

# WHO INVITED SHEPHERDS?

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Who invited shepherds? If any of the Bethlehem townspeople had noticed shepherds crowding into the stable, which was probably a cave, at the rear of the inn, the reaction might well have been, "Who let those guys in?" Modern research is revealing that our romantic image of simple shepherds visiting the newborn baby is not quite correct. The fact that shepherds attended the celebration of the baby's arrival was a startling, shocking, revolutionary visit. The fact that shepherds were honored guests at the baby's birth would have made the assertion that this baby was the long-awaited Messiah a laughing matter. The Messiah came to shepherds? The gossip lines must have sizzled! "Can you believe it? Someone said that the Messiah has been born and that shepherds were told by angels. Can you believe such nonsense!"

In first-century Palestine the shepherd was viewed not only as a humble occupation, but also as one of the most despised trades. Shepherds were generally considered to be thieves. Donald Messer in a recent issue of the Circuit Rider magazine, wrote,

Far from being viewed as reliable and responsible, they were habitually known to graze on other peoples' lands and to pilfer the produce of the herd. Their societal and religious status would not be much higher than pimps and drugpushers in our day. They, like the publicans and tax collectors, were deprived of their civil rights. They could not fulfill a judicial office or be a witness in court. It was forbidden to buy wool, milk, or a kid from shepherds, because it was widely assumed that what they sold would be stolen property. One ancient writing reports, "No position in the world is so despised as that of the shepherd."

Isn't it astounding that shepherds were invited! Shepherds were singled out by the angels to receive the announcement of the Messiah's birth! Shepherds attended the event, and the visit was recorded in the Bible, giving them status. Astounding! Revolutionary!

Not only did despicable shepherds attend the birth, but Jesus saw himself as a shepherd. The gospel of John tells us in chapter 10 that Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd." I imagine the followers did not appreciate being called sheep, but also to hear Jesus call himself a good shepherd must have raised many eyebrows. How can any shepherd be good? It would have been a contradiction in terms, like cruel kindness, authentic reproduction, jumbo shrimp, pretty ugly, postal service, or United Methodism! How could a thieving shepherd be called good?

Jesus probably intended to shock his listeners. He contrasted the good shepherd with the typical hired shepherd. The good shepherd is willing to lay down his life to protect the sheep, while the hired shepherd runs when the wolves come because he is more concerned with his own safety than with the safety of the sheep. "He cares nothing about the sheep," says Jesus. The good shepherd is willing to sacrifice one's life or status or reputation for the sake of the sheep, for the sake of people and what is right.

In his 1981 novel But Your Land is Beautiful, Alan Paton tells the story of the Holy Church of Zion, a South African black church. On Maundy Thursday, the church celebrates Holy Communion, preceded by the ritual of footwashing as Jesus washed his disciples feet at the last supper. One year the pastor invited Judge Oliver to come to the church and washed the feet of Martha, the black woman who had raised and cared for the judge's children. The Judge, a white man of moral character and principles, accepted the invitation. After washing Martha's feet, the judge remembered how she had often kissed the feet of his children. So after washing her feet in the ritual, he bent over and kissed her feet. Tears filled the eyes of other worshipers in the small church.

Somehow the press learned of the event and gave it wide publicity. In light of the apartheid of South Africa, it is not surprising that shortly thereafter Judge Oliver was denied the chief judgeship that he had been promised. The pastor called on Judge Oliver to ask his forgiveness

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for involving him in an act that destroyed his professional future. The judge replied, "Taking part in your service on Maundy Thursday is to me more important than any chief judgeship." And that is why the people of the Holy Church of Zion renamed their church, "The Church of the Washing of Feet." Jesus said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."

By deliberately choosing a despicable trade like that of the shepherd, Jesus was standing with the outcasts of his culture. Jesus deliberately identified the gospel with the despised of his society. What outraged the religious people of Jesus' day was not his message of God's love, but his insistence on inclusiveness. Everyone is loved by God. No one is so low, no one is so despicable that he/she is not loved by God. No one is outside the province or the concern or the membership of the church. Shepherds, of all people, were visited by angels. Shepherds, of all people, went to the stable. Shepherds, of all people, are immortalized in the Bible itself as being privileged, chosen, selected, to help celebrate the Messiah's birth.

What the Christmas story is saying is, not only are shepherds invited to the birth, but all people: people of all colors, people of all nationalities, people of all classes, people of all occupations, people of all sexual orientations and lifestyles; all people, even shepherds, even you. May you take comfort, may you take courage tonight from the fact that shepherds went to the manger, and Jesus himself identified with shepherds. For this means that, regardless of who you are, regardless of what you have done, regardless of whatever mess you have made with your life, regardless of how guilty you feel, regardless of how little you think of yourself, regardless of how disgusted you may be with yourself, regardless of who you are, regardless of what other people think of you and say about you, regardless (even if you are a shepherd), you are invited to the party, you are invited to the manger, you are welcome at the celebration, you are welcome in the church, you are welcome to God's kingdom, you are welcome in God's family. There at the manger, may the touch of the baby, the smile of the baby, the love of God so fill you with hope, so fill you with love and affirmation, so cleanse you of whatever is inhibiting you, that you leave that manger a new person, rejoicing in the Lord, praising God as did the shepherds when they returned to the hills. Luke tells us they returned praising God for all that they had seen.

Who invited shepherds? They were most welcome at the manger. So are you.