

O HEAR THE ANGELS VOICES

A Thrill of Hope (Part 3) | Luke 2:8-10

I don't know whether you recognize or remember the name, Bob Kerrey, but – in an age where we often doubt the character of people in high positions, Bob was the kind of person who inspired hope. **Bob Kerrey** grew up in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he went to public school and then on to Vietnam with the Navy Seals. In time, Bob became the leader of Seal Team One. In one terrible battle, Kerrey was savagely wounded, yet valiantly kept leading his team, an act for which he was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor – our country's highest award for heroism. The injuries Bob received in that battle left him with scars he carried for the rest of his life. Nonetheless, Kerrey went on to serve as the Governor of Nebraska and then as a U.S. Senator and, in the early nineties, mounted a campaign to become President of these United States. His party chose a candidate named Bill Clinton instead.

I hope you are getting this picture. Bob Kerrey was not a perfect person -- but he was a mighty warrior, a luminous being, an authority who spoke from great heights. It could seem quite odd, therefore, that when Senator Kerrey decided to withdraw from the Presidential Primary race in 1992, one of the first people he phoned to announce the news was not another politician or a talk show host or a media figure, but a young woman – a very dear friend of our family -- named, **Barbara Burbach**.

Several years before, Barbara was riding in a Manhattan taxi cab when the reckless driver lost control of the car and crashed. Because there were no seatbelts in that cab, the accident left Barbara with a catastrophic head injury that disabled her in numerous ways and probably shortened her life by thirty years. In a single instant, this lovely farm girl from the fields of Nebraska – who, by the way, had just graduated from Yale Law School to a prestigious post with one of the nation's premiere legal firms – suddenly lost everything that this world deems "significant."

Over the years before, Barbara had donated thousands of hours to helping people who had lost much or who were lost themselves. Throughout her school days, she volunteered her remarkable mind to giving guidance and protection to a vast flock of impoverished people, otherwise at the mercy of wolves of this world. The accident took a lot from Barbara. But what it did not steal was the rare quality of her HEART. A woman of vital Christian faith and persevering compassion, Barbara pushed through her devastating, disabling injuries to champion seatbelt legislation that ultimately saved countless lives and won the admiration of Bob Kerrey. Scars and all, she continued to be the kind of caring shepherd with whom even Greater Shepherds, particularly the ones who understand scars, might want to share themselves. And so, when he had very important news to share, Barbara was one of the first that Bob Kerrey called.

I tell you this story because, on a vastly greater scale, this is something of the phenomenon we meet this morning in Luke's Gospel. It's hard enough to imagine a U.S. Senator baring his soul first to a brain-injured girl. We would certainly struggle to imagine Tim Cook choosing the late night custodial crew at Apple's headquarters as the people to whom he first revealed Apple's next life-changing technology. Yet at Christmas, Someone infinitely greater than Bob Kerrey or Tim Cook -- the God of the Universe himself -- chose to share the news that He was stepping down... that He was going to change lives globally through a radical breakthrough... and he elected to announce this first, not to famous Caesar, not to powerful Herod, not to the influential religious establishment -- but to a bunch of SHEPHERDS working the late shift in the Middle East's version of the Nebraska fields.

My question is WHY? What was it about those shepherds? Why'd they get the inside track? Why were THEY chosen to **Hear the Angels Voices** announcing the coming of the Son of God? And what does this tell you and me?

I think the answer is profoundly simple, or maybe simply profound. God shared the good news of Christmas with these people FIRST because the good news is that God has a Shepherd's heart. Jesus puts it this way in one of his most famous teachings: **Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep and loses one of them. Does he not leave the ninety-nine in the open country and go after the lost sheep until he finds it? (Luke 15:4)**

On the first day of Preschool for our eldest child, our three year-old went missing. I dropped him off in the classroom of our church's Preschool. I came back a little later to check on him and he was gone. "Um, where's my kid?" I asked the teachers. Unbeknownst to them, Rush had wandered off to watch the big yellow construction vehicles out in the parking lot. He's now driving those vehicles (!), but that's not the point. The point is, the energy with which I saw that Preschool staff go looking for our son was something amazing. I like to think they'd have exercised that energy for anyone's lost child and not just boss' kid!

That's what good shepherds do, says Jesus. They are relentless in their search for every lost lamb. **And when [the shepherd] finds it, says Jesus, he joyfully puts it on his shoulders and goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbors together and says, "Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep." (Luke 15:5-6)** Then, later on, when summing up WHY he had come to this world, Jesus says, this is the reason: **The Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost. (Luke 19:9-10)**

Let me ask you TWO questions. The FIRST one is: Do you have a shepherd's heart? Are you someone likely to **hear the angels' voices** -- in other words, to be someone to whom God would be more inclined to speak -- because you have a heart for the lost, the least, the last sheep -- as He does? Then, SECONDLY: Are you in need of a

shepherd? In other words, could the message of Christmas that there is a Good Shepherd seeking lost people especially good news for you?

