

“Reaching for Him”

Scripture: Romans 15:1-13

Graphic: hands reaching, shepherds, Messiah

Key Verse: 7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you...

Ask them to: Reach for Christ this Advent and then reach for other for Him...

1) Introduction

- a) One night on the hills outside Bethlehem, an angel of the Lord announced to a group of shepherds the birth of their Savior.
- b) The shepherds weren't alone in the fields that night. The sheep in their care were also present—a mix of rams and ewes, yearlings and lambs. Most were filthy, I'd imagine, after spending the day in the fields. Some, probably bleeding and bleating, nursed cuts or other ailments. Some rams would have spent time that day butting heads, while others headed off on their own. Some stayed calm, while others stayed agitated. And there, in their midst, were their shepherds—perhaps hirelings—keeping watch over their flocks by night.
- c) That's the setting in which the angel of the Lord made the life-changing, world-changing announcement of a Savior.
- d) In These Days . . . On the night of December 24, 2007, in towns and cities around the world, we will once again share the message the angel of the Lord once proclaimed on the hills outside Bethlehem on that first Christmas night—news of the Savior, born for us.
- e) We will share that message in the presence of a unique mix of people—male and female, young and old. While outwardly many will come clothed in the finest attire, all will come spiritually filthy, covered in sin. Some will have spent their days butting heads, while others will have headed out on their own. Some will dread their first Christmas without someone they loved, while others will anticipate their first Christmas with someone they love. Some will have received a helpful end-of-the-year financial windfall, while others will find themselves falling more and more in debt. Some will have found the season invigorating, while others will have found it nerve-racking. Some couples will be celebrating their first Christmas as husband and wife, while others will experience their first Christmas as an ex-husband, an ex-wife. Some will come to life, surrounded with people, while others will

come to deal with loneliness, even when surrounded with people. Some will feel overly blessed, while others will feel overly stressed.

- f) That will be the setting when, all over the world, we announce the birth of the Savior to the flocks in our care.
- g) And it's OK to be willing to announce that birth to the people in our care...it is normal for us to celebrate together in the midst of our joys and struggles...as a congregation...
- h) And we are called to do that...
- i) Yet, if we stick to ONLY that, we are missing part of the plan that God has created...and that plan is for us to reach out to those outside the body of people gathered here...to reach outside our list of favorites...
- j) Cell phone companies these days are doing some interesting marketing...one company offers each subscriber free calls to the people that are included in their list of favorites, their **FAVES**.
- k) These are folks that are in our IN network...our best friends and family...a small group of people that we consider our IN crowd. From a sociological perspective, we sometimes form relational associations around our faves...
- l) And why not, Jesus had faves...12 disciples, Mary and Martha and Lazarus...this is a normal and comfortable thing...
- m) But while Jesus had favorites, he didn't have un-favorites. Those who were culturally shunned, like prostitutes and tax collectors, got an audience with Jesus. The ill, the crazy and the lame were not ignored, but sought out. Those who were healthy had no need of a doctor, it was the "sick" (Mark 2:17). You walked the extra mile, took a second blow to the chin and enemies were to be ... *gasp* ... loved.
- n) If Jesus had un-favorites, they were the religious elite who trumped love and grace with legalistic tradition. But even then he longed to gather his antagonists to himself, weeping over the Jews of Jerusalem who rejected him (Matthew 23:37).
- o) It's on Jesus' example of radical kingdom inclusion that Paul stakes an exhortation for unity, harmony and community deference in today's text. Paul closes his letter to the church in Rome by addressing the Jew-Gentile

tensions that existed in their fellowship. There were religious cliques in the church. An IN network and an OUT network. As we read Paul's encouragement, we can't help but think of our own church communities. And it's not so much about the in crowd and out crowd within the church...but, how are we reaching out to the entire community in ways that show them that we ALL can be part of what God is doing?

2) Romans 15:1-13

- a) Here's what Paul writes...Romans 15:1-13
- b) It's a given that we're to love all people, show compassion toward all, extend the hand of kindness to all regardless of station in life or the prospect of recompense or reward.
- c) But what is not so obvious is that we will have difficulty doing that, reaching out to EVERYONE in authentic and mature Christian love, until we ourselves understand the ways that God himself has reached out to us and to them – to the whole world and everything in it.

3) God Reached Out

- a) I would like us to understand three ways that God has reached out to the world...three ways that we can examine to see what it means in our own lives and in our church...
- b) And then I would like to suggest three ways WE can do the reaching as we prepare for the Advent of the Messiah to be born...
- c) #1 – God reach out...to the world through Jesus...
 - i) God's act of sending his Son Jesus to earth to be born as a human is an amazing testimony of God's ultimate desire to reach out to us and have a relationship with us.
 - ii) This mysterious incarnation, the act of God being born in human form, yet remaining fully divine, is unbelievable...it's incredible...and it's humbling...it begs to be disproven and challenged. Maybe you have spent time thinking about how incredible that truly is...maybe not...
 - iii) But in it's unfathomable depth, comes the simplicity of the plan...in order for us to know that God feels and understands us, our pain, our joy, our struggles and temptations, our relationships and emotions and

- dreams...in order for US to be assured of that...God KNEW that we would need a Savior who was like us...who looked like us and felt like us and lived like us...yet one who would be faultless and pure...sinless...
- iv) God reached out to the world through Jesus...and we can understand his plan and be part of it.
- d) God reached out...to the shepherds for Jesus...
- i) Baby Jesus, lying in the manger, remains a beautiful sight and is forever burned into our memories when we sign Silent Night on Christmas Eve.
 - ii) But if God leaves the story there...never tells anyone that the Messiah has been born to fulfill the words of the prophet and the promises to his people, then Jesus remains only a memory...
 - iii) Instead, God reached out to the Shepherds so that they would go and see the baby and worship him.
 - iv) It wasn't enough for God to create and let it be...the angels excitedly announced the birth...just like when we have a baby, we can't wait to send out those announcements. And it's not just so people will know...it's so they can be included in the joy...so they can share in the gift of the baby...
 - v) God reached out to the Shepherds...so they could share in the joy and be part of the plan...
- e) Turning to Paul's letter to the Romans, God reached out...to the Gentiles through Paul...
- i) It's all well and good that Jesus came for the salvation of the Jewish people, of God's chosen people...but he came so that EVERYONE would have life and life eternal.
 - ii) In Romans 15:8-9, Paul tells us that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised (the Jewish people