

Have you felt on the outside, where you were the one that didn't belong? That you were in the wrong place at the wrong time? I've had experiences like that in my life. I want to share a few of them with you. Some of them are so powerful they stick in your head decades later. One of these stories occurs when I was in middle school. My family lived in northwest Wichita at the time.

I was at Pleasant Valley Middle School and they had these long hallways. The bathrooms, the restrooms had doors at that time. They opened one this way and one going out, which was great. If you were in a hurry, you could go in or you could go out and not have to worry about running into someone on the way. This was pretty efficient and most of the time worked really, really well, unless you're going down a little bit different hallway, the one what you weren't used to going to, just before lunch, and you walk in the wrong room.

You're in a hurry and then as you're halfway in, then you realize, I am not in the right place. I am not in the right place. I was inside, but I was outside. I was in the wrong place. I made my way outside pretty quick. It was uncomfortable of course as a middle schooler, as you might imagine that. A chance of being outside.

Then in high school, it was Spirit Week. You remember, Spirit Week, there's different themes. You dress up in different days. Superhero day, [inaudible 00:01:21] day, the next whatever it was. It's great. You get to have fun and dress up and go to school, unless you get the wrong day, which isn't so bad, but then if you get the wrong week, that's a little bit worse. So there you are dressed up and you've got the whole day ahead of you and you realize, I'm out. I'm not like everyone else here. One of these things is not like the other. Clearly on the outside.

Today we continue our journey toward Christmas. We're preparing for the coming of Jesus and taking a closer look at those who were involved in the story of the very first Christmas, those who were seeking Christ, and those whom God sought out as part of this story. Two weeks ago, in the first week we considered the story of an angel, Gabriel, coming to Mary. Last week we considered the humble Mary and Joseph. This week we will consider those who are on the outside, the shepherds, and then next week, we'll hear the story of the wise men, the Magi, who were looking for the Christ child, seeking out Jesus, and then finally, on Candlelight Christmas Eve, hearing the story of Jesus coming to us. The light of Christ, seeking us out.

But today we consider being on the outside and those stories were just a small example from my life. Maybe there's times when you've felt on the outside, but of course we know that it's not always so simple as those. There's times when we can feel outside, when we make others to feel outside in much more serious ways.

Sometimes we're on the outside because of the job that we have. Sometimes we're on the outside because of our address, where we live. Sometimes we're on the outside because of what we look like to other people. Sometimes being on the outside has serious consequences. The shepherds in the story today are on the outside.

We're going to take a closer look at their life and what it might have been like for them, and what we might learn from them today, about the way that God continues to be at work in the world. The story of the shepherds is one of the more familiar during this season. We hear the story every year. It's something that we sing about in Christmas carols and it can be easy to romanticize shepherds but I want

to be realistic. For shepherds in the first century, they were on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. They were on the outside in a lot of different ways.

The Egyptians at that time considered shepherds to be dirty and unclean. They wouldn't have anything to do with them really. They knew that they needed them because someone had to take care of the sheep, but I don't really want to spend time with the shepherds. Jews of course were from a long line of shepherds. Abraham, Isaac and David, Moses, they'd all been shepherds, but shepherds were associated with people who were less educated at the time, people who were generally living in poverty.

By the second or third century, the Jewish rabbis made it illegal, they forbade shepherds to testify at trials. They couldn't come and give their testimony because they were considered, well maybe just a little bit dishonest. The truth was people just didn't like them very much. They liked the fact that they took care of the sheep. Somebody had to do that, but the shepherds, not so much.

You might imagine that there's a difference between the person who owned the sheep and who was actually watching the sheep. If you were working the night shift as a shepherd, that was even worse. You were the lowest of the shepherds. No one wanted to work the night shift. It's probably you were the youngest in your family, or you were a hired hand.

Oftentimes shepherds, they were responsible for the sheep, and they had no land for themselves. They had to graze their sheep on the neighbor's property. Now how fun is that? Imagine today someone coming on your property and grazing cattle or sheep, and maybe you have some flowers or plants that you want to take particular care of. How long would you tolerate it before you did something like that?

Maybe post something next door. Somebody let the sheep out. Here they are. Can somebody know about these sheep? How would you feel about the shepherd? Maybe a little bit irritated with them. These aren't the kind of people that you'd invite to hold your newborn baby. Not even to come into the hospital, really. I mean at least not straight from work. They were arms deep in sheep. You can imagine a little sheepy aroma on the shepherd. People tended not to think very highly of them, and they were clearly on the outside.

