have personally come to:

- Don't tell me how you feel about abortion
- Don't tell me how you interpret the Bible regarding LGBTQ
- Don't "woe is me" about how global warming proves that we are being terrible stewards of God's creation
- And don't tell me how teenagers, young adults, (and just about everybody else) are ruining the world by have screens in front of their faces 24/7.

An effective sign has to be so close to what it is pointing to that you can't tell them apart. So instead, how about this:

Show me how you've taken-in a flesh and blood woman with an unwanted pregnancy and are helping her get pre-natal care and helping her explore her options moving forward. Be a sign to the compassion of Jesus.

Show me how you've stopped running down the differences between us when talking about race, sexual orientation, and politics with your friends and have

instead start loving your neighbor and sharing your love for Jesus in terms they can understand. Be a sign of the acceptance of Jesus.

Yes, the science is clear--our planet is getting hotter and that is already complicating life all around us devastating ways. It doesn't matter what or who is causing it. We've got to figure out how to moderate those temperatures and minimize their effects. This is God's world, we're just borrowing it--one lifetime after another. We're the ones responsible for taking care of it and God will want to know how we've made it more livable for all. Be a sign of what it means to "tend" and cherish God's garden.

When it comes to technology we are fish and screens we look into have become the water we breathe and glide through every day. We can set up healthier boundaries for ourselves and our children, of course. But if we are going to be witnesses to *a good news that will cause great joy* then we're going to have to learn how to hold our breath and swim. We're going to have to find a way for those screens to communicate the good news that used to be shared from the pulpit. Be a sign of the perseverance and adaptability of our God and His church.

The shepherds dropped what they were doing to find the manger because the manger was holding their Savior who was Christ the Lord. After they found him and were finally shooed out by Joseph, they grabbed a hold of anyone and everyone they could get their hands on to tell them what they'd seen and heard. They *found* God's sign and *became* God's sign in a single evening. We've had one or two millennia or more. I think it's about time we do the same.

I am who I am because of some very good news that has brought great joy into my life. I have a Savior who has also agreed to be the Lord and Master of my life. I'd be glad to tell you about it, but before that, why don't you join me loving our neighbors in the ways they want and need to be loved first. Watch me closely and I might not have to say a thing at all.