

The Christmas Eve Sermon 2014  
Christ Episcopal Church, New Bern, North Carolina  
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The famous words of Isaiah 9:6 are, perhaps, the most revered prophesy for Christians found in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the coming of the Messiah: *“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”*

This prophesy is the echo to what the Angel of the Lord said to the shepherds in the second chapter of Gospel according to Luke, *“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.”* As we know so well, the shepherds then *“went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. And when they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child.”*

Shepherds...the most common of folk...people not known for their education or sophistication... shepherds making known what had been told them! If we ever doubt that God uses the least likely people to do God’s work, look at who God chooses to first share the Good News so many had heard foretold in the words of the Prophet Isaiah. I’m sure that nobody of any rank or importance expected that shepherds...the most common of folk...people not known for their education or sophistication would be the first to learn that *“to you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord,”* the one whose name we embroider as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And I’m equally sure that nobody of any rank or importance expected gentiles such as the wise men of the East found in Matthew 2:12 to be the exponents of the Matthean translation of the Prophet Micah chapter five, verse two: *“And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.”* Again, we see God using the least likely people, in this case educated gentiles we also call Magi, to announce God’s Good News.

Now here’s a tidbit in two parts that you can share over Christmas day dinner. Jesus is born into the community descended from Abraham that we call the Jews. The Gospel according to Matthew is written with this community in mind. It begins in chapter one with the lineage of Jesus. Jesse, of *“On that day the root of Jesse shall stand a signal to the peoples”* fame in Isaiah 11:10, is known as the father of King David. Note **King** David. Matthew is written to address the concerns of the internal Jewish community. The Gospel according to Luke is written with the external gentile community as the primary focus. Here, when Luke finally gets around to a rather brief exposition of the lineage of Jesus in chapter three after the baptism of Jesus, Luke simply lists David as the son of Jesse, no title, no pomp, no need for the connection or the prestige.

Here’s part A of the tidbit: the first people God gives the Good News of the birth of the Savior, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord is the opposite of whom you would expect! Matthew’s internal Jewish community must confront the implication that this Good News is for everyone. Why else would the gentile Magi be entrusted by God to interpret the Micah passage, follow the star, and then announce the presence of this Messiah to an authority nominally within the internal Jewish community, namely King Herod. By using the Magi in this manner, Matthew, in chapter three, verses 16 through 18, exposes the ruthlessness of Herod who kills all the children in an around Bethlehem who were two years old or under. Matthew begins his indictment of the

internal Jewish community, especially the leadership who demand the crucifixion of the adult Jesus, that in their own ruthlessness they missed the Good News that the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace was in their midst.

Part B of the tidbit might be easier to swallow. Remember the Gospel of Luke is aimed at the external gentile community. Luke uses a sense of humor to let the gentiles know that the Savior, the Messiah, the Christ, the Lord, came to save everyone with Luke's emphasis on the humble birth of Christ wrapped in bands of cloth, lying in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. Add to this the use of the shepherds as the initial witnesses of the Good News. Remember, shepherds...the most common of folk...people not known for their education or sophistication, a people who were part of the internal Jewish community, albeit folk on the outer margins of society. In our world today, a shepherd would be the character in a situation comedy that is always the butt of the joke. While Luke is written primarily to attract the external gentile community, these "newcomers" who are being asked to consider Jesus as the Messiah, know what it means to interact with the establishment. By stressing the humble birth of Jesus, Luke opens the arms of love that will someday hang on the hardwood of the cross to everyone. By giving the shepherds a dignity in the eyes of God, Luke wraps his message of inclusion in cloth that might appeal to followers of Mark Twain, Will Rogers, John Stewart, or Stephen Colbert.

We've been together for almost a year and half. What did you expect when I used the word "tidbit!" How about this as a conversation starter for Christmas dinner: 100 years ago on Christmas Eve, what we call World War One had not yet become the Great War. The expectation of a six-week war came to a tragic and costly end with the Battle of the Marne in September 1914. By December, trenches from the North Sea to the Swiss frontier made the coming four years hell on earth. Yet, on Christmas Eve and Christmas day of that first year, there was a Christmas truce along many parts of the line. Some reports say the truce began when English soldiers who raised their voices from across no-man's land joined German soldiers singing Christmas carols. Fraternization in the form of gift giving and football followed. This lasted but the one Christmas. What a sad irony that people who celebrated what the Angel of the Lord told the shepherds, "*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*" could not embrace the Good News of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace they claimed to share.

Perhaps this will serve as your Christmas Day dinner tidbit: The translation of the Hebrew word מָשִׁיחַ *Mašiah* (Messiah) as Χριστός (*Christós*) is the result of translating the Hebrew into Greek in the late second century BC version of the Old Testament called the Septuagint. Christ is not Jesus' last name but his title. To be the Christ, the Messiah, is to be the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace we seek on this holy night.

When we sing Silent Night after we have communion, imagine being given the gift of something so unexpected, so incredible, so, dare I say in it's truest sense, so awesome, that you find yourself kneeling before the Word made flesh in the form of the infant Jesus. You might imagine yourself as a Magi who heard God's invitation and travelled from afar. Or you might imagine yourself a shepherd in desperate need of recognition that you have worth. Or your might come to the manger with the bible character who helps you best relate to the Good News. You might be with the woman at the well, or Peter or one of the Apostles, or Saul who was to become Paul. All showed us all just what it means for God to use the least likely people to do God's work.

Perhaps as we consider on this Christmas Eve 2014, our world so torn with strife in war and anxiety, you might share your moment with the Word made flesh, Jesus the Christ, with someone like a soldier in the trenches of just a century ago, or with someone who grieves, or someone who is hungry or in prison, or someone who cares enough to wear a uniform.

*“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests on his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”* Expect the unexpected but desired and needed most when we close a hymn sung across the trenches with these words:

*“Silent night, holy night, Son of God, love’s pure light,  
radiant beams from thy holy face, with the dawn of redeeming grace,  
Jesus, Lord, at thy birth, Jesus, Lord at thy birth.”*