



WHEN GOD SHOWS UP

By Sue Palmer Lander

Now in that same 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 Saviour, 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,[b] praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"[c]

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 who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, and 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, just as it had been told them. Luke 2: 8-20

How many times have you heard this scripture, read it, or watched it played out in a play or on a screen? You quite possibly skipped reading the above passage just now because you are so familiar with it. The problem of familiarity of course is a loss of sensitivity to the powerful themes contained in the Christmas story. How can the message move us when we've heard it a hundred times before? Is it possible to enter another Christmas season with a sense of wonder and excitement?

Wouldn't it be so much easier to get excited if we had an angelic host of angels appear in our night sky? Of course, the shepherds got excited, how could they not? We don't know what became of them after this wondrous event. Were their lives transformed forever? All we know is that they were the first recipients of the Good News of Christ's birth and that they made haste to find the new-born Prince of Peace where the angels had told them.

What I love the most about this part of the Christmas story is that God showed up in such an amazing way to this lowly group of social outcasts. At the time of Christ's birth, shepherds were treated as social outsiders. In first century Jewish society shepherds really were the bottom rung of the ladder, alongside tax collectors and, well, dung sweepers. Being a

shepherd was a menial job and thus they were not highly thought of. Because they spent so much time out in the fields with smelly sheep, shepherds were considered unclean. Thus, they were excluded from entering the temple. This meant they were excluded from God's presence, because God's presence was in the temple. The Jewish law separated them totally from God and from God's people.

Don't you feel satisfaction in knowing that out of all the people in those days, the temple leaders, the Sadducees, the well to do, God chose the shepherds to be the first to receive the good news of the birth of Jesus? Isn't this the wondrous message of love that we long for? That this God of Love shows up to the poor, the shunned, the ones that nobody else wants. Here they are, sitting on the hill, totally unexpectant of what was about to unfold. God surprises them with the Good News in a dramatic and life changing experience.

God chose the outcasts to be first to see the Prince of Peace. And during Jesus' life we see time and time again that he chose to hang out with the misfits, the poor, the sick and the unclean. From Zacchaeus to the woman at the well, to the lepers, the Samaritans, and even his own chosen disciples, we see Jesus pushing aside cultural prejudices and divides and offering himself inclusively to all people. Even in his last moments of life, Jesus forgives the thief on the cross.

Perhaps the true Christmas message is about making sure we never ever exclude or deny ANYONE from God's great, unending love. And the other message, I think, is to be expectant. God can show up in the ordinariness of life in unexpected ways. Let's live expectantly, awaiting the arrival of God's Good news for 2023!

My prayer is that as another Christmas fast approaches, you will sense the blessing of God's Spirit upon you, prompting you, exciting you, and refreshing you. May you find time to ponder in your heart the wonder of God's amazing love. May you find time to press pause and seek connection with God's Spirit of love, joy, hope and peace. And may you encounter God showing up in unexpected, bountiful ways on your path ahead.

Mostly I pray for God to help us build communities of excited, expectant, love filled people all around our country as we prioritize anew the mission of Jesus Christ in 2023.