

RETHINKING CHRISTMAS  
“*OUTSIDE IN; INSIDE OUT*”

First in a sermon series by James R. Blades  
First Presbyterian Church of San Luis Obispo, CA  
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Luke 14: 1, 12-24

These past weeks, we've been doing a lot of thinking about circles. We all have circles in our lives: circles of which we are a part, to which we are insiders; and circles of which we are not a part, to which we are outsiders. Most of us know how it feels to be an outsider and most of us have, from time to time, been guilty of making others feel like outsiders.

We've also observed how the heart of God from the beginning of Creation has always been to widen the circle to invite outsiders in. God's purpose in Creation, says the Bible, was to welcome many children into the circle of God's household. God's purpose in Christ was to redeem God's lost and wayward family—to welcome them back into the circle; not just the pious but the irreligious, not just the rich but the poor, not just the insiders of the community but the outsiders. “This man welcomes sinners.” There is the heart of the Gospel.

Now in this Advent Season, I want to take this theme a bit further: that the whole Advent narrative of the Bible, the whole Christmas story is, at its heart and core, the story of outsiders not only being included within the circle of God's redemptive drama, but being placed in the very center of it.

God chooses Mary and Joseph, plain undistinguished peasants to be the parents of the Messiah. They are outside every circle this world pays regard to; of power and privilege and influence and wealth. But here they are, front and center in God's redemptive story.

The mighty Caesar Augustus in Rome orders a census, a headcount for tax purposes, of all his empire's hapless subjects. Joseph and the quite pregnant Mary have to walk, yes walk, 70 miles from their hometown Nazareth to register in Joseph's birthplace of Bethlehem. Just as they arrive, Mary goes into labor and they find nowhere to lodge. So they go to the local inn, not the Holiday Inn but a string of outdoor stalls with a fire pit and some straw for bedding, a place where the rejects, bandits, and homeless stay. But not even there can Mary and Joseph find welcome. Some compassionate soul refers them to a nearby cave, outside the city, where animals are kept. They are outsiders.

Then you have the shepherds in the field, guarding their sheep by night. Shepherds were not workers of status. They went from field to field, hired hands, trying to eek out a bare living, working days and nights in the flock-fielding seasons, working to provide the clothing and food and temple sacrifices of the well-to-do. It is to them that the heavenly vision appears, to them that the invitation is delivered to witness the manger event.

Then there are the Magi. Not kings. Not wise men. The word *Magi* is the Persian root of our English *magic*. These were astrologers, sorcerers, interpreters of heavenly signs, from where? From the east! Most likely from Persia or Babylon. They too were outsiders. But God has spoken to them in their reading of the stars, and they come seeking the One born King of the Jews. And when they arrive in Jerusalem asking where the child should be born, King Herod calls his wise men together, the experts in the Hebrew Scriptures and they tell these foreigners where the child is prophesied to be born. Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem, though you be small among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth he who is to be ruler in Israel.”

And there you have the story of these outsiders going in search of God's wonder, while the insiders of the Jerusalem religious establishment show no evidence of going.

Do you see the theme breathing everywhere through these narratives?

Mary's Magnificat puts that theme to words:  
God has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;  
God has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.

The birth of Christ is but the opening sequence of the drama that spins out of the very core of Jesus' teaching and ministry. Not just a widening of the circle, but a redrawing of the circle altogether. Sinners sit at Jesus feet while the established religious hierarchy stands outside. The prostitutes and tax collectors crowd into the kingdom while Scribes and Pharisees turn a critical eye.

"I tell you," said Jesus, "that while many outsiders come pouring in from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, the heirs of the kingdom find themselves outside ..."<sup>1</sup>

Does this mean that God has something against the insiders to wealth and privilege and power? I certainly hope not because in that event, I and most of us here could count ourselves out!

It's not that God has a thing against such folks; it's that they have more trouble responding to God's invitation.

Remember the story of the rich young ruler in the Gospels? "I want to follow you," he said to Jesus. "Very well," said Jesus, "go sell everything you own and give it all to the poor and then come follow me." And it says the man turned away grieved, for he had great wealth. And how does it say Jesus saw this man? "And Jesus hated him"? No, it says, "Jesus loved him."<sup>2</sup>

"How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven," Jesus went on to say. "For the rich already have their consolation."

When I was back in high school, we got out of swimming practice at about 6 p.m. I was always just about famished. It wasn't easy standing the bus stop where Burger Chef and McDonalds wafted the fragrance of hamburgers and French fries into the frigid air. Most of the time, I resisted the temptation because I knew that my mom always had one of my favorites dinners waiting for me. But one night I was just too hungry. I ate up a cheeseburger and fries while I waited for the bus. I figured I was hungry enough to eat that AND to tackle dinner at home. But by the time I got home, my appetite was gone. I couldn't fake it. My mother saw me picking at my chipped beef on toast. "What's wrong, you don't like it?" she said. No, it was my favorite! Then I had to tell her the truth: I had eaten before I got home. Well, I could see it hurt her feelings and I thought twice about doing that again.

So what's the point? I think this has a bit of bearing on our discussion of why folks who are poor and hungry and powerless find their way in and why the rich and full and powerful find themselves out.

Not that God shuts them out, but that they are already so full of self-satisfaction that God's grace and comfort and spiritual blessing can not find a place.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," said Jesus, "for they shall be filled. But woe to you who are already full."

Which brings us back to the central theme of the Bible's Christmas story: How God redraws the circles of blessing to put at the center those typically left outside: the poor, the powerless, the stranger and alien. It is they whom we who are insiders to power and wealth have an opportunity to demonstrate God's own favor. That's the whole point of opportunities like

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<sup>1</sup> A paraphrase of Matthew 8:11ff

<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:17

today's Alternative Gift Fair. Instead of giving gifts to all our friends and family who are already rich and have everything, we have the opportunity to channel that blessing to people around the world who are at the heart of God's care while we send our friends or families a note of witness telling them where their gift has been invested. I hope all of us here will take advantage of that opportunity by shopping at our Alternative Gift Market in Wilson Hall today.

And then there's the opportunity we will all have in the next couple of weeks to bless the migrant families in our area who spend ten, twelve, fourteen hours a day of back-breaking labor picking the foods we enjoy. Many of them have barely the money to put food on their tables, let alone bless their families with Christmas gifts. We have the opportunity to bless those whom God specially blesses.

And here's something else the Bible reminds us of this Christmas season: that whatever our need, whatever our hunger, whatever the measure of our hope, whatever the depths of our despair, whether we're rich or poor, happy or sad, full or wanting, inside our outside, near or far, God's table of heavenly resource is set and we, whoever we are, are welcomed honored guests.

If anyone is thirsty, says Jesus, let her come to me and I will give living water. If anyone is hungry, let him come to me and I will give him the bread of heaven. If anyone is weary and burdened, come to me and I will give you rest.

The invitation is for you, whoever you are, whatever your history, wherever you are in your faith or doubting. If you are hungry or thirsty this morning: hungry for meaning, thirsty for reconciliation and forgiveness, hungry for peace, thirsty for God's kind and tender mercies; if you wish God to fill whatever your lack out of God's heavenly resources, come to the table.