**An Odd Cast of Characters**

A Meditation on Luke 2: 1 – 20

Rev. Cathy C. Hoop Grace Presbyterian Church **December 24, 2019**

Did you ever get to take part in a Nativity play? Do you remember who you were? A shepherd? An angel? Mary, perhaps?

In my years as a director of Children’s Ministries in Nashville, I cast many a Nativity play. There was a part for everyone…after all, the Bible doesn’t say anything about *three* magi, so why not four or five? The costumes are to die for! And who knows how many shepherds were abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night? You get to hold a staff, which basically becomes a dueling sword in the hands of your average child. You need an abundance of angels if you want to be a heavenly host (although wings can be really hard to manage! Who needs a BB gun? You can poke someone’s eye out with the tip of your angelic wing!) There is always room for a host of animals. In the movie, *Love Actually*, there was even a Nativity lobster! Who says magi must be boys? Or angels must be girls? My hope was that every child – from the shyest (how about a sheep? I know you can “baaa”) to the most exuberant (Alright, Gabriel, time to surprise Mary!) - would have fun sharing the Christmas story, and I encouraged them to think of their participation as their gift to the community.

I never considered that casting children in their various roles could have a lifelong impact…until I heard a story on NPR’s “Wait, Wait, Don’t Tell Me” last month. While gearing up for the “Listener Limerick Challenge” – yes, that’s right, the “Listener Limerick Challenge” – you can only find jewels like this on public radio – the host ran the panel through a series of questions about stories in the news. Here was the one that caught my attention:

*…people are always looking at predictors for kids to see* ***how they're going to fare later in life.*** *Well, one new study out of the U.K. shows that a surprisingly reliable predictor is what your child did - what role they had in what common childhood activity?[[1]](#endnote-1)*

The panelists quickly guessed, “class play,” and eventually got the correct answer, which was not just any play, but *the Nativity play*. Yes, according to this study by Virgin Media (you heard that correctly, *Virgin* Media), *a child’s role in the nativity play can predict their future success*. Somewhat surprisingly Nativity plays are still a really big thing in the U.K., and Virgin Media polled 2,000 adults, seeking a connection between casting and life success. The results may surprise you.

Take a guess, who do you think – of all the roles in the Christmas story – who do you think are the highest earners when they grow up?

I would have guessed Baby Jesus, but Baby Jesus evidently doesn’t get cast. Ever. He’s always played by a baby doll - probably for his own safety. And we don’t really need a child to grow up with a messiah complex. My next guess was Magi…but I was wrong again. The characters who grossed the highest income in adulthood were… the oxen. *The oxen!* Earning an annual average of £43,000 or $55,370. The oxen aren’t even mentioned in scripture…nary a “moo.” I would have thought camel, if an animal was going to win this contest. Again, not in scripture, but they are just so intimidating! It must be true that there are no small parts, only small actors. Here is the rest of the ranking:

Angel Gabriel earns £40,000, with Mary a close second at £39,000. On her heels is

Joseph at £38,000, closely followed by the innkeeper at £37,000. We then have a huge jump, with shepherds coming in at £29,000, followed by the magi at £26,000. It’s downhill from there. Donkeys come in higher than your average angel, narrator or lamb, even though a donkey is never mentioned in the nativity narrative. We have embedded in our minds the visual image of Mary riding a donkey to Bethlehem because we feel so sorry for her having to travel at nine months pregnant. We desperately want her to have that donkey, but it’s not really there. Much like the camels accompanying the Magi, who look so much grander when we picture them on their beasts of burden.

In addition to gathering information about income, the survey also collected data about career choices and hobbies. The oxen tend towards jobs in marketing and enjoy community theater! Lambs and angels are drawn to health care and enjoy yoga. Magi work in construction and play video games to unwind. Narrators love horseback riding and work in the field of education. “Marys” work retail; “Josephs” become bankers; “angels Gabriel” work in marketing and love to read.

No comedians? No professional athletes? No artists and musicians? No veterinarians? No midwives? Of course, this is a small study, just a snapshot really. Surely some shepherd is the anomaly who became a pastor? And though it’s entertaining to hear about their hobbies and careers, where were these questions:

1. Do you currently participate in a faith community? If so, why? If not, why not?
2. Do you believe the nativity story has any relevance for your life today? If so, how?
3. If you could go back and do it all over again, what role would you choose?

I would love to have a dialogue with the folks who responded to this survey. I would love to know if participating in that Nativity play as a child inspired a spiritual curiosity or if it was just one more thing that was expected of them. Do those now grown up lambs practice yoga *and* prayer? Do those banker Josephs *also* serve on the finance committee of their local parish? Did they find any relevance in this story or were the lines they recited (or animal noises they made) simply a part of childhood?

We could look for a good news message in all of this and say that it’s fitting, in God’s realm, that an extraneous ox – really unnecessary ox - would come out on top. Or that Mary would earn *more* than Joseph. That’s a breath of fresh air. We could celebrate that the innkeeper is rewarded for creatively making room where none could be found, and that the shepherds fair better than magi (which is surprising since we think of shepherds as peasants and Magi as “kings”). That the oft maligned donkey ranks higher than an angel also fits God message of the last shall be first.

But none of that really makes me feel better about this study. What grieves me about this data is that “how you fare in life” is equated with wealth. Individual financial achievement is how this study measures success. And that they would extrapolate that from Jesus’ birth story would just make him cry. Financial stability is a wonderful thing, but we all know that money won’t save us. Here’s the study I wish they would do: Find out what they remember about being in that play. Maybe it’s only an impression or an emotion. Maybe their strongest memory would be the faces of the audience – their family and friends - looking up with hope-filled expressions. That would be enough. To know that you are loved and that someone is there for you whether you are a donkey or an innkeeper, an angel or a lamb.

But beyond that what I would hope for is that someone, at some point, helped them unpack the meaning of what they were enacting that day. I would want that child who was draped in Marian blue to be invited to catch a glimpse of a God who longs to be reborn through us into the world. I would like for the child who was given a lantern and told to look sleepy, to be challenged to consider what it means to open your door in the middle of the night to desperate strangers. I would hope that the child with tinsel caught in their hair could be empowered to embrace what it means to be one of God’s messengers, one who brings surprising good news to those who wait in darkness. And I would hope that the child who was given an itchy beard with an elastic strap and told to stand beside Mary would be able to shrug off the embarrassment and grow up to become someone who defines family in expansive and generous ways.

But those things won’t happen if we label this story “juvenile” and shelve it with the picture books. If you could go back to childhood and be anyone in this story, who would it be? A star gazer? A sheep tender? A cradle builder? A lullaby singer? Through whose eyes would you like to experience this story anew and how do you think that might shape your future? Not in financial terms, but in salvation wealth. The wealth born of compassion and forgiveness, the wealth born of patience and steadfast hope.

If we had never heard this story, we would look at this cast of characters gathered across the stage and think “how odd!” What a disjointed cast. How do they go together? And yet there they are. United around a baby. And so we are, gathered on this world’s stage, united around the hope of a baby.

And yet gathered around the fear of a baby.

For he is the one who reminds us to live in the world but to not be of the world. He is the one who asks us to visit a stable rather than a palace. He is the one who asks us who we wish to be? God is waiting for you to continue the story; let us play it out with joy and courage. Let us play it out for all the world to see!

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. https://www.npr.org/2019/11/16/779987957/panel-questions [↑](#endnote-ref-1)