One afternoon many years ago, some children chose the yard of author Robert Fulghum for a game of hide-and-seek and it awoke in him the heart of a shepherd. He goes on to ask: *"Did you have a kid in your neighborhood who always hid so good, nobody could find him? We did. After a while we would give up on him and go off, leaving him to rot wherever he was. Sooner or later he would show up, all mad because we didn't keep looking for him. And we would get mad because he wasn't playing the game the way it was supposed to be played... No matter what, though, the next time he would hide too good again. He's probably still hidden somewhere, for all I know.*

"As I write this, the neighborhood game goes on, and there is a kid under a pile of leaves in the yard just under my window. He has been there a long time now, and everybody else is found and they are about to give up on him over at the base. I considered going out to the base and telling them where he is hiding. I thought about setting the leaves on fire to drive him out. Finally, I just yelled, 'GET FOUND, KID!'

My roommate in college was a Jewish man named, Ira. We roomed together for all four years. He took me to his family's Passover meal in New Jersey. He was the guy who gave me the courage to run for head of the student government. He was the only friend from college who traveled out to California to attend our wedding. Ira became a beloved doctor on the East Coast. And then he developed cancer and never told me.

As Robert Fulghum says of a similar friend: *He knew about dying, and he didn't want to make his family and friends suffer through that with him. So he kept his secret. And died. Everybody said how brave he was to bear his suffering in silence and not tell everybody, and so on and so forth. But privately his family and friends said how angry they were that he didn't need them, didn't trust their strength. He hid too well. Getting found would have kept him in the game. Hide-and-seek, grown-up style. Wanting to hide. Needing to be sought. Confused about being found. 'I don't want anyone to know.' 'What will people think?' 'I don't want to bother anyone.'"¹*

Do you know anyone like that? Are YOU someone like that? I think we live in a Hiding Culture today. The American people are quick to expose the flaws and foibles of public officials, but very concerned about keeping under cover themselves. Individuals spend small fortunes to conceal the fact that they are aging. Businesses contort the balance sheet to hide losses. Behind our social media appearances, many of our families carry painful secrets – mentally ill loved ones, physical or sexual abuse, marital struggles, addictions, financial despair, criminal records, heart-breaking losses and more. Our affluence has allowed us (and our busyness has forced us) to a kind of isolation from one another unimaginable to the more intimate communities of an earlier era.

Technology has given us fresh ways to hide. It's the new pile of leaves. Email allows us the illusion of contact without the risk that face-to-face conversation poses that some of what we FULLY think and feel might slip through. Twitter and online worship lets us chat with others without even giving away our true name. Amidst a society where so many seem to be prosperous and put-together, we hide, lest our failures and fears, our vices and vanities, our losses and liabilities, our illnesses and idiocies – in short, our humanity -- be revealed.

But here is THE GOOD NEWS: *God loves human beings*. It is to real people that the Good Shepherd comes. **And this will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (Luke 2:12)**. God comes in the form of a helpless baby to show us that He does not despise vulnerability. He comes to live in a human body and to share our hungers and sorrows to show us that God can work through frailty. God comes to offer the staff of his truth to prod us back onto better paths, and the lifting hand of his grace to help us when we've fallen down. He WILL guide on the homeward way, those who are willing to be found. The question is, wherever you are out there in the field: *Are you willing to be found?* Will you hear the angels voices proclaiming the good news that God loves us all and is reaching out to us to bring us home to him.

One of the signs that you have been found and encountered Jesus is that you live with the heart of the Shepherd too. Your gratitude for God's continual seeking after and caring for you... your growing intimacy with Him... makes your eager to seek other lost ones too. Is that true of you? *Are you seeking those who may be lost or hiding?*

Last Sunday, I didn't have the responsibility of preaching, so I walked through our buildings and just struck up conversations with people. I asked them how they REALLY were and where they especially needed God's grace. People shared with me stories of facing illness and feeling loss and struggling with relationships. It was clear from the response that each gave to my asking and listening and resonating with them that it meant a great deal to them to be FOUND.

I hope you are doing that wherever YOU go too. I pray that if you have ***heard the angels voices*** – if you have heard the news that God truly loves human beings and has come to share life with them in all its beauty and pain – that you are seeking out people. I hope you are looking for them as you walk through the fields and finding them where they may be hiding under the leaves.

The Bible says that after the shepherds heard the angels: **They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child (Luke 2:16-17)**. I pray that you – like the shepherds in the Christmas story – are spreading the word. I hope that you are telling everyone you can and showing them by the way you listen to and love them that God is FOR real people.

He will meet any of us right where we are and help us go further than we dared to dream possible.

Ideally, the church of Jesus Christ is a band of under-shepherds. We are a fellowship of found-sheep who extend to others the grace we have received. We have a seeking eye for that child in our family, that colleague or friend, that neighbor or church-member who has gone into hiding. We create by our very vulnerability and humility, by our very kindness and care, by our gentle invitation and our persevering patience, an environment that says to others what the angel said to those watching over the flock that night.

Do you remember what that message was? **Do not be afraid**, said the messenger. **For I bring you good news of great joy that will be for ALL the people. (Luke 2:10)** Not just the put-together people but also the real people. Not just the presidential candidates but also the brain-injured ones. For, in the coming of the Christ Child, God is saying: "*Olly-olly-oxen-free... Come on in from wherever you are. Get found, kid. C'mon home.*"

O hear the angels voices: In Jesus Christ, God has come to find us all. And because of Him, you and I will now go out and help others be found.

¹ Robert Fulghum, *All I Really Needed To Know I Learned In Kindergarten*, p.56.