

Love BIG

Loving Like God: Christmas Series

December 23 "Everyone's Included"

Focus: Love touches those who seem hidden and outcast

Intro Paragraph: When Jesus came to earth, he did something people didn't expect. People thought that being Godly and being successful and popular and important were synonymous. There was a societal structure in place based on this belief that made some feel good about their lives and others feel like they were outcasts and strangers to God. But Jesus came to save all of us and to tell the least, the last and the lost that they are valuable and important. God loves BIG and that means everyone.

(2058 words beginning... now.-E.)

Paperwork! Ugh. Paperwork and I do not get along very well. Piles of paper come into our home, and sometimes I don't know where to file it, or I get overwhelmed and ignore it for a bit, and then forget which pile it's in. Trouble is, though, when I get paperwork from the state or the feds. That usually has to do with my sons' benefits. Having kiddos with disabilities creates a mountain of paperwork... IEP's, Medicaid, OVR, finances. And missing that paperwork can upend our lives. We can start feeling like numbers. I've learned that it doesn't matter if we do everything we are supposed to do and get all the paperwork in on time... if the government offices lose the paperwork, we must start over.

I don't know how people without strong advocates do this every day. Some just give up in defeat, and end up homeless, and then become the object of an attitude that, because they are homeless / need assistance / etc. that they are somehow inferior to the rest of the population. And so, they must go through all sorts of red tape and follow laws that they may not know about and struggle to find someone who can guide them through the mess. Standing in that line at the county assistance office can be demoralizing. I can only imagine how it was for Mary and Joseph that time when they had to travel 80 miles on foot / donkey, Mary very pregnant, to fill out paperwork for a census.

Scripture reading: [Luke 2:1-7](#)

So first, we have [Caesar Augustus](#).

Quite a character. Augustus was, and is still recognized, as a great leader. As the first emperor of Rome, he brought the Pax Romana, or "roman peace," to the empire. Civil wars, tribal conflicts, wars between territories were vastly decreased. Aqueducts, infrastructure, all those good things were developed. Of course, there was a tradeoff for all this peace and prosperity. People were conquered, countries / territories forcefully overtaken, and any civil unrest was immediately squelched. The PAX was not for all people. Definitely not loving big.

Augustus was a propaganda genius. Brought back the good old days of ancient Roman worship, remodeled the Roman temples, encouraged families to worship. But.... He became enmeshed with religion. Since he asserted that he was the only one who could save them, he declared himself the Lord, Savior of Rome. When Halley's comet went through the sky, he claimed that it was Julius, his uncle / adopted father, entering heaven. Julius was a god. So that meant the Augustus was.... son of God!!!

Then there's the census.

God had forbidden the people to simply “count” their population. If there was a need for a census, it was at the direction of Yahweh. [As one Rabbi says](#), “Out of love for His people, G-d counted us at important junctures of our history. The completion of the Tabernacle was one of these occasions.¹ 2) To ensure that the Jews had sufficient numbers to merit the dwelling of the Divine presence upon them.² 3) To ascertain how many warriors the Jews would have in their upcoming battles to conquer Canaan.

I repeat: Censuses were only taken when God directed them. We read in 2 Samuel that King David conducted a census on his own, and the response was that God sent a plague upon them!

So, as I see it, the Jews in the Roman Empire had to go to their hometowns, register at the order of a false God (emperor) to pay a tax to that (false god), to fund the opulence of the palace and all the finery of that false god (Roman Temple?), and to support a government that was occupying them. This included Joseph and the very pregnant Mary, who had to travel 80 miles to Bethlehem, either on foot or with a donkey.

I think Jesus understands government and paperwork issues.

It’s hard to find some good news in all of this if you don’t know what’s happening. I’m sure Mary was exhausted. Joseph may have been stressed about the bottom line. And there was also the stigma that they were engaged and not married.

God works his best even in our mess.

Meanwhile, life went on all around them with others in their community who were dealing with the same thing. But little did the people called Jews or the Romans know that the people they treated like subjects was where they could find the true King. Mary and Joseph found a stable in Bethlehem, which was so crowded, and there Jesus was born.

The gospel tells us that this is good news. But who is this good news for?

Luke 2: 8-20

This is good news for all, especially for people like the shepherds!

The shepherds had to live under the same occupying government, and most likely had to go through all the same government hoops as Mary and Joseph. But their lives had changed dramatically over the past hundreds of years.

Shepherds in the Hebrew Bible are revered. Psalm 23 says the Lord is my Shepherd. King David was a shepherd. But somehow, shepherds became despised in their own community. Scholars say that when the Hebrews were taken captive to Egypt, they adopted Egyptian ways. Egyptians valued farming crops, not raising animals. Sheep and goats as nuisances who ate their crops. Those who took care of sheep and goats were therefore not valued. Besides, shepherds were dirty and smelly. They were unable to take part in synagogue and other holy days due to being unclean (dealing with sheep and all their... stuff). According to **Associate Professor of Religion James Hansen** at St. Olaf College Northfield, Minn, [They were also seen as dishonest and crafty, for they were often accused of grazing their sheep on land that was not theirs; thus the early rabbis counted them among those who were unfit to serve as witnesses or judges! On this score, it’s hard to avoid seeing the shepherds as foreshadowing the type of people to whom Jesus himself will bring “good news” -- as well as the reaction it will generate.](#) So the Hebrews adopted the thoughts of their captors, the government and “false god” pharaoh. They forgot and devalued their shepherding roots.

