Cute – or scandalous? A Christmas Eve Sermon
Pastor Hubert Den Draak at Pinegrove United Church

First a quick pop quiz to test a theory I have: who here has ever been in a Christmas Pageant? Ah, quite a show of hands. Now, who of those folks desperately wanted to be a shepherd in the Pageant, like really really badly wanted to be shepherd. No one? Well, that confirms what I’ve been thinking.

When it comes to casting a Christmas pageant, shepherds rank low on the list of juicy parts. The most popular roles, of course, are Mary and Joseph. They get to travel on a donkey, Joseph goes around knocking on doors only to find a stable, Mary gets a baby… how can you top that?

After that, I guess it’s the three wise men are pretty cool; they get to wear fancy robes and bring gifts to the baby Jesus and say something deep and profound. And while angels maybe don’t quite rank with the wise men, at least they have more star power than shepherds, with their wings and halos and white robes going for them.

As for those shepherds, they get to wear bathrobes with blankets over their heads – think Linus from the Charlie Brown Christmas special here. No crowns, no wings – just blankets and bathrobes. No gifts and no grand songs to sing. While the angels hang out in the heavens, hogging the spotlight and broadcasting the good news, the shepherds hang out in the dark with sheep and dogs. There’s nothing all that exciting about the shepherd roles – except that Luke seems to think that they are important.

Luke’s birth story doesn’t include wise men, kings, or magi – whatever you want to call them. That’s Matthew’s version, literally a different story (just compare the two), basically because he had a different audience in mind. Maybe he knew that Christmas pageants would someday need some “star power” and so he added them into the mix – I don’t know. But Luke doesn’t seem impressed with star power and so instead of the three kings, he gives us… shepherds.

Shepherds lived on the margins of society, literally. The sheep they tended were not their own but belonged to the well-off people in town who hired these guys to do the hard work. They were a grubby, smelly, uneducated, rough-cut kind of people living on the edge of town. Nowadays we’d say they lived on the wrong side of the tracks. You didn’t want to meet a shepherd in a back lane after dark. They were at the bottom rung
of the career ladder; if you failed everything else, you could always become a shepherd. (Maybe that explains why no one really wants to play a shepherd in the Christmas play!)

Now let’s step back in time for a moment, and imagine yourself there with the shepherds. We’re outside in the fields; it’s pitch dark and absolutely quiet, except for the occasional sheep going baaahh… Suddenly, the silence and darkness of that night get ripped apart by an explosion of heavenly sounds, songs and lights. It scares the heck out of you, you’ve never experienced anything like this. It’s the angels, telling you the good news that in Bethlehem, the city of David, Christ the Lord has been born.

Now consider for a moment that this astounding, earth shattering, life-changing news comes first, not to Caesar’s palace in Rome, or his straw puppet king Herod in Jerusalem, or even a bunch of theologians – but to a group of smelly simple shepherds…! Just one more reminder that God’s ways of working often turns our expectations upside down. What makes sense to God doesn’t necessarily make a lot of sense to us.

And while we’re at it, have you ever thought about the fact that the Creator of the Universe chose to come to us… as a baby? An infant who needed non-stop care and comfort, diaper changes and lots of attention? Almost half of the babies born in those days didn’t make it through their first year. In Jesus’ days, being a baby was risky business! And yet, Jesus came as a baby… not as an angel with supernatural powers, not as a king with an unbeatable army, not even as a self-sufficient adult who needed no help from anyone.

Instead, he arrives as a helpless baby, born in a small town to a scared teenage mom and a confused adoptive dad who were in a strange city without any family around for support, depending on the kindness and hospitality of strangers in a big way.

God’s Son, the Prince of Peace, the Saviour came to us as a vulnerable child in some grubby animal shed. And the first people to hear about it and to see him were a bunch of losers and misfits. That’s not romantic or cute – that’s downright scandalous! What was God thinking?!

Well, for one thing, it tells us that our God is on the side of the poor, the misfits, the homeless, the powerless. And, that God is quite willing to take down the high and mighty. That is the good news the shepherds heard in that field, the news they couldn’t help but to spread around. Good news for sure – but also kind of weird and unusual news… No wonder nobody wanted to believe them at first…!

So as we return to our homes tonight and celebrate Christmas – gathering around trees to open presents, and around dinner tables to eat (too much) – let us remember who it is we have come to honour: a baby in a feeding trough, wrapped in some rags, surrounded by simple shepherds. God’s son…
Remember also that this is only the beginning of the story. Jesus doesn’t stay in the manger. Don’t let the cuteness of that scene lull us to sleep and cause us to forget the purpose of his coming. That purpose is to reveal to us God’s light in the darkness of this broken world, God’s coming kingdom of peace and enough for all – not somewhere in heaven or in the far future, but right here and right now.

And the beauty of it is, we are invited to be part of it; you and I; we get to get our hands and feet dirty working with Jesus, together with a whole bunch of other misfits, and oddballs, hypocrites and underdogs. Those are the people Jesus liked to be with, those are the people he blessed.

What are you willing to do to care for this tiny baby? How are you willing to change your life in order to give baby Jesus the attention and care he needs right now? And as he grows up, are you willing to follow him – even with a cross looming in the distance…? Amen!