

Shepherds and Angels

December 18, 2011

Luke 2:8-20

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; 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 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." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them

Several years ago Mike Rowe stumbled across a brilliant idea. One day, while living in an apartment in San Francisco, his toilet "blew up" (his words). He wrote a check for the plumber, left it on the counter, and when he came home that night it was fixed, like magic. It suddenly occurred to him how disconnected we are from all those folks who work hard for a living, doing dirty jobs, keep everything running. And yet, these same folks; factory workers, agricultural producers, and skilled laborers get little respect and virtually no recognition.

He recalled his own childhood. When the toilet blew up at his parent's home, it was his grandpa that came to the rescue. After twelve hours of hard labor, digging, sawing and sweating pipe, the toilet worked again. It was one of the best days of his life – working side by side with his dad and grandpa – doing dirty work.

That is how the show, "Dirty Jobs" was conceived. Mike set out to apprentice for one day with folks who do unimaginable work and film it for the Discovery Channel. His show was an instant success. In addition to his antics and commentary, he was and is fully committed to experiencing a variety of dirty jobs as honestly as possible. Its not only good television it honors those who do dirty jobs day in and day out.

Rowe has worked in mining, steel, fishing, road kill clean up, even shepherding...the list goes on. After two hundred shows and two hundred different jobs, he has come to this conclusion that we have marginalized folks who do this work. He has since launched a PR campaign for skilled labor and trade occupations highlighting their critical importance to our infrastructure. He is making dirty work noble work just by helping us to appreciate all those magical things that happen behind the scenes of our lives.

When I first moved to Granger I bought a little house from woman named Marian. Her husband, Clarence, had done quite a bit of re-muddling on the house with scraps of stuff he brought home from work. So when the time came to redo the wiring and plumbing and ductwork Clarence's name came up quite often. What also came up was that Clarence had quite a reputation around town. He was a great guy, had lots of kids, was kind and generous, but he stank (or stunk – I'm not sure which word is right. Let's just say he was very fragrant in a not so good way.). For most of his adult working life Clarence worked at National By-Products, the rendering plant. My only experience with National By-Products happened when I was a young girl anxious to spend a Saturday with my dad. My dad, a plumber, said, "I just need to make a quick stop to check on a job." Guess where... He left me in the truck. A few minutes later an older man, that I suspect was a farmer, parked in the spot beside me with a dead horse in the bed of his truck. That's what I got to look at for the next fifteen minutes until my dad returned – and when he returned the odor followed him. I wasn't sure I wanted to know what went on in there. "Its dirty work," he said, "but somebody's got to do it." I think I was a little too traumatized to fully appreciate what he was trying to tell me. I just pulled my shirt up over my face and said, "Eeewww." So when people talked about Clarence I got it. His life was so saturated with his work it seeped through his pores.

I suppose every era has its share of dirty jobs – jobs that come with dirty nails, cracked hands, stinky clothes, and caked boots – jobs that have 2nd shifts and graveyard shifts - jobs that are vital to our existence but looked down upon by folks who like things to just show up on their plates and flush down their toilets magically.

Shepherds were on the top of that list in Jesus' day. They tromped through dung most of their days. Oily sheep coats made dirt stick like glue. They stank. They seldom socialized with others. Their work made it difficult to participate in community life. They were perpetually rendered "unclean" by the religious leaders because of the kind of work they did and their inability to fulfill religious obligations. They weren't welcome in the temple even though they tended the lambs that were necessary for sacrifice in the temple. Shepherds had the reputation of being thieves and liars. They were not allowed to testify in legal proceedings because of their alleged untrustworthy character. They lived in the fields with their sheep and most everyone was happy to let them stay there.

They were tough guys – accustomed to fending off bears, lions, wild dogs and other predators with slingshots and sticks. They were tender guys – often having pet names for their sheep and able to distinguish one from another. They may not have been educated in any formal way, but they had their own brand of wisdom. Watching sheep eat grass allowed time for pondering questions about life. Sleeping under the stars made them observers of the heavens. Many shepherds were musicians, like King David, perfecting their songs while watching sheep. Still they were shepherds...the lowest of the low.

So when the angels were commissioned to deliver the good news of Jesus' birth you have to wonder if they got a little confused – like all those birds that crash landed in a Walmart parking lot in Utah a couple days ago. This huge flock of migrating aquatic birds

mistook asphalt for open water and crashed. Maybe God was up there trying to re-direct the angels shouting, “I said tell the leaders, not the breeders!”

All one has to do is read the whole story to know it was no mistake that shepherds were the first ones to receive this holy birth announcement. Mary sang about it with Elizabeth in her revolutionary song, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.” (Luke 1:52) Jesus, when he began his ministry, made a beeline for the lepers, the blind, the sick, the poor, the outcasts, the broken and the oppressed. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,” he quoted Isaiah, “to bring good news...” And he delivered that good news to those most in need of some good news – those whom the religious types had written off or rejected. Actually, if you think about it, Jesus had a dirty job. He touched people with rotting flesh. He held the hand of the deceased. He didn’t shy away from a convulsing child. He wasn’t worried about getting hit in the face with the slobber of a man possessed with a legion of demons. He didn’t shy away from suffering or grief. He ate with people others hated – tax collectors, sinners, prostitutes. He withstood the pummeling of religious types who didn’t like the way he did things. He didn’t seem to mind the stench of his disciple’s feet as he washed them one by one. He slept on the ground, in the dirt. I’d say he had a dirty job. It just makes sense that the first ones to learn about his birth were those who understood what it was to be on the bottom.

First it was one angel, “*Do not be afraid; 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 the Messiah, the Lord.*” Then a whole army of angels showed up singing, “Glory to God!”

They went to see that baby – and no one cared that they stank. They probably had to step over some dung and that is like rolling out a welcome mat to a shepherd. Maybe they held baby Jesus in their dirty hands.

As they left town that night – they told anyone who would listen. “The messiah has been born – he’s over there, lying in a manger, wrapped in rags. Really! An angel told us and a host of angels lit up the sky.” People were amazed by their story...

I suppose it’s still hard to believe. Angels visiting shepherds? Good news of great joy for ALL people.

At Christmas, we stand shoulder to shoulder with stinky shepherds and we are no more worthy to be there than they. In the stable we check self-righteous smugness at the door. There’s no room for arrogance, or snobbery, or judgment in the stable. There’s just good news – for ALL people – including the lowest of the low.

The shepherds are just one episode of the story of God coming to us. For a brief moment they stand in the spotlight of angels and we see them in a new light – God’s light. We see them as those worthy to kneel at the manger and welcome the Christ child...and we are glad to share their company. Amen.