

WHAT ARE YOU SEEKING

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Advent 4

(Luke 2:8-15 NRSV) In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. {9} Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. {10} But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: {11} to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. {12} This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." {13} And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, {14} "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" {15} When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

This morning we conclude our Advent series on the places of the Nativity. This week we look not so much at a place, but at those who come to greet the newborn babe.

In the latest issue of National Geographic is a powerful article about Bethlehem. For these next few days, our eyes are all pointed toward Bethlehem as we celebrate, one again the birth of Jesus. Let this little town, probably no more than a thousand people at the time of Jesus birth — this town of close to 35,000 today is one of the most contentious places on earth.

A hundred years ago, 90% of Bethlehem was Christian, today that figure is down to less than 1/3 and it is shrinking fast. The Christians today in Bethlehem are being pushed out by both the Jewish and Muslim sides. Many are choosing to leave their ancestral homes and flee to the United States or Europe.

But at the time of Jesus birth, Bethlehem was a small Jewish city — known as the birthplace of David — the greatest King in the history of Judaism. We are told in the biblical story that 2 groups of people come to Bethlehem to seek out this king that has been born.

Matthew tells us:

(Matthew 2:1-2 NRSV) In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, {2} asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

Luke tells us about another group who come to see the baby.

(Luke 2:8-12 NRSV) In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. {9} Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. {10} But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: {11} to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. {12} This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

I want to spend a few moments this morning looking at both of these persons who come and let us ponder the question: WHY? Why does Matthew tell us that Wise Men come, and why does Luke tell us that Shepherds come to seek out this new born "king".

Let's start with the Wise Guys. Matthew tells us that *magos* in the Greek come and seek out the child. The word *magos* literally means magicians, or sorcerers, but we know from the context of the day that they were what we might call today scientists or astrologers.

What we do know is that they were learned men. How many? We have no idea because Matthew doesn't tell us. But he does tell us some interesting things about them. Most importantly he tells us about the gifts that they brought. Three gifts to be exact — and we all know the three gifts that they brought —

Gold
Frankincense
Myrrh

But just what are those gifts.

chrusos — means a golden article or maybe a coin
A symbol of wealth and importance

libanos — refers to a white colored incense
It was used in the Hebrew Bible in Temple worship

smurna — myrrh
This may be the most interesting of the gifts, for myrrh was used in the embalming process. It was actually used in

embalming until the 15th century. If you receive the sacrament of extreme unction, the oil which the priest uses is traditionally scented with myrrh.

Three rather unusual gifts.

One reminding us that Jesus is important and true source of wealth in the world.

Another reminding us that Jesus is God's temple — God's presence on earth

And the last reminding us what is going to happen to Jesus. At the very beginning we are told of his coming death.

We hear of Myrrh once again in the Gospels — in Mark 15:22
(Mark 15:22-23 NRSV) Then they brought Jesus to the place called Golgotha (which means the place of a skull). {23} And they offered him wine mixed with myrrh; but he did not take it.

In other words — from the very beginning — Matthew in his telling of the birth of Jesus is laying out for us quite clearly who Jesus is.

But what about Luke? He mentions nothing about Wise Guys, instead he tells us about shepherds.

This is the one story that Currier and Ives, Bing Crosby and others have made it hard for us to really understand. For they have painted beautiful pastoral scenes of shepherds out in the field. We all picture a beautiful and clean little boy dressed in sparkling robes (or dad's bathrobe) carrying a little lamb across their shoulder. And a nice and clean lamb at that!

Unfortunately, being a shepherd was a brutally difficult task. It was long and arduous hours, constant vigilance to make sure none of the animals wandered off — and of course, the biggest threat, that something or someone might come and steal your animals. It was a job that NOBODY wanted. The closest job that I can imagine in 21st Century USA is that of a garbage collector — but the biggest difference being nobody is coming and trying to steal your garbage, nor is it trying to wander off.

So why? Why does Luke tell us that an angel appears to a bunch of dirty shepherds and announces the "good news?"

They don't bring any gifts to the baby — they don't bring anything to the baby — so that doesn't help us any.

We need to know a few things about Luke's Gospel before we can answer this question. First, remember who Luke is writing to. He is not writing to a Jewish audience (like Matthew was), instead Luke is writing to a Gentile audience. Second, one of the major themes of Luke's gospel is that Jesus has come for the marginalized. Both those factors play into why Luke tells us the birth story the way he does.

The Shepherd's are the first to hear the good news because traditionally they are on the outside of society (much like the gentiles were in the early years of Christianity).

Luke is telling us that Jesus comes not just for the chosen people — Jesus comes for everyone — including the scum of the earth (shepherds). Actually, Luke is suggesting that Jesus has a special place in his heart for those who are marginalized by society.

So where does this leave us?

Maybe there is one more thing to mention. The WiseMen and the Shepherds knew where to go because everyone knew at the time that Jesus was born where the Messiah would be born.

Everyone knew that Bethlehem — that now contentious city — had to be the birth place of the Davidic Messiah. It was David's hometown, and God had promised that a Davidic Messiah would reign over a unified nation.

Luke and Matthew both make it clear that Jesus was born in Bethlehem to tell us just WHO this Jesus was.

HE IS THE DAVIDIC MESSIAH
HE IS THE ONE WHO IS TO COME!

Tuesday is Christmas morning. Tomorrow you will be back here at Ridge helping us celebrate Jesus birth at one of our three services.

But what are you going to come seeking?

Why will you come?

For what God can do for you?

Or for what you can do for this baby?

The WiseMen brought gifts

The Shepherd's spread the news

What are you going to do?