

**“Preparing for Joy”**  
**Christmas Eve—Luke 2: 8-20**  
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CCUMC  
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**The Lowly Shepherds**

The author of the gospel of Luke paints a lovely, pastoral picture. Shepherds tenderly watch over their sheep in a deepening, violet-colored dusk, with verdant green hills rolling about them. Lovely. What the author fails to mention, though, is that these shepherds are on other people’s lands that isn’t rolling and green, but rocky and hard. These shepherds also aren’t the gentle, tender type of guy. Shepherds were viewed by their culture as despicable, shifty types—forced to work with recalcitrant, smelly sheep because they couldn’t hold down any other work. Shepherding was a despised vocation at the time. These guys with the crook and the headdress and cinched robes were the lowliest of the lowly in their culture. Shepherds were not respectable types; you definitely don’t want your daughter going out with one of them. They were the outcasts, the outliers. Why else would they be out working, when all the decent folk in town were home eating their suppers? On this cold winter night, these shepherds are definitely not smiling as they herd the sheep—nor are they gentle. They are not having a good night this night; they are cold, smelly, and hungry. They are not speaking kind words to each other. These shepherds are in no spirit of peace and goodwill to all people. Their night surely wasn’t silent—it was filled with the bleating of sheep. . . and their own curse words. Their night surely wasn’t holy; it was cold and miserable.

**Lowly Christmas Eve’s**

I wonder if any of you have ever had Christmas Eves like the shepherds---where you felt cold or miserable, I wonder if even tonight might be like that for some of you. Curious

about people's experience of Christmas Eve, this night that is supposed to be holy and bright, I sent off a request to my friends on Facebook about Christmas Eve's during which they felt as lowly as those shepherds long ago.

A college friend of mine replied that a few years ago she needed to go out and get a few last minute things at the grocery store. She took her dad's truck, because her car was blocked in on the driveway. She did her errand, got in the truck, and proceeded to back directly into a car parked behind her. Ouch. The truck was a lot longer than her car, and she had underestimated the distance between vehicles. Showing herself as an honorable sort, she had the grocery store to page the owner of the vehicle. She stood outside, cold and miserable, hopping from one foot to the next, as she waited to introduce herself to the owner of the car she creamed on Christmas Eve. Not the best kind of way to meet people! Police were called, reports were filed---and my friend completely missed the Christmas Eve service at her church. She could identify with those lowly shepherds.

Another friend sent me a song by Kyle Matthew about a Christmas Eve with some misery in it. The song is called:

#### The Most Inconvenient Christmas

Among the bills that I received on Christmas Eve was a postcard marked "Apology,  
the Christmas gifts you ordered aren't in stock."  
So I packed up the kids for Grandpa's house  
Then a blizzard blew in and the car broke down  
So, we shared a quart of eggnog at a truck stop

By the time we got to Grandpa's house  
His Christmas lights had burned it down  
So we had to take him home to live with us  
But he couldn't stand to leave the farm  
So now there's cattle in our yard  
Sheep on the rug, pigs in the tub, and a rooster at dawn

But the most inconvenient Christmas ever was  
Was the first one, when God came so far to give himself to us  
So when the stress hits each December

How it helps me to remember  
God is with us most when things just can't get worse  
The most inconvenient Christmas ever was, was the first

Matthews reminds us that it is in those places of misery, those places of unfortunate events, particularly on a night like Christmas Eve, that God appears to us. Another friend of mine told a story of a Christmas Eve she spent in the ER. This friend lived at the time in a house of intentional community; they regularly welcomed homeless women to be residents in the house. On Christmas Eve, my friend watched and waited with a woman for whom she had offered room in the 'inn' as this woman gave birth. A modern day Mary, on a Christmas Eve my friend never forgets--because God appeared there in that ER room.

### **Angel Wings and Star Dust**

And so to those miserable shepherds long ago in a rocky field with stubborn sheep, God appeared. God didn't come to the kings on their thrones or happy people in their homes with glowing lights and food aplenty. God came to the poor, to the miserable, to the lowly, to the outcast. To them, God's angel said, "I bring you tidings of great joy!" Joy. Joy to you who haven't known joy in a while. Joy to you who feel forgotten or abandoned. Joy to you who live in brokenness. Those shepherds, who had only experienced discrimination and hardship, actually looked at each other and had a gentle conversation. "Hey, maybe we should go and check out what this angel dude is talking about." They decided to follow star to Bethlehem, to see this baby who loved them already more than they had ever known. Note here that in the book of Matthew, important magi are the ones to follow a star. In the gospel of Luke, it is the miserable ones, the humble and outcast ones, who see Jesus first. These hardened shepherds get brushed with angel wings, star dust, and the sound of a baby's soft breath. On this one glorious night, joy does come into their hearts as they have never known before. They are changed forever. With angel wing glitter still dotting their

headscarves and robes, they go forth praising God. They have been touched by grace and love. These shepherds, these miserable shepherds, have really experienced joy. Joy to world, the Lord is come!, they shout. “Let earth receive her king!”

Maybe some of you need God to appear to you on this holy Christmas Eve night. Maybe some of you have felt cold and misery in your life this year, this season, like those shepherds. One friend wrote to me of experiencing her beloved aunt die on Christmas Eve. Maybe some of you have lost significant loved ones this year. Maybe you feel forgotten or abandoned. Maybe you are living in brokenness. Maybe you need a brush with angel wings, a sprinkling of star dust, a gift of a baby’s breath that breathes salvation into your soul. You need to know that God is appearing to you this very night. You need to know that you are loved with a love deeper than any you have ever known. God’s angels are saying, “We bring you tidings of great joy!” Joy. Joy to those of you who haven’t known joy in a while. On this glorious night, joy can come into your heart. God is touching you with grace and love. So you too can go forth from this place with angel wing’s glitter and wonder sprinkling your shoulders. You too can sing with the shepherds, “Joy to the world! Let every heart prepare him room. Receive the wonders of his love, the wonders of his love, the wonders of his love.” Amen to joy.