

Christmas Day 2019
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I think that God has a soft spot for Shepherds. After all, God chose the shepherd-boy, David, to become the most celebrated King of Israel. The picture we are given in that scenario is that shepherds are courageous, prepared to defend their sheep against wolves and raiders; and also caring, making sure that their sheep can get to food and water, and leading them to safe places at night.

I think, though, that most of the time most people pictured shepherds as smelly, trudging around with sheep all the time; and unclean, from the point of view that they weren't religiously pure.

But God still seems to have a soft spot for them. As another example, the Old Testament prophet Amos was a shepherd from Tekoa, who was called on to go to the government of the day and deliver a prophetic message about the consequences of continuing patterns of injustice. Other prophets, while not shepherds themselves, used images of shepherds while critiquing their government's leadership.

To the best of my knowledge, Mary was NOT a shepherd. But sheep were not far away, and according to this story the shepherds were the first to know about Jesus' birth.

These were not people from the centre of Jerusalem, or the religious or political establishment; they were from the margins. They had the joy of telling Mary what they had seen, and possibly a slightly harder task of telling some of their other friends elsewhere – a kind of prophetic task.

You can be the judge as to whether Shepherds make good prophets.

Prophets and their messages are not always popular, whether they are shepherds or not. Amos was certainly frozen out by people with power when he was speaking truth to them. Prophets aren't always of the religious variety either. As so many Australians today are facing a very difficult Christmas, as they continue to fight fires or to count their losses, scientific voices about Climate Change are still not welcomed - their prophetic words dismissed with claims that they are "taking advantage of catastrophe for political purpose" - the same old chestnut used just as dismissively in American gun debates. And when the prophetic voices are young women, even if their education is good they are told to go back to school.

Mary was a young woman who did not go back to school.

She had a message to deliver – because in Jesus, the medium is the message – Jesus was the embodiment of God's word, not just another prophet bringing a message.

Jesus showed us God's way of precisely NOT taking power in a coercive or dictatorial way. Jesus' life was lived on the margins: he moved about the countryside, healing and preaching

about God's kingdom being near, for us to lean into; he embodied compassion and grace. He died a criminal's death and rose alone from a lonely tomb.

The way in which we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth brings home the way Jesus lived on those margins, even while he proclaimed and embodied God's being and nature of love.

His life and teaching bring us home to God's priorities of love, justice, faith, and hope; He radically impacts our understanding of God and ourselves by embodying a God who loves and suffers with and for us, and invites us to know fullness of life with him.

Given Jesus' life on the margins, perhaps it's not really surprising that God has a soft spot for shepherds.

You may or may not be aware that though there are plenty of writers represented in the New Testament, only two of them mention stories of Jesus' birth and only Luke mentions these shepherds. Our recognition of Jesus' relationship within God doesn't hinge on these stories, as the other New Testament writers show.

This year, on Sunday mornings we'll be taking some Bible readings from the gospel according to Mark. Mark doesn't have any stories about Jesus' birth, but he titles his gospel, his book, as: "The beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ". We just call it "Mark".

It is a short book, with crisply told stories and with lots of misunderstanding on the part of Jesus' disciples. In fact, by the end of his book, he finishes up with some women running away from the empty tomb, afraid, and the other disciples scattered. It seems that the only ones left standing are the people who had been healed, or welcomed, or stood back on their feet by Jesus through the course of his ministry.

So, with only those people standing (and the tomb empty) he ends his book, the book he calls "the beginning of the Good News of Jesus Christ."

(It's an easy book to read – a good summer read idea, except it won't take that long.)

The reason why it's only *the beginning* is because those people who were healed and welcomed *are* on their feet; the Spirit will be with them and the good news will continue.

Luke's story, this morning's story, in which the marginal shepherds became the carriers of the good news, is a bit like that. The shepherds encouraged Mary as she delivered her message, her child, and they themselves went on to continue to worship God and to share the joy they had found. So the story begins.

Maybe there are times when we feel like we are on the margins, especially when it comes to influence. But stories of Jesus' birth are only the beginning, because shepherds - and people like us - can be there to encourage and care; because the courage to stand for justice, the humility to live for love, and the joy of living with Jesus continue the story through us, this day, and onwards.

Thanks be to God.