

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta
“The Most Amazing Gift of All” (Luke 2:8-20)
Christmas 2020
Dave Johnson

In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

So glad to worship with you this Christmas!

My favorite television show ever is the NBC comedy hit *The Office*, which aired from 2005 to 2013, a show about making a documentary of the ordinary daily lives of employees at the Scranton, Pennsylvania branch of the Dunder Mifflin paper company, and all the changes in their lives—the sublime moments and absurd moments, the joys of those given promotions and the disillusionment of those passed over for those promotions, the heartwarming moments of falling in love and the heartbreaking moments of relationships falling apart, the friendships and the pranks, one another’s attributes and idiosyncrasies—all the aspects of their lives.

The reason this show resonated with millions of people is not only because it is hilariously funny but also because it is so relatable. Each screwball character will make you think, “I know someone just like that” or perhaps “Oh no...I’m just like that.” And yet in the big picture things worked out for every character in the show, so that as Andy Bernard said in the series finale, “I wish there was a way to know you’re in the good old days before you’ve actually left them.” A little later Jim Halpert thanks the makers of this documentary, “Imagine going back and watching a tape of your life. You could see yourself change and make mistakes and grow up. You could watch yourself fall in love, watch yourself become a husband, become a father. You guys gave that to me, and that’s an amazing gift.”

If you could watch a tape of your life, like Jim you would see all the changes. Perhaps some of you would fast forward parts of that tape, especially in 2020, and yet neither anything that has happened in 2020 nor anything that will happen in 2021 or any other time will change what we celebrate today, or rather Whom we celebrate today—an amazing gift, the most amazing gift ever from God to the world—the most amazing gift ever from God to *you*—Jesus Christ. Jesus himself put it this way, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16).

One of the aspects of Luke's account of Jesus' birth that always moves me is whom God chose as the first ones to hear the news of this amazing gift of Jesus Christ. God chose shepherds. We tend to romanticize shepherds, but in biblical times shepherds were looked down on, or overlooked altogether, because they literally lived outside in the wilderness with sheep. Yes, some days were sunny and idyllic with plenty of grass and water and all the sheep present, happy, and healthy. But most days shepherds had sheep that were wounded or sick or under attack from predators or lost. Shepherds had to lead hungry, thirsty sheep through the wilderness to find grass and water, no matter the weather—blisteringly rainy or oppressively hot or bitterly cold. But although the world looked down on shepherds, or overlooked them altogether, God did not, as Luke tells us:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2:8-14).

God chose lowly shepherds to be the first ones to hear of the birth of the Savior of the world, the "good news of great joy for all the people"—including you. And how did the shepherds respond? Luke continues:

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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all those heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:15-20).

God chose lowly shepherds to be the first ones to hear the angels sing, the first ones to hear the “good news of great joy for all the people”, the first ones to hear God’s proclamation of peace “among those whom he favors”, which also includes you. God’s love knows no bounds and is so overwhelmingly generous that it led to giving his Son, Jesus Christ the most amazing gift ever, to the world and to you.

You see, God has always had a special place in his heart for those who, like the shepherds on Christmas night, are looked down on or overlooked altogether. And God has always had a special place in his heart for those who like the sheep in the care of the shepherds are hungry or thirsty or wounded or sick or under attack from predators or lost—so much so, in fact, that scripture tells us that when Jesus “saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

If there was ever year in which people have felt “harassed and helpless” it has been 2020. I do not need to reiterate the challenges of 2020, you are already fully aware, and perhaps some of you have felt especially “harassed and helpless” this year. If you, like Jim Halpert, were to watch a tape of your life in 2020, I suspect you would see plenty of evidence of that. And yet God’s love for the world and God’s love for you have never wavered, and never will. The gospel remains “good news of great joy for all the people.”

To the hungry Jesus gives the Bread of Life, to the thirsty Jesus offers living water, to the wounded or sick Jesus offers healing, to those under attack Jesus offers comfort—and to those who are lost Jesus refuses to give up until they are found and brought back to safety, to sinners Jesus offers forgiveness, and to the dying Jesus offers assurance of eternal life because he is the Resurrection and the Life.

And as Jesus drew near his passion and death he proclaimed, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). And on Good Friday Jesus the Good Shepherd was so moved for a world “harassed and helpless” that he did just that in his death on the cross. In doing so Jesus the Good Shepherd became a sheep himself, or to be more specific, became “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). As I once heard many years ago as a child, on the cross Jesus stretched out his arms to the world, and proclaimed “I love you this much”—and then died in your place.

This means even 2020 can one day be looked back on as “the good old days” because in the same way in that in the big picture things worked out for each and every screwball character in the television show *The Office*, in the big picture God’s love in Jesus Christ will work out everything for you.

So on Christmas we celebrate the good news of the gospel—that to a world full of people like the shepherds—looked down on or overlooked altogether—a world full of people “harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd” God gave the Most Amazing Gift of All, Jesus Christ to be the Savior and Redeemer of the world, including you.

Merry Christmas!

Amen.