

Christmas Eve

Shepherds and Angels, Orchids and Dandelions

There's something charmingly childlike about what we are doing here tonight, all of us dressed up in our Christmas best and at church, singing with a room full of strangers at a time of night when we'd usually be snuggling down into the warmth of our own homes. In this day and age, it's sort of stubbornly counter-cultural to gather in a place with very small screens, to hear a story you've heard a hundred times before, accompanied by music we make ourselves, with no other visual or sound effects.

It's an old story we tell at Christmas. A baby born in an out-of-the-way stable. His family was part of the overflow crowd in a busy city that night. They camped out in one of those free, anonymous spaces you can use when there's no motel or Air BnB available in town—like a night you might spend in an airport terminal after the last flight has been cancelled, or a bus terminal after the library and every coffee shop in town has closed. There was no registration where their name and credit card number were recorded. No trail for people to follow. And still, there were witnesses, people who gathered around that night to see.

Those witnesses are part of the story. I bring them to your attention tonight not because it's a detail of historical fact you must know for accuracy, but because in the Gospel stories there are no wasted words or images. If there's a detail included in there, it's because it has significance to the story. It adds something.

So who were the witnesses to this birth? Animals, you might say first; but actually there are no animals mentioned in the stories that Matthew and Luke tell. Sheep and camels and donkeys are flourishes that later storytellers have added. No animals. No wise men either. If you read the story carefully, you can see that wise men from the East didn't show up until a couple of years after Jesus was born. So they too were not there at the manger that night.

But there were witnesses who were there. They were stopped in their tracks that night. They came in two categories: shepherds and angels. Two types of beings who were meant to suggest to us polar opposites, the highest and lowest forms of humanity. Angels: God's messengers, half human and half divine. Angels are like a bridge between life on earth—where houses have to be cleaned and the garbage taken out—and heaven, where everything has soft, rounded edges. In every story where an angel appears, someone is being lifted up out of ordinary life into some holy vision. Angels are carriers of the divine.

Shepherds, on the other hand, were on the bottom rung of society. Their work was in the dirt. They slept on the ground, outside the city, with animals. They didn't get weekends off—so they didn't go to church or do any of the rituals that would connect them with religion or holiness. The only people who would take a shepherding job were people who had ambitions, or no options.

The angels in this story knew something earth-shattering was happening that night. They sang. They said “Don’t be afraid, but tonight the earth is tipping on its axis. The line between heaven and earth on this night is very, very thin.” And it was shepherds, way far away from where news usually got circulated first, who heard those angels. And then they went to see for themselves.

Angels and shepherds. The holiest among us and the grimmest.

I heard just recently about two other categories that people can be placed into. Maybe you’ve heard this distinction before; I had not. Orchids and dandelions. The terms come from a scientific study of children’s behavior.

Dandelion children are resilient. They do pretty well almost anywhere. Like those stubborn little weed flowers, they find a way to rise up and thrive whether they’re raised in a sidewalk crack or a well-tended garden. There are also *orchid* children. Orchids need more attention than dandelions. They’re beautiful, but they’re delicate. They wilt easily if they’re ignored, but they bloom spectacularly when they grow up in a greenhouse where it’s not too hot or too cold; where the soil’s moist, but there’s not too much water.

I bet you know adults who also might be called an orchid or a dandelion.

The point of this research is that some of the behavior in children that we’ve thought of as misbehavior, or even dysfunction, is actually genetically programmed. Some people are *born* with the resilience and grit of dandelions. Other people—orchids—need more care. There’s a narrower band of conditions they need to nurture their growth. One is not better than the other. They’re just different.

The more we know—about almost everything, it seems—science, culture, politics, history—the more we learn that we are not all the same. That there are differences among us that are real. Characteristics and needs and ‘normal’s’ that are baked into us, and that give us quite different ways of being in the world. Categories like “good” and “bad” aren’t really relevant. They don’t serve us well as we try to understand one another, and get along. One way is not better or worse than another because it’s unfamiliar; it’s just different.

It is very human to think that being in the middle of that much difference is a dangerous condition. It feels much safer to be surrounded by people who are like us. It seems like you used to be able to count on everybody seeing the world in mostly the same way. It never actually was that; we just didn’t know it. Now, every day the news brings us stories of people who think and act and vote so differently from us, that we’re mystified, wary, sometimes a little defensive.

Into this world that includes angels and shepherds, orchids and dandelions, and every other kind of difference that you can imagine, a world filled with people who are dangerously different from one another, God came—as a *baby*. A vulnerable, unprotected baby.

In this birth that we celebrate tonight, the story that we gather to tell over and over again, God himself, Creator of the Universe, shrunk down and let all his power go. God became the size and

the helplessness of an infant. A baby whose birth witnesses were both unwashed shepherds and angels singing arias. A child who depended then—and depends now—for care from people who are both orchids and dandelions. God put everything she is and hopes and holds most dear into the hands of unlike, unpredictable, damaged people. Us. And people who aren't like us at all.

That baby is two thousand and sixteen years old tonight, and again tonight God comes to us as a newborn. Our work is, as it has always been, to create the conditions where that newly born life can thrive. To be as unafraid as that baby was of being surrounded by people who are quite different from one another. To work together—to *be* together—the soil where delicate, tiny little seeds that baby brought into the world—of hope, peace, love, joy—can take root and grow. For everyone.