

**September 16, 2018 (Visitor's Sunday)**

**TEXT: [Luke 2:1–20](#)**

**TITLE: Unlikely Community**

*By the Rev. Heather Schoenewolf*

Think of a meal you've eaten. What comes to mind? The food you had for breakfast this morning? The first lobster you ate, dripping in butter? A slice of wedding cake? Many of us joke that we can't remember what we had for dinner last night. We pack the same sandwich for lunch, eat the same bowl of cereal in the morning—so when we are asked to think of one meal, we often think of one that is special, one that stands out to us, rather than Tuesday's luncheon special.

I don't remember the date. My husband and I had stayed at a friend's home for the weekend while visiting town, and as a gesture of thanks offered to cook brunch for him on Sunday afternoon. I don't remember how it happened, but brunch for three turned into brunch for 7. Our friend, it turns out, had already had brunch plans with another couple but didn't say anything. He then spontaneously invited another couple from church to come over too. And so we all, awkwardly eyed one another around the sunlit table—each couple feeling a bit intruded upon, surprised to be joined by strangers that day. We each had a claim to our host and had expectations of a meal that would go much differently—relaxed conversation with a longtime friend. But we were grownups and didn't stay stuck in our expectations for long. I don't remember how it happened. But somehow, stories were shared around the table. There was enough food for everyone, even though I have no recollection of what we had to eat. And hours later, we were discussing how washing dishes could be sacramental, and so we hand washed every plate, passing them on to another to be dried, even though the dishwasher was empty.

When we are asked to think of a meal so often we remember more about those gathered around the table with us than what was featured on our plates. We remember the familiar stories and the surprising guests. We remember the people who shaped the event. Stories are shaped by their characters.

Our story for this morning is one of the most familiar stories of our faith. We've likely heard this passage more times than we can count—certainly on Christmas Eve, and in the children's Christmas pageant and even on TV. The passage ends with the lovely words that *Mary treasured all of these things and pondered them in their hearts*, and we feel as if we have had a chance to take a glimpse into Jesus' baby book—to see the photos of his birthday and get a behind-the-scenes account of a day that was special not just for Mary and Joseph, but for us, even today.

We've grown so accustomed to the characters in our story: angels and shepherds—and even the wise men from Matthew's gospel—that we take them for granted as expected surrounding the Messiah's birth. But I know how surprised I would have been if a bunch of shepherds had arrived at the hospital to see my son just hours after giving birth, and realize what a motley crew God summoned to the manger that night.

Now, we know that each gospel writer paints a cast of characters attending to Jesus birth with intention, wishing to tell us something specific about Jesus.

Matthew writes to a Jewish audience and wants his readers to see Jesus as the new Moses. And so his birth includes a tyrannical leader and a flight to Egypt.

But Luke wants us to see Jesus as the one who ushers in a kingdom in which the outsiders are welcomed too. He levels the playing field in Jesus and wants for us to see that no one falls outside of God's all-inclusive love.

And so God's cast includes shepherds—those who lived, literally, on the outskirts of society. One commentator writes:

Shepherding had become a profession most likely to be filled from the bottom rung of the social ladder, by persons who could not find what was regarded as decent work. Society stereotyped shepherds as liars, degenerates, and thieves. The testimony of shepherds was not admissible in court, and many towns had ordinances barring shepherds from their city limits. The religious establishment took a particularly dim view of shepherds since the regular exercise of shepherds' duties kept them from observing the Sabbath and rendered them ritually unclean. The Pharisees classed shepherds with tax collectors and prostitutes, persons who were "sinners" by virtue of their vocation.<sup>1</sup>

Shepherds are the first who were invited to the manger. They don't just show up by following a star or stumble upon the scene looking for water for their sheep. They receive a divine invitation—a host of angels singing praise to God and telling them of the good news of Christ's birth. They are told where to find the new baby. They are invited off of the hillside and to the cradle of the Messiah.

And so in Luke, God chooses the outcast—literally those who were outside of human society, living among sheep, and proclaimed the good news that God had come to dwell *with* them, to be a savior *for* them. And these shepherds are given a new vocation. They are sent out then to proclaim this good news to others—shepherds heralding the arrival of the Good Shepherd who has come to lead the people.

Luke is quite clear: held against the backdrop of the authoritarian rule of the Roman Emperor, God breaks into creation with a new kingdom in mind. Angelic messengers sing of a reign of peace. They share the good news with those who are put down and left out. Something new has dawned. A new life was born who will *give* new life and new purpose to all. His story changes their stories. His story changes *our* stories.

Our God welcomes people from all stations of life: those on the margins, those forgotten, those with so little to their name that they don't know how to make ends meet.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1522](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1522)

God calls people out of despair or isolation. God calls people into relationship and into purpose. God calls us into life.

In Luke's Gospel, Christ's birth is not a private family affair. It is a public event that changes the fabric of the culture. Luke's gospel points us not only to a kingdom of God that will come, but Luke shows us that in Christ, that kingdom has broken into our world too. This kingdom runs counter to the dominant narrative—in which people are classified or cast aside. The hierarchies upon which we so heartily rely have lost their authority. Christ breaks people out of their station in life and anoints them with the divine authority to proclaim God's love. He gives value to those who are forgotten. He welcomes the most unlikely guests to draw near—to see and hear that they are loved.

The incarnation is a paradigm-altering, life-changing event. It is not just a sentimental holiday message, easily captured in an image of serenity on the front of our holiday cards. The incarnation has the potential to shake things up in our daily lives too. And so we too are called to identify roadblocks and stumbling blocks that we install. We are called to examine the quality of our relationships and the quality of our community.

Do we feel safest when we can clearly see our place on the inside, and know that others are left out? Do we feel most secure when we can clearly identify the vulnerable and see that they are not us? Or do we feel most authentically ourselves when we are all together: broken, hopeful, and longing for peace? Do we trust the merciful reach of God and know that we can love another across difference because God first loved us?

See, God in Christ crosses the threshold between human and divine, breaking barriers between humanity and God, and inviting us to do the same.

We need this message now, as tensions continue to escalate in our politics and in our communities. We hear so many stories of the deep divides that remain in our nation in spite of strides to overcome: divides along race, along gender, along ethnicity, religion, sexual identity. We need a counter narrative that breaks these harmful cycles and puts us on a path of love.

The incarnation reminds us that when God came to us in Christ as that babe born in a manger, the rules of the game changed. Into an empire founded on domination and violence he ushered a reign of mercy and peace. Into a world rich with social distinctions made to classify people in order to keep others safe from riff-raff or impurity, God puts on flesh- and all that comes with it, challenging the systems that divide in our culture: breaking down walls and crossing borders.

So think of a meal you've eaten. Who is gathered around your table? Are there any unlikely guests with which you find yourself breaking bread? If not, ask yourself who God is calling you to feed, to welcome, to love. There's room at the table for everyone.