But the angels appeared to them. Scripture says it was a host, or an army! So, while people were paying taxes to support another god's army, the true God sends an army of angels to announce the birth of the new King of Kings (Same language used in Kings: when angel armies appeared against all odds)! And the message was PEACE, not war, like most armies would announce.

At first, the shepherds were afraid. I don't blame them. But they were reassured. This was "Good news of great joy! The savior was born unto YOU."

Jesus breaks through our fear.

The rulers were even more afraid. Herod was frightened of losing his power. Caesar would be very protective of his reign. The good news was scary for many. The religious leaders of the time were afraid of Jesus and later would order his crucifixion.

One of my favorite theologians, NT Wright, preached a sermon about the Shepherds back in 2007. He talked about the shepherds in England, where he lives. It seems that there was an outbreak of foot and mouth in September 2007, caused by a "careless leak from a government laboratory." The shepherds then faced dark nights and despair, made no money that year due to this disease that ravaged their sheep, and were most likely not going to make any in 2008. These fiercely independent shepherds and farmers were not totally reliant on handouts and charity. And not only that, but small businesses were going up for sale because when lambs weren't sold, no one shopped. The government at the time did "next to nothing," according to Wright. Sure, there was pressure at first, but then the shepherds' plight quickly became "last month's news" and were forgotten. Like the Shepherds in Bethlehem, they were forgotten by their government and forgotten by their own.

What would the angels' song mean to these shepherds? Or to the shepherds on that hill outside Bethlehem? What kind of good news would that be?

To YOU this day is born the savior, the one who is messiah and lord. The government will rest on HIS shoulders. The Prince of Peace.

The Bethlehem shepherds were near the bottom of the social and financial pile. They had absolutely nothing to gain, and certainly nothing to lose. They were empty vessels, waiting to be filled to overflowing with God's joy. When they heard that there was a new King born who would rescue Israel from her misery and establish justice, they rejoiced. They rushed to find the new baby. They were proof that God's message is for everyone, from the highest to the lowest, from the faithful churchgoer to the seeker to the skeptic. God's word is for everyone. With God, everyone makes the cut. <https://revkory.wordpress.com/2009/12/27/a-fresh-look-at-christmas-through-the-eyes-of-the-shepherds/>

Glory to God in the highest, and peace upon whom God's favor rests. God's favor rests on you, Shepherds. Maybe you feel like the shepherds right now. Maybe you are feeling forgotten and stuck in some mess that you can't control. This good news is for all, and especially for you today. Maybe you have a message for the rest of us like the shepherds had for Bethlehem. If God had gone to Caesar or Herod or anyone else in power, they would have tried to turn this miraculous event to their advantage. "How can we use this to increase our prestige? Can we make money off this announcement?" People in power are always looking for ways to increase that power. This was good news for the world in which emperors and kings thought they ran the show but in fact God runs it.

For those of us who have been redeemed, know this love, accept this good news... What if we learned to sing this song now? If we were to take this scripture seriously, what would we do differently?

Graphic: The forgotten need to know that God is for them.

God chooses to reach others through us.

Who are the forgotten that desperately need to know that God is for them, even when it seems everyone and everything is against them? Because, interestingly, God chooses to reach others through.... Us. As Wright says, "This new baby grew up not to be a dictator who kills off all his enemies, but one who talked about the reign of God coming like seeds growing secretly, like a shepherd looking for a lost sheep, like the vineyard owner renting a vineyard to tenant farmers and coming back later to collect the fruit." We are those tenant farmers. We are the secret seeds growing to tell that there is hope, there is good news of great joy. Who will we love big? And how will we love big/make sure they know that God loves them BIG?

Jesus is Lord of all or not Lord at all, says N.T. Wright. Amen? And if this is true, that Jesus is our Messiah and Lord, then that "must translate into something far more solid and life-changing and community-rescuing than simply a warm nostalgic inner glow, much though we all rightly enjoy that too." Jesus is not simply Lord in a distant heaven and in our hearts, leaving the public world untouched. The angels meant what they sang. And the way to that meaning is "through Jesus' followers picking up the threads of his own public career and living as kingdom-people under his direction, bringing his saving rule to bear in acts of love and mercy, working for justice and truth whether it's for... shepherds who are relying on assistance, asylum seekers desperate for help, or the planet as human greed and carelessness make [Earth] a place of danger and pollution instead of joy and beauty."

Love Big. This message is part of the reason why we did Serve Weekend. ...

In the next couple of days you will have some serious opportunities to share with those who might be forgotten. Some may be in your own families. You may encounter people in your travels that seem forgotten or like outsiders.... (wrap up)