

Two weeks ago, I had the privilege of participating in the Alley Shoppe's Christmas Toy Giveaway. As you know, Alley Shoppe is AHLC's free thrift store. Under Pam's organized and efficient leadership, a cadre of volunteers over the previous months had collected and categorized toys, designed and decorated dozens of gift bags.

Starting last year after Christmas, volunteers received donations and purchased toys at a steep discount, bagged them up and sorted toys for girls and boys, And arranged them for toddlers and teenagers.

As people arrived on the giveaway day, at their appointed time by car and by foot, volunteers would get their names and bring out their bags full of presents.

Grateful faces would light up with joy and gratitude.

In all 1480 children received a gift bag with a toy and some stocking stuffers. They came from 436 families, families of numerous ethnicities and races, all with socioeconomic limitations, all with needs, and all who wanted something more for their children.

Many of whom experienced the toy giveaway as gifts they could not have imagined.

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There are many obvious connections to the Christmas story with this wonderful annual Toy Giveaway by the Alley Shoppe. Giving of gifts, to remember the greatest gift of all, God giving Godself in the form of the son, our savior, the incarnate, enfleshed, bodily appearance of the one God of the universe, maker of heaven and earth.

These clients of the Alley Shoppe are the overlooked and left out of our society, and remind me of the **shepherds**, in our story, who kept watch of their flocks by night.

What are we to make of them and their status in life?
One clue is that they are watching their sheep *at night*.
Who watches their flock at night?

I grew up on a farm, and I never watched the livestock at night. They were safely in the barn or a fenced-in pasture.

These shepherds were most likely poor and didn't own land. If you owned land, you would have a place to keep your sheep at night, a sheepfold.

No, these shepherds are nomads, moving from place to place without permanence, likely sneaking a graze on someone else's land. As such, they are the least likely of the unlikely to receive a heavenly message.

This focus on those at the margins of society is a characteristic of Luke's gospel. These are the people to whom the angels come with good tidings of great joy. The angels do not show up to announce Jesus's birth to the powerful and privileged.

The shepherds are somewhat astounded that they are the recipients of the divine angelic revelation, so they rush to see this thing that has happened.

And they find **Mary** and the baby, just as the angels said.

Mary is almost always depicted as serene and "not worse for wear" post-birth. But, we know that couldn't have been the case.

Mary, has made a journey, being very great with child.

If you've seen a very pregnant woman or been a very pregnant woman, you know it's hard sometimes to even walk,

She's traveled some 90 miles—the distance from here to Albert Lea—
on foot on dusty roads,

or bouncing along on a donkey.

Our text today breezes over a reality of the first Christmas that diminishes our understanding: Luke gives a very incomplete birth story.

We know through first- or second-hand experience just how traumatic and terrifying birth can be

and we have infinitely better resources and healthcare

than Mary did in 1st c. Palestine.

Such were the conditions that one commentator observed that there were two miracles on Christmas,
the incarnation,
and Mary and the baby *surviving*.

In Jesus' birth, then, we see an incarnate God who is interdependent with humanity. Jesus is dependent on Mary, Mary who is breathing, contracting, and pushing. All our depictions of Mary make her serene and clean, but the reality was far messier,
Blood, sweat, pain. Tears and fears,
all experienced by an
unwed 14-year-old teen mom,
powerless and marginalized Mary
undergoing the birthing pains that will bring God incarnate into the world.

And she does bring forth a son, her firstborn,
and wraps him tightly in swaddling clothes.

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And what of this baby, this unlikely King of Israel, savior of the world? How do we receive him today? What do we make of the babe in the manger?

What does the God incarnate, word become flesh, tell us? It tells us that
God doesn't do things the way the world does.
God is counter-cultural.

Noted Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggeman gives a succinct summary of how we should respond to God's vulnerable, powerless, non-violent appearance in the manger. He simply says this:

"Bet on the baby."

Not politicians, not the powerful, not a cultural Christianity,
not nationalist notions of manifest destiny,
bet on the vulnerable. Bet on the baby.

So what do you see in the manger today? How will you respond?

If we "bet on the baby," we are making a bad bet by the world's standards. But yet,
this is the way the kingdom works.

Taking a cue from Bruggeman,
if you were going to wager the odds, I would say,

Bet on those without worldly power to effect change,
Bet on those who are vulnerable,
 Especially the vulnerable who risk their lives
 to condemn unjust and oppressive systems.

Bet on vibrant churches that share our building,
 House of Praise
 And Ministerio Dias de Gloria
 As they reach out to our East Side community.

Bet on Literacy Minnesota
 who is teaching new immigrants to speak English,
 right here in this building,

Bet on the Alley Shoppe,
 who is helping take the edge off of generational and systemic poverty,

And ultimately, dear friends, **bet on the baby in Bethlehem,**
The unlikely and unassuming presence of God with us,
 who brings healing and hope to a
 hostile and hurting world.

Word become flesh, Emmanuel,

born this day in the city of David
 a Saviour,
 which is Christ the Lord.

Thanks be to God, Amen.