

# Characters from a Story

Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas  
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Episcopal Revised Common Lectionary

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**Luke 2:1-20** (*King James Version*) -- And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; because he was of the house and lineage of David: To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, 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,  
and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

One of the classic ways to do Bible study, or simply to enjoy stories from scripture, is to look at each Biblical character, and to think creatively about what they can tell us. In so many

Bible stories, we can see a part of ourselves in each of the characters.

So I'd like to invite you to think about this cherished Christmas story a bit – to

play with it – and see what we can learn from some of its characters.

Let's start with the arrival in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph have travelled a long way, from Galilee – hard travel when you are on the verge of childbirth. They need a place to stay, so they seek a room at the inn. And that's my first character – the Innkeeper.

He's busy. The inn is full. He's got more to take care of than he can handle. (Does that sound familiar to anyone here?) I can imagine that it's after hours. His doors are shut; the lights are out. There comes an inconvenient knock. Can't they see the "No Vacancy" sign?

How often are we pushed and stressed, and so we close the windows and doors of our consciousness? We get anxious and narrow our attention.

Strangers ask for a room. The easy answer is the factual one. "I'm sorry. We're full. There's no room. Go somewhere else." But that's not the answer this Innkeeper gives. Wonderfully, he makes room. "There is a manger," he tells them. It's not perfect, but it is room. He doesn't give them exactly what they want, but what he gives is enough. It is shelter.

How did he do that? How did he contribute something so simple and so significant to this eternal story?

First, he had to actually see the couple. When we are busy and stressed, it's so easy to close off, shut down – close the windows and doors of our attention. He could have simply dismissed them as

inconvenient customers who have come too late. Instead, he must have looked at them. He must have seen Mary's condition. He saw them and had compassion. That will become a theme for the life of the child Mary carries. He too will see others – especially those who are invisible and on the margins of society – and he will have compassion. The Innkeeper sees this couple. And he has compassion.

Then, the Innkeeper had to be modest and generous enough to offer them something inadequate. There's an old saying: "Anything worth doing is worth doing badly." Sometimes we get stuck if we think we can't do things just right, even perfectly. The Innkeeper is humble enough to do what he can do, even if it doesn't seem like enough. Another old saying: "Your best is good enough." He does what he can, and leaves the rest to God. A third saying: "Do what you can, and leave the universe to God."

The Innkeeper can teach us a little something about being awake and open, alert to the unexpected possibility in the stressed busyness of the day. He also invites us into a spirit of humble generosity, where we can do what little we can, even when it doesn't seem adequate, and be okay about that. The Innkeeper's reward – centuries Christmas pageants where little children dressed in bathrobes open to the knock of the holy family and give the baby Jesus his birthplace.

**A**nd then there are the shepherds. Hard, dirty and dangerous work. If you could do anything else, you would. We may think of shepherds with

some romantic, pastoral images, but that's not how it was in Jesus' day. Shepherds were resented, like thieves. They were bad about trespassing, and letting their sheep eat someone else's crop. A shepherd's reputation would be just a notch above criminal. They lived a hard life. Sleepless nights outdoors. Sudden up-close violence, when a predator attacked. Universal hostility from settlers trying to guard their water and produce.

So when God does something so spectacular and longed-for as the Messiah's birth, you would think it would be announced to the priests and religious authorities or maybe proclaimed to some whose holiness and sanctity was obvious or renowned. But no. God's messengers, the angels, visited the shepherds, those rogues in the field.

The shepherds themselves could have resisted such a message. They might have disqualified themselves, saying, "Who are we that God would call on us this way? We're shepherds; sinners. We don't deserve this. Who are we to receive such blessing?" They could have shifted back to their sheep - to their everyday rut, and let the night's darkness return.

Or, they could have listened, accepted the message, and then done nothing. Just absorb the wonder, and make no response, no change. After all, if they were to take that message anywhere, who would believe them? Who would respect anything a shepherd might say?

Sometimes we can be so rough on ourselves. We know so many of our own

failures and shortcomings so intimately. We can feel unworthy. Inadequate. Who am I, that God would visit me? ...love me? ...entrust me with something wonderful and special?

But when God breaks into the world, God announces the glad tidings not to the holy or mighty, but to the shepherds. Sometimes it is through the most disowned part of ourselves that God comes and announces good news to us. When we recognize our own brokenness and weakness, when we know our own sense of neediness, God can come to love us into wholeness. Forgiveness and acceptance are the first gifts of Jesus.

The shepherds accept the angelic visitation and the message, and they determine to do something. "Let us go and see this thing which has come to pass." They go to Bethlehem. They go to the manger.

There they are welcomed. They are not treated as trash or strangers. Joseph, the protective father, receives their message. Mary, the nurturing mother ponders it in her heart. And the baby, is, well... a baby. Doing what babies do. Watching alertly, sleeping, crying, eating.

**A**nd that's the final character I want to offer you. The baby; the child Jesus, the child of God.

Part of what we say is that we are all God's children. We are all created in the image and likeness of God. Within each of us is the divine child. In the dazzling darkness of this night, the baby Jesus invites us to awaken and embrace our own inner identity as a child of God.

Here's how another Episcopal priest, Mark Bozzuti-Jones puts it: "Being children of God requires that we act like children. Cry when you need milk. Act silly to make God laugh. Listen to what God says. Throw things off the table and experience God's patience. Curl up in the arms of God. Ask God to read you a story. Allow God to throw you up in the air. Play hide and seek with God. Allow God to play hide and seek with you. Cry when God goes away. Squeal with delight when God comes back. Listen to God say how much you are loved. Tell God of your love."<sup>1</sup>

So here we are, characters in the Nativity scene tonight. Like the Innkeeper may we be awake and attentive to know when God is knocking at our door, to see others and be compassionate. Even if we

don't think our response is enough, we can trust, whatever we offer will be received, and God can make wonders of it.

Like the shepherds, angelic visitors sing a glorious message to us, unworthy as we may seem to ourselves. Receive that message with joy, and walk out of here with a song in your heart. Then live with the freedom and abandon that is your inheritance as a child of God.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem  
Descend to us, we pray  
Cast out our sin and enter in  
Be born to us today  
We hear the Christmas angels  
The great glad tidings tell  
O come to us, abide with us  
Our Lord Emmanuel*

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Bozzuti-Jones, from *The Womb of Advent*, Church Publishing, 2007

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