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**Title:** The Gift of Yes: Shepherds

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**Scripture:** [Isaiah 61:1-4](#)

**Text:** [Luke 2:8-20](#)

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There's an old story about the church in a small community that had held a Christmas pageant for 47 years with the same director. For years the church's pageant ran like clockwork. Mrs. Williams was a perfectionist and perfection was her goal, nothing less. Perfect lines, perfect pacing, perfect everything. The problem was the

director's commitment to perfection was greater than her commitment to children. Her reasoning was: "When there are too many youngsters, there is no control."

However, the church had been growing. Younger and younger families were joining which meant more and more children. More and more children meant more and more children who weren't in the Christmas Pageant. The Committee on Education (which included three mothers of last year's rejected Marys, Josephs, Wise Men) made a policy change: "All children who wish to be in the Christmas pageant may do so. Parts will be found for them." Well, that was more than the long-time director could handle. She resigned in anger and disgust.

Although the old director and some of the members felt the pageant would fall flat on its face, it didn't. However, it WAS different. There were at least two dozen shepherds twice that many sheep. And these boys and girls who were sheep studied their parts well, because on the night of the production, just like real sheep, they wandered all over the church.

When Mary and Joseph entered. Mary was clutching a doll wrapped in a blue blanket. Joseph walked solemnly beside her. The narrator was supposed to read the biblical story about Joseph going to Bethlehem "...to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child." One of the young mothers realized the children could not understand the English of the King James Version about Mary being great with child. So even though they had practiced the play with King James, at the last minute she switched to the Good News translation.

So, as Mary and Joseph entered, the narrator read, "Joseph went to register with Mary, who was promised in marriage to him. She was pregnant." As that last word echoed through the sound system, little Joseph froze in his tracks. He gave Mary an incredulous look, then looked out at the congregation. "Pregnant? What do you mean, pregnant?" he asked. Of course, the whole place cracked up. The pastor's wife, wiping tears from her eyes, said, "You know, that may well be what Joseph said." The former director, sitting on the front pew as if she was still in charge, had a smug look which said "I-told-you-so."

But then a couple of magical things took place. First, the flock of sheep bleating all over the sanctuary, made their way down a side aisle and sat in front pews to watch the conclusion of the pageant and who were they sitting with? The former director surrounded by the very children whom she had excluded the previous year!

Then the stage was overrun by shepherds like it was some sort of union convention. You could barely see the Holy Family. It was like the shepherds were the most important people.

Finally, as the pageant came to the end with the Singing of Silent Night, snow began to fall and the entire congregation could see it for like us, they had a big window as the backdrop for the play. When Silent Night was finally finished, a hush fell over the entire church. Just for a moment, no one moved, not even the sheep. Then, one of the elderly women, who was hard of hearing and always spoke too loud, broke the spell when she "whispered" to her husband in a voice all could hear, "Perfect! Just perfect!"

And it was. It wasn't perfect in production. But it was perfect in the way God makes things perfect, perfect the way God accepts our fumbling attempts at love and fairness and then covers them with grace. It was a night of confusion and that night WAS a night of confusion. No one knew what the script was supposed to be. The night of Christ's birth was filled with the unexpected, like shepherds being the first to know of Jesus' birth. It's an interesting selection, don't you think?

But all of the characters who were asked to offer the gift of yes at Christmas and have been interesting. A young virgin from a no-where town in Galilee and her betrothed from the same place is interesting. An old priest who'd given up on being a father is interesting. Now shepherds, fourth in the line of interesting selections.

Why shepherds? It doesn't make sense. Shepherds were some of the poorest of the poor and yet very important to the economy of first-century Palestine. The wool and meat from the sheep were essential. And yet like so many of the people involved in essential services today, they were looked down upon. They were like the trashmen or sanitation workers, thought poorly because of their profession. People didn't know them because they worked "in the fields." Anytime you don't know someone, you can become suspicious. So, they were social misfits, considered untrustworthy, maybe even thieves

Worst of all, they religious outcasts because they were unclean. It was just a blanket statement about all shepherds, no matter how faithful or how deeply committed to serving God they were. They were unclean by the virtue of the job they performed. Touching any kind of dung, even just stepping in it accidentally, made you unclean. And shepherds couldn't help but step in it now and then. Even if they didn't, the sheep they herded had and touching them, which shepherds had to do, made them unclean. So, shepherds were outcasts, just a rung or two up from lepers. <sup>ii</sup> And to this unpopular group of people, God announces the birth of Jesus. Why?

