

When you think of the shepherds in the Christmas narrative, what do you picture? If you read my Christmas letter, your image of the shepherds may have changed a bit. You may have to think back a few weeks to a time before you read that letter. At some point in the Christmas tradition, our image of the shepherds evolved so that we came to picture them as devout, gentle, perhaps even prayerful men. Of course they were surprised to see the angel that came to visit them, but we weren't terribly surprised that the angel would be sent to shepherds. If they were gentle and devout, why would the shepherds not be among the first to receive word that their Savior was born in Bethlehem.

In the first century, however, the shepherds were not viewed as gentle, or devout, or prayerful. Shepherding was among the most despised professions of that culture. It was assumed that shepherds were dishonest. It was assumed that they engaged in theft. In fact, some people believed that shepherds were incapable of taking the steps necessary to repent.

The line of thought went something like this. Repentance required a few steps. First, you had to acknowledge that you had done something wrong. Then, you had to apologize to those whom you had wronged. Finally, you had to make restitution to the people you had wronged. Only then would your repentance be acceptable to God.

One of the ways that shepherds wronged people was that, as they led their sheep out to pasture, the sheep would graze on other people's land. The flocks they were leading were stealing vegetation all along the way. How could the shepherds know whose grass they had stolen, or how much they had stolen? This made apologizing and making restitution impossible.

That view of shepherds might be at the extreme end of the spectrum, but the reality is that shepherds were despised, and even feared by almost everyone. Certainly shepherds were not the people you would expect to receive the news of the Savior's birth first. You would not expect that they would be given any priority in God's plan for saving the world.

Why is it that we turned the shepherds into gentle and devout men? We inherited that tradition, but somewhere along the line, people in the church chose to change the image of the shepherds. It probably happened gradually. Another factor may well be that most people in Europe were not familiar with shepherds in the Middle East during the first century. So, we did not have an accurate frame of reference.

There is probably another, more troubling reason that the shepherds evolved from a rough lot, who may have even been beyond any hope of repentance to the gentle souls we envision today. There is a desire to see the state of humanity as somehow better than it is. There is a tendency to think that we went slightly off track somewhere along the line, and all we really need is something or someone to set us going in the right direction again, and everything will be just fine. So we expect God to start with the most likely candidates. We expect Him to start with the most devout, the most prayerful, those most ready to see His activity in the world. If the shepherds were among the most despised professions of the first century, and if they often earned this reputation, then the fact that they were among the first to receive the announcement of the birth of the Savior says something very different about the human condition.

God's choice to start with the least likely, to start with those who were most despised, tells us that Jesus did not come simply to set us going in the right direction again. The fact that the shepherds were among the first to see the Savior born in Bethlehem tells us that, through Jesus, God's plan is to bring a radical change to humanity. The choice to select those who were the most unlikely to turn to God, shows us that our salvation does not come through our effort. It does not come through our righteousness. It does not even come through our disposition to turn

to God. Our salvation comes through God's love and mercy and His work in and among humanity.

The response of the shepherds, when the angels left them was to go to Bethlehem to see their saviors, and to tell everyone what the angel had said to them. Those who heard the shepherds' words were amazed. They were probably amazed that the savior had come to a manger in Bethlehem rather than a palace in Jerusalem. They were probably amazed that he was wrapped in cloths, like a typical peasant child, rather than being clothed in the finest of fabrics. But what was probably even more amazing was that His birth had been made known to the shepherds first. They had been chosen to be the first evangelists.

A commenter posted a note on a Christian blog that read, "I started attending church a few months ago and want to become a Christian. But I'm afraid that God won't accept me. I've done some really bad stuff, not just the usual things. My Christian friends tell me He will accept anybody but I'm not sure about me. Also, what if I can't live up to His expectations for me? I don't think I'd make a very good Christian. Do you know if he would accept me and what would happen if I do mess up?"

There were a number of follow up comments that expressed the same feelings. At one time or another, all of us have received the message that we are not good enough to be accepted by God. It may have come in the form of subtle, but disapproving looks when we did or said something that did not meet with the approval of others. It may have come in the form of being excluded from certain gatherings. It may have come in the form of an outright statement that God must be displeased with us. Whatever form the message came in, it seems that it's a universal experience to be told at one time or another, that God does not want anything to do with us, that we are like shepherds in the Middle East during the first century.

On Christmas, we celebrate the fact of the Incarnation, the fact that God loves us so much that He was unwilling to leave us to our own self-destructive and sinful nature. By the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son of God became incarnate from the virgin Mary, not because we were ready to receive Him. It was not because we were finally disposed to listen to God. It was not because of any righteous work that anyone had done. It was because of His love and mercy toward us.

We came here today to see the Savior who was born for us. We have heard him in the reading of the word and in the hymns we have sung. In a few minutes, we will see and touch him in sacrament of His body and blood. May we then, like the shepherds go and make known to everyone who will listen that the Savior has come to us. He came not because we were ready, not because we were worthy, but because He loved us, and by His mercy, we have received Him. By His mercy, the rest of the world may receive Him too.