

## Message:

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We've heard afresh the Christmas story, said and sung. So perhaps for some of us that feels like Christmas has really started. We've heard about Mary being visited by the Angel, we've heard about Mary and Joseph and we've heard and met some shepherds. Surely all that's left is to put the baby in the manger and then we are ready for Christmas!

I'd like to briefly remind us all that there is something special about all the people that we have heard about tonight. All are important to the big story of God because they remind us about who God was including.

The whole Christmas story is a story of the surprising people God includes. An unmarried mother says her yes to the biggest ask of God. She says her yes when that was an incredibly dangerous thing to do. When all the custom of the day says she should be shunned, stoned even - and God wants her to birth His son. She is included. She is welcomed for a reason.

The new holy family who have to escape a tyrant King as refugees and find sanctuary in a new land. Their story is there for a reason.

Even the wise men, the Magi, whatever you want to call them - foreigners from another land - included for a very particular reason. To remind us that the heart and the welcome of God is bigger than we would give Him credit for.

Later in the story - two old people, Simeon and Anna. Included for a reason. None of this is accidental, or just a tool in divine story telling...

We're meeting the cast of Christmas over our special services this Christmas and tonight we're thinking about the shepherds.... And what marvellous shepherds we met earlier.

Shepherds were not the most popular of professions. Not the lovely children with tea towels on their heads in the nativity play were the shepherds, they were seen as ritually and spiritually unclean, a bit dodgy and not at all the sort of people you'd associate with. They were classed as the lowest of the low. Shepherds were not able to testify in a court of law because no one thought that they were capable of telling the truth. They were outcasts. The literal scum that no one would associate with. They were not close to God in any way, shape or form, and yet on the night Jesus was born God drew them in.

### **God started with those who were not welcome elsewhere.**

He starts with those who no-one else wants to know and He begins with them, – he gives them a purpose and tells them they are in on God's plan! God starts with the shepherds who are given the task of being the first to visit the new born King. They are included. They are welcomed.

As is the unmarried mother. As is the foreigner being invited to visit and worship the new born King. As is the old person.

**Do you see?** The Christmas story is all about those who were not traditionally welcomed, and God says - I want you to know that you are included - **because the birth of this child makes all things new. All bets are off. I'm starting afresh with a rescue plan for the world. And I want EVERYONE to know about it. Because this is for everyone!**

God is in the business of welcome. Of including. Of drawing people to him and saying - you might not think that this is for you - but it is.

That's the story of Christmas. A God who loves us so much. Whoever we are. Where ever life has brought us. Whatever mess we've found ourselves in. Whatever others have said about us. Or what we have believed about ourselves. And He says, I am Emmanuel: A God who is with you. A God who is for you. I LOVE YOU! Come follow me. Like Mary we are given the opportunity to say YES.

**You are included.** The people we least expect are included.

The poorest of the poor, the parents who had to wrap their baby up in rags and were visited by the outsiders, the shepherds, the foreigners, the elderly, that challenges me about who I include, and who I don't.

**Who are you welcoming this Christmas. Who are you not?**

And you are welcome tonight - not just to sing carols or learn more but say yes to a life changing adventure with that baby who grew up to be the man on the cross for us. Who is found in the most unexpected of places! Not in a palace where the magi or the Kings or Wise Men expected him, but in a hidden place of no importance to anyone, born in a borrowed place and a animals feeding trough. The divine in the middle of the ordinary.

**People say to me that Christmas is a time for the children.** If we've limited Christmas to being a time just for the children, then we've lost its meaning, and I challenge you to find it again. If Christmas to us is all about the fluffy sheep, the donkey and the shepherds tea towels, if Christmas is about the gifts we give one another and the tinsel and the festive trimmings, then we've limited our understanding of the magnitude and the wonder and the glory of the incarnation. Of the fact that the Maker of the Universe, willingly left all the glory and wonder of heaven to be handicapped as a helpless human so that he could begin the salvation plan that would win our hearts in Jesus.

There is so much more to Christmas than perhaps we've all been content with. And that starts with who God includes. And He includes you. He includes me. How will that change your Christmas this year? And your 2017? You are included. You are welcomed. You are loved. Emmanuel: God is with us! That is Good News for Christmas and for ever! Amen!