When God sought the very first people to declare the good news of the birth of his Son, God sought out the shepherds. God sought out those who were on the outside. When God invites people to come and see the newborn king, God went to the lowest of the low. God went to those who were made to feel small. God went to the nobodies. God welcomes those that are on the outside. God still welcomes those that are on the outside today.

This gives us a clue about the kind of king that Jesus would be. Some hints about the kind of kingdom that Jesus would rule over. Much later of course, we hear the gospel stories about Jesus beginning his public ministry, and who does Jesus spend time with? Well he focused on those who were on the outside, especially in the gospel according to Luke. We read about Jesus welcoming tax collectors and sinners, those that are on the outside.

You remember of course that tax collectors at that time, they were hired hands of the Roman government. This was an outside imperial power that mainly collected heavy taxes on a people there in the ancient holy land. They often inflated the tolls and taxes that they received just to pad their own pockets. They were wealthy but nobody liked them much, these tax collectors. Sinners of course

includes everyone, like you and me. At that time, people particularly thought about those that had broken the moral laws, those that hadn't maintained the ritual purity as practiced by some of the Jewish groups.

Jesus spends time with the tax collectors and sinners and listens to them. God welcomes the outsider. When Jesus acted that way, when he welcomed tax collectors and sinners, when he chose to spend his time at Zacchaeus' house instead of going to the house of the preacher that day, the upstanding folks of society didn't like it very much. The religious leaders and the legal experts, the upstanding folks, grumbled and complained.

You see they made a decision about who was welcome, what that type of person looked like, where they lived, what they did for a job, how much money they had in their accounts. They then decided who was out, where they lived, what they did for a job and how much money they had in their bank account. And here was Jesus, spending time with those folks. They made it clear that the tax collectors and sinners were not welcome, yet this is who Jesus seeks out.

Jesus spent time with those whom everyone else said was on the outside. In practice and in teaching, Jesus made it clear that in God's kingdom, all are welcome. It doesn't matter where you live, what you look like, what you do for a job or how much is in your bank account. God welcomes all people. In God's kingdom, no one is outside. When I think about the shepherds, and those who are on the outside, I think of the kind of people in society today, those who aren't always valued. They're the hardworking people, but those who others sometimes make to feel small or insignificant.

Outsiders today, nobody really wants to be around. Maybe you found yourself in that place sometimes. Maybe you've made others feel like that at times. Of course outsiders today are sometimes light-hearted. You might imagine those are on the outside, a Georgia State fan in Manhattan last night. A Villanova fan down the road in Lawrence would be on the outside, clearly. Of course there are more serious examples. There are outsiders right here in Barington.

It can be easy to make assumptions about who's in or who's out. Who's welcome or who's unwelcome. I don't know what the people are like who live in that part of town. I don't really want to hang out with someone who does that for a living. Well they don't even have a job or a place to stay. Have you ever head things like that in our community?

One of the lessons from the shepherds for me and for us is that God chooses and works through the outsider. Those who we, those whom society look on as those that are outside, God works through especially and particularly. This is Luke's theme in telling the Christmas story. Mary is from a town the lowest of the low came from. But what good could come from Nazareth? Joseph himself wasn't a master builder. He was a [inaudible 00:10:45]. He was a tecton, just a handyman who worked with wood.

When Jesus was born, he wasn't born in a hospital. He wasn't born in a clean place. He was born in a stable and laid in a feeding trough of the animals. The good news is that Jesus' birth brings a kingdom in which all are welcome, especially those who are on the outside in our world. There are no preconditions. It doesn't matter where you live or what you do for a living, whether you have a place to live or are uncertain about how you understand yourself to be. God welcomes the outsider. God welcomes all people and offers the good news of love, forgiveness, the chance to live life that really is life.

This is who came on Christmas. This is true for each one of us. We believe that God welcomes all people, that God brings the outsider in. God offers us love and grace when we aren't aware of it. Even before we recognize God's power in our lives, and as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, in just over a week, I invite you to look for ways that you might welcome someone that's on the outside. Maybe it's picking out some gloves or mints to share on our mint tree before the end of the month. Maybe it's offering a word of encouragement or visit or a call for someone that might not otherwise receive one.

My invitation for you is to welcome those that are on the outside. God welcomes the shepherds. God welcomed those outsiders on that very first Christmas. God continues to welcome the outsider today. Even you and me. Will you pray with me?

Oh God we give you thanks that your welcome is available to all people. We ask that you encourage us to open our eyes, to see those around us, to share your love with those who may not yet have heard, to welcome those who may be on the outside. Encourage us, strengthen us, help us to follow you. Amen.