Why else than this. From the moment of Jesus' birth, God proclaimed the Good News of salvation for all people, no matter what place or station in life. God chose the last and least in society, the shepherds, to be the first to know. Jesus, in his first sermon, would proclaim as much saying, "The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Isaiah 61:1-2a).

Of all people, the shepherds were ready to hear some good news. They weren't just outcasts in their society, they weren't just spiritually cut off, they lived under the oppression of Herod who as suspicious and afraid that someone might come and take away his power. They were ready to yes to the good news because they were oppressed, they were brokenhearted, held captive by an unfair culture and society.

So, "an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." (Luke 2:9). Who wouldn't be when in the middle of the night, suddenly an angel is standing right in front of you? But the feeling was familiar because they lived terrified. It was a way of life.

But if we've learned anything in our study of the gift of yes, we've learned that God's angels are ready with comfort and just like those who've already

said to startling angelic news, the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid..." (Luke 2:10a).

I'll admit something to you, knowing that when I do, you might think badly of me as your pastor. I have never seen an angel. Oh, I've seen them on Christmas cards and in the movies and of course, in Christmas pageants. But I've never seen one face to face. If I ever do, if one just shows up and stands before me and says, "do not be afraid" it won't make any difference. I'm going to be afraid. And they too were probably afraid but it probably wouldn't have made a bit of difference to them except the angel added. "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." (Luke 2:11).

If I were there, if I'd been among those shepherds, I would have said, "wait a minute, say that again", because that little statement is loaded. Good news for all people? Born where? In the city of David. David. David was one of us, a shepherd. In fact, we all would be shepherds, David, Moses, Jacob, Abraham, all the way back to the beginning.<sup>iii</sup> And, we are taught when we get cleaned up and can go to worship, that the Lord is our Shepherd. They knew...in fact, it might have been the only thing that gave them any esteem, that God would raise up one like David, like them, a shepherd to be a Savior, to redeem and rescue their people. The Messiah, the anointed one, the Savior would be a shepherd.

So, if I'd been there, I would have wanted to hear it again. And I might have had a brother there, because I think one of them said, "Wait a minute. Are you sure?" And it might have been the very moment the angel snapped his fingers to get reinforcements and they came, an army of angels, the heavenly host, singing, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (Luke 2:14). And who is he favoring at the moment? Shepherds.

It's no wonder that once the angels left, they said, "Well, let's go see." And off they went. We don't know how many went. Maybe just a few, like the number in your nativity sets. Or maybe there were two dozen, like in the perfect play. However many shepherds there were, when they found Mary and Joseph and the babe, not in house or palace, but in a manger that screamed poverty, shouted their level of living, those shepherds said "Yes!" He's one of us and indeed he was for the child wrapped in swaddling clothes would grow up to be a shepherd and say what every shepherd knew and said. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays his life down for the sheep... I know my own and my own know me . . . I lay my life down for the sheep." (John 10)

Yes, they said, "Yes, just perfect!" A shepherd born for people like us! This perhaps explains why we are told "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (Luke 2:12). As they do, they are the first to offer the gift of yes after the birth of Jesus.

It perfect, just perfect because the shepherds remind us that God sent Jesus for all people, even people like them because he was like them. That is incredibly Good News and it caused them great joy. And it ought to cause the same in you for God sent Jesus for all people, even people like you, and you and me. Why? Because he is like us, one of us. Born of woman, flesh, and blood. with heart and soul, hopes and fears, fully human like us, that we might know the good news of great joy of a Savior, a Messiah, our Lord.

It's perfect, just perfect. Or it least it can be. But it requires a bit of work. You must get yourself into the pageant, find your way to Bethlehem. The show runs in two days. There's a role for you to play; it even comes with a line. Just one word though. Say it with me, won't you? Yes. "Perfect, just perfect!"

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<sup>i</sup> Strayhorn, Billy D. Is There Room for Shepherds? Retrieved by subscription at sermons.com

<sup>ii</sup> Strayhorn.

<sup>iii</sup> Grun, Anselm. Jesus: The Image of Humanity. Continuum, 2003. Pg. 26.