

Came to see whom?

Titus 2:11-14 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, ¹² training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, ¹³ while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. ¹⁴ He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Tit 2:11 NRS)

Luke 2:8-20 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." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Came to see whom?

Why are you here this evening? There are all kinds of reasons for coming to a Christmas Eve service. Some come out of habit, or because it's like hitting the pause button in the midst of a frantic time of decorating, shopping, cooking, and spending time with family. All those things can be both pleasurable and burdensome, as we all know. Some people go to Christmas Eve services out of a sense of obligation, feeling that it's something they ought to do for their children – or their parents. Years ago, when I first began attending Christmas Eve worship, I had very mixed reasons. A piece of me wanted to hear the music and remember earlier pleasant days. I had a very faint hope that I might feel some small glimmer of inner peace, a bit of healing for some of my emotional wounds, a tiny speck of momentary contentment. But, there was the nagging feeling that I was out of place. I didn't belong. I certainly wasn't good enough to deserve to be among the worshippers on Christmas Eve. We may comb our hair and dress up for this service, but the truth is, our baggage, whatever it may be, comes right with us.

We have, it seems to me, done terrible things to Christmas. I don't mean the culture of consumerism and debt and inebriated excess that are the usual rants of many this time of year. I'm thinking of what the church has done to Christmas. We meant well, but we've reduced it from a hearty meal -- to fast food -- and we are all the poorer for it. It's become a little sweet treat of a story that leaves us with little strength to face the trials and pains of our lives. Because we know how the story of Jesus ends, in glory and power, we overlook much of the grit and struggle of his arrival.

Who did Jesus come to see? If we stop and think about it, we would never have done it that way. Jesus arrived in a peasant family from a tiny village of probably 200-400 people. That's not a very impressive beginning. His father, Joseph, was a poor laborer, his mother, a teenage girl, pregnant before her wedding. These were not circumstances that earned a family any respect. And it hardly seems like an auspicious beginning that will draw multitudes to worship the creator of the universe. Joseph and Mary weren't well known, highly respected, or successful by any common standard, but amazingly, God chose them. They were unworthy, but they were where divinity came to live.

Our Christmas cards portray picturesque and peaceful nativity scenes. Our carols are about how "the cattle are lowing" and the "little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay." And we overlook the pain of childbirth, the messiness and screams, the danger of the whole process in ancient times. Stables are not the best delivery

rooms. There are gentle cows with big brown eyes, but there are things that scurry, slither, and buzz about. And a stable, to be kind, smells like a stable. God arrives, not in a palace or a temple, but in the earthy messiness of life.

We picture crystal clear night skies with winged angels singing celestial music of ethereal beauty to shepherds below. We concentrate on the angels -- and almost ignore who they seek out for this announcement. Forget the angels for a moment. Who did they come to see? Shepherds. Shepherding isn't and wasn't as romantic a life as we might like to imagine. Like long haul truck driving with a broken CB radio, it tended to be a lonely life with long hours. Like being a garbage collector, it wasn't a job you sought out, but work you accepted because of necessity. Shepherds were just barely above being an outcast. No young woman would dash home to squeal with delight because a young shepherd had winked at her. But the announcement of this birth was made in grand fashion to the bottom of the social heap.

But then the kings arrived bringing expensive gifts. The carols and Christmas cards have not only told just a small part of the story, but they've misdirected us a bit, too. They weren't kings, at least in the sense that we usually use the word. They were magi -- court astrologers, soothsayers -- the sort of diviners that good Jews knew that they were to ignore and avoid. Jews were to believe and trust in God, not hocus-pocus and crystal ball readers. But they certainly brought worrisome news to King Herod. A new King of the Jews had been born -- and he wasn't being rocked in any cradle there in the palace. Herod killed wives and children who were threats to his throne and his paranoia certainly extended beyond his own family. But we overlook the point. These magi were foreigners. They weren't part of the chosen people. On top of that, they were in an unapproved occupation. They were pagans, making their living with deceit, superstition, and sleight of hand.

What an unlikely cast of characters! None of them are described as deeply devout. They aren't praised as paragons of virtue. We're told that Joseph was compassionate, but nothing is said about him being devoted to fervent prayer, or being especially meticulous about the food laws, or spending long hours memorizing scripture. We're told that Mary was obedient and accepting of her lot, but not that she was strikingly worthy of this honor because of her goodness and purity. Virginitly is a universal trait among females for several years, not a unnatural phenomenon. We aren't told about how the shepherds were men of sterling character or intense piety. And the magi were foreigners, unclean, pariahs, people to be avoided because they were corrupt and pagan. All of these people are unworthy at the least, unsuitable for a divine event, inappropriate by just about any standard. And Emmanuel came to them. Emmanuel. It means "God with us." And this story is about how God is with the hurt, the pain, the messiness, the undeserving, the outsider, the poor in mind, the poor in spirit, the poor in money, the poor in behavior, the poor in station in life. These are those that Jesus came to. These are the ones who got the special announcement and the invitation.

So, no matter why you are here tonight, you are in the right place. You don't have to be worthy in any sense of the word. God has made the initial move. Jesus has come to us despite who -- or what -- we may be, indeed because of our imperfections and our needs. The act of being God with us, the initiative on the part of God to be with those who didn't ask for him and didn't deserve a visit -- is an act of pure love and mercy. God isn't out to get you, but to love you. The reading tonight from the letter to Titus says, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." All. Huge meaning for such a small word. All. No matter who or what you are, no matter whether you are weak or powerful, rich or poor, male or female, good or bad, you can't escape the fact that God loves each of us and Emmanuel came, was with us, is with us, and will be with us.

"Even in the midst of the unexpected, God shows up. Sickness, death, divorce, unemployment. Life gets messy, but in the midst of your mess, God shows up! No matter what you are struggling to overcome, no matter what life issues have come your way, God promises to show up. Christmas is God's vivid reminder that amid the uncertainty, God shows up to bring you peace, purpose, joy, hope, and wholeness."¹ Your worthiness has nothing to do with God's love for you. But your response has everything to do with your love for God. Have a very blessed Christmas!

¹ Mike Slaughter, *Christmas is Not Your Birthday* (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 2011) location 332-335, Kindle edition