



**The Great Reversal + Luke 2:1-20**  
**Christmas Eve 2023**  
**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

You know that in pew Bibles, the editors create headings to organize the text. In mine, that familiar part of the Gospel we just heard which begins, "Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields..." has been given the heading, "The Shepherds and the Angels."

But if you think about it, the angels not really players in this story – they're only messengers. It's the shepherds who grab the headlines. If I was the copy editor on the night desk of The Good News Gazette, I would write a headline like this: "LOWLY SHEPHERDS SEIZE THE DAY!"

Why is this headline-worthy? Because the shepherds did what the rich and famous in Bethlehem almost certainly would not have done if given the chance: They really did seize the day, or rather, the night.

Let's just think for a minute just how 'lowly' shepherds really were.

At that time in Jewish society they occupied the lowest rung of the totem pole, along with tax collectors and dung sweepers. They were outcasts at the farthest fringe of society -- dirty, scruffy, and smelly. So despised were they that their testimony was not even admissible in court.

Centuries before, shepherding had been an honorable profession—think of Abraham and all his flocks. But after the twelve tribes of Israel migrated to Egypt (remember the story of Joseph?) the attitude toward shepherds changed. Egyptians' fortunes rested on crops, sheep and goats had the habit of doing what? Ravaging the crops, mowing them right down, whenever they could. The stereotype was therefore promoted of shepherds as dirty, lowly outsiders to drive them away, an attitude that followed them back to their homeland. (See – stereotyping is a dangerous thing, anytime, anywhere.)

So why are tonight's shepherds grabbing headlines? Because they asked no questions. They took things at face value and ran with them, literally.

Just think how most of us might have responded if we'd been in the same position.

- The angels appear in the sky: "What is this? A special effect? Who's behind it? We're not falling for some cheap lighting trick."
- The angels bring the news: "What do you mean, a Savior? What do we need to be saved from? We're perfectly content with our mansions and pots of gold. If anyone needs saving, it's you, for bothering us."

- The sign is a child wrapped in bands of cloth: “I can’t imagine how you think such a common thing can be a sign. There are babies all over wrapped in bands of cloth. A sign is something spectacular, mind-blowing, like fireworks. Get lost!”
- And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude praising God: “Yeah, yeah, more special effects, and now you’re bringing in a soundtrack. I’m not falling for it!”

But the shepherds did not react in any of these ways, did they? Instead they took it all in, and believed. That leads to one of my favorite lines in all scripture: “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.”

They do, and then they go one better: They run into town to tell others what they had heard with their own ears and seen with their own eyes. Shepherds – the cultural equivalent at that time of dung sweepers – become the first evangelists.

And here’s another amazing thing: People believed them! “And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told to them by the shepherds.”

All this is an expression of the great reversal that motivates the Kingdom of God. I’m sure you can think of many examples:

- The long-awaited Messiah is not a soldier on horseback but a helpless baby.
- He is born not in a well-appointed inn (the innkeeper missed his chance to make history, didn’t he?) but in an open-air stall with animals.
- In Jesus’ first foray into ministry, the people of his hometown not only reject him but try to kill him.
- His disciples are gathered not by a long application process or extensive vetting, but simply because they were willing to drop everything on the spur of the moment.
- His following grows exponentially even though he continually chastises and insults and the power elite;
- Jesus embraces society’s outsiders at the center of his ministry and mission;
- He declares those to be blessed who are poor, hungry, weeping and excluded;
- He is condemned and dies in the manner of the worst criminal although even the local official said he could find no fault with him;
- By this death he enters, alive, into the entire range of humanity’s suffering with hoe that leads us into the same new life.

The story of the shepherds, just like the women at the tomb at the other end of Jesus’ life, is one that never could have been invented. Yet it is our story and one for the ages.

Welcome it, embrace it, and then go and tell what has been made known to YOU.