

“What Kind of Sign?”

Luke 2:8-12

January 15, 2012

Rev. Jeong Park

Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

I want to thank Mary McCollum for teaching us Wesleyan Covenant Prayer on the first Sunday of this month, and I also thank Kathy Glass and the worship committee for sharing the meaningful message about Epiphany last Sunday. I am going to begin a new series with the title of “Who is this man?” I hope we can have an opportunity to build a strong foundation of faith in Jesus Christ in the next six weeks.

Let me share a story that I heard from one of our church members. A Sunday School teacher decided to have her young class memorize one of the most quoted passages in the Bible - Psalm 23. She gave the youngsters a month to learn the chapter. Little Rick was excited about the task - but he just couldn't remember the Psalm. After much practice, he could barely get past the first line. On the day that the kids were scheduled to recite Psalm 23 in front of the congregation, Ricky was so nervous. When it was his turn, he stepped up to the microphone and said proudly, "The Lord is my Shepherd, and that's all I need to know."

What images comes up your mind when you think about your God? I personally love this image of God: “God is my shepherd.” Who is a shepherd? A shepherd always walks near his sheep to encourage them, and he counts his sheep to make sure that not a single sheep has strayed. Psalm 23 is a beautiful poem and a confession that King David praised his God while he was flocking the sheep as a shepherd. King David understood God as his protector and guide in his life. The Bible shares many other different images of God. For example, Yahweh was originally a name of Moses’ God: literally it means ‘God of warrior,’and it means “My name is forever;” Abraham called his God El Shaddai which means God of the Mountains or God of Almighty; later all these names merged into one name, God.

Through the season of Advent and Epiphany, we have celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ, our Savior. (The Hebrew word, Messiah means “Savior” in English.) The first three gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke include many of same stories, often in the same sequence, and sometimes exactly same wording about stories of Jesus. But each gospel has also a different perspective of the Messiah. For example, the gospel of Mark doesn’t describe the birth of Jesus in

his book at all. He focuses on Jesus' public ministry and suffering. We assume that Mark didn't hear anything about the birth of Jesus or he didn't write it down because the birth story was not much important to his understanding of the New Messiah. In the Gospel of Matthew, there were three wise men riding their camels, wise men who followed stars to the barn and presented their expensive gifts to the baby Jesus. But the Gospel of Luke has a simple and humble story. Luke has more emphasis on mission and more interest in reaching out to people beyond Jewish people in sharing good news of great joy for "all the people." So in the account of Luke, the shepherds went to Bethlehem and saw the baby Jesus.

Let's take a close look at our Scripture reading in the book of Luke. The Messiah in the Gospel of Luke is very simple and humble. The humble shepherds were the first people who heard this news from the angels. In Jesus' times, shepherds were not a privileged class, but economically poor and socially isolated - the bottom class of society. The Gospel of Luke emphasizes that our new Messiah even has come to reach out for those who were marginalized, humble or even isolated ordinary people in their life. We need to remember why Luke intentionally has shepherds as the first witnesses with such an important role. The image of shepherds is a reminder of King David when he was a young shepherd, and it also will associate the image of Jesus Christ to be our new shepherd as our Savior.

This was still quite a different expectation than other Jews anticipated from their New Messiah. At that time, Jews longed for the Messiah who would save them from the Romans and rule on the throne of David in Jerusalem. They desired a mighty military leader who would liberate them from political occupation.

But what the Gospel of Luke shows us as a sign of Messiah was a very vulnerable image of God. The Angels said, "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." What does this big contrast mean to us?

What Luke understood about his Messiah was not a warrior, but a Messiah who is willing to come to our 'lowly places' and 'vulnerable places' in our human condition and deliver us, and to bring healing and hope to our broken places. I want to encourage you to think about your 'vulnerable places' which need God's presence and invite Jesus Christ to "wrap your wounded hearts and hurts" for healing and comfort. God sent us his son for us. We all need saving, caring and salvation. Hopefully, this is a true statement to you, too.

Jesus, the son of God is willing to come down in the middle of our messy life and save us from our struggles. He saves us from guilt and shame, from hopelessness and despair, from fear and death.

Luke is writing about the true "savior of the world," one from the line of the great King David. He looks to Bethlehem, the city of David, and not to Rome, the city of Caesar. It was a politically-charged term since, after all, Caesar Augustus was known as "the savior of the world." Luke's announcement of Jesus as "savior" is a way of saying, "Jesus is Lord, and Caesar is not." Moreover, this "savior" comes from the house of David. He is not only "lord," but "messiah." Thus is born the true savior of the world--not Caesar Augustus, the oppressor, the false savior of the world, protector of those with power and privilege, but Christ the Lord, whose birth is "good news of great joy for all the people."

If you can request God to receive one blessing for your salvation, what do you want to ask for? We need to highlight the part of "great joy." Joy is different from pleasure. Joy is richer and deeper than pleasure. Pleasure is derived from the flesh; joy belongs to the soul. It is clear that Gospel of Luke helps us to remember that the Messiah came for the joy of our soul. Jesus Christ is our Joy. I like lyrics of the song, "His Eye is on the Sparrow:" "Why should I feel discouraged, why should the shadows come, why should my heart feel lonely, I sing because I am happy, I sing because I am free! And I know he watches over me!" Isn't it powerful to have God beside you, watching over you with care and love?

We are like lost sheep astray from the right path. We easily turn away from God's will and consciously or unconsciously stick to our greed, lust and pride, so we have a tendency to have our own way. God sent his son to rescue us from this danger. To invite Jesus as our shepherd gives us a new life and journey to live in joy. Our God promised us that if one of a hundred sheep is lost, "he will leave the ninety nine in the open country and go after lost sheep until he finds it." This is our God's special invitation and covenant for us: When we accept God's invitation, Jesus as our friendly shepherd, then he will guide us along the right paths. Even though we walk through the darkest valley, we will fear no evil because God is with us, and his rod and staff will comfort us. I pray that the blessings of God's goodness and love be with you all as you start a new year with our good shepherd, Jesus Christ. Amen.