

SEARCHING FOR GOOD NEWS

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Luke 2:8-20

You may have seen the news story about the election in Alaska that has yet to be decided. The election was on November 6 and the race was for a seat in the Alaska legislator. When the polls closed, the votes were counted and the Republican candidate in the race received 2661 votes. The Democratic candidate opposing him received 2661 votes. It was a tie. So, the votes were recounted by machine and the results came back exactly the same. The votes were recounted by hand and the results were the same. In Alaska, as I imagine in most states, at each polling place, at the end of the day, all materials pertaining to the election are gathered up and placed into a box or envelope and returned to the office of the election commission. In the instance of this tied race, the returned materials were searched and there was discovered a single, uncounted ballot. It had been mistakenly placed into a gray, security envelop and overlooked. The ballot was marked for the Democratic candidate, but the election commission is hesitant to simply accept it given the odd nature of its existence. Was it an actual ballot?

There is a lot riding on that single, uncounted ballot. At hand is the race itself. That ballot would determine the winner for that legislative seat. However, it could also affect the entire political power structure of the state. In Alaska, the Republicans currently hold the governor's office, the state senate, and the state house. If the Republican candidate wins there will be no change. However, if the race goes to the Democratic candidate, the house would become evenly split with 20 Democrats and 20 Republican members. This tie would shift the balance of power in Alaska.

Whoever says that politics is boring isn't paying attention.

Our scripture reading for today is the familiar account of the shepherds who are visited by angels and told of the birth of Jesus. What you may not realize about this passage is just how political it is.

I imagine that some of you are thinking, "Please, Pastor, don't preach on politics. We've had enough." But the politics in this reading are different from the politics that we are used to. We live in a representative democracy. We believe in ideals such as 'one person, one vote' and 'no taxation without representation,' and that sort of thing. The situation in first-century Judea could not be more different. For those people, politics was not "who will I vote for," but instead politics was "who controls my life?"

The land of the Jews was no longer an identifiable political entity and had not been for several hundred years. In the first century, the land was an outlying

province of the greater Roman Empire. The emperor at the time was Caesar Augustus. The Jews lived in a land that was controlled by outsiders. Roman soldiers enforced the will of the Empire. The Jewish people were searching for a leader to free them from the Romans, someone to save them.

Earlier in Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel appears to the young woman Mary. He says this about the child she would bear, *He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end* (Luke 1:32-33). The words of the angel encapsulated the hope of the people, a champion to claim the throne of David and rule over Israel. That is why today's reading is so political. The nation was searching for a hero to drive the Romans from their land and bring them independence and the words of the angel Gabriel seem to promise that in the birth of this child.

In our reading today, we are introduced to shepherds. Shepherds were iconic figures among the people of Israel. They were a part of the history of the nation. King David had started out as a shepherd. Shepherds were a common sight on the landscape. They were crucial to the economy. People in that part of the world relied on sheep and goats and used every part of the animal—the meat, the milk, the hair, the hide. Even their droppings could be used to fuel a fire. And while the people had a special love for the image of the shepherd, the truth was that they were common laborers at the bottom of the economic ladder. Shepherds lived dangerous, rough lives. They moved around a lot. Generally, the shepherd didn't own the sheep; they were hired hands. They had a reputation for being untrustworthy and unsavory. One scholar describes shepherds as being like the American cowboy. Yes, we have this romanticized notion of cowboys being the heroes of the west, but you don't want your daughter to marry one.

The shepherds in our reading, true to form, are *living in the fields* watching their flock. It is night when an angel of God stands before them. *The glory of the Lord shone around them, and the shepherds were terrified.* The angel addresses the shepherds saying, *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.* That simple phrase is a highly-charged political pronouncement. The angel talks about the good news that is being delivered. As Christians, we use this term to describe the message and purpose of Christ. The word is often translated gospel. The Gospel According to Luke is the good news of Luke.

For the people of the Roman Empire, this was a technical term with a very specific meaning. In Greek, the word is *euangelion* and it describes a royal announcement. This might be the ascension of power of a new emperor, or the announcement of a military victory. But normally, the *euangelion* was reserved for the announcement of the birth of a royal child. If the emperor has a son, then messengers are dispatched throughout the empire proclaiming the *euangelion*, the

good news. Royalty were not considered regular folk like you and me. Royalty had a measure of divinity. They were considered to be like gods. The birth of a royal child would be proclaimed by messengers and poets. For the angel to appear to shepherds in a field with *euangelion* was revolutionary. It implies that this baby is a king, he is a god. Furthermore, the angel does not deliver this news to the elite in the capital where it should be announced. The angel goes to the shepherds at night in a field. He goes to the people. The angel is very specific about to whom they are bringing the news. They say to the shepherds, *I am bringing you good news.*

The political nature of the angel's message continues with these words, *To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* Again, there is a lot going on here. The angel is announcing a savior. And a savior was a word associated with the emperor. The emperor is the one who brings peace and security. The emperor is recognized as the savior. But the angel is announcing a king born in Bethlehem which is the ancestral city of King David. He will be savior and messiah. This message is directed at the Jews, not the Romans. The angel says, *To you is born...* What more could the people hope for?

The angel says that this child-king will be found in Bethlehem blanketed in silk and lying on soft pillows in a golden cradle... No. Sorry. This infant will be wrapped up in torn tee shirts and its cradle will be a feeding trough.

At the announcement of the angel's good news, because creation could not restrain itself any longer, the heavens break open singing, *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*

The shepherds rush into Bethlehem and locate the baby and Mary and Joseph just as the angel had described. The shepherds tell the parents what the angel told them about the child. Mary ponders these words in her heart.

This story is political. It is not about who we're voting for the in the next election; it is about power. The Romans held power over Israel. The Jews were searching for the power to overthrow the Romans. All the people of Israel—from the shepherds on up—were searching for the good news of a savior. And God responds with power.

But this is not the sort of power the people imagined. This was not military power or economic power. God does not arrive leading an army of angelic warriors wielding flaming swords to push the Romans back to the border and restore the ancient nation of Israel. God sends an infant, helpless and dependent, not to bring power but to bring peace. This is good news for the world.

In this season of Advent, as we approach the celebration of Christ's birth and God's entry into our world, may we ask ourselves the question, "What is it that we are searching for? Are we looking for the *euangelion*? Do we desire the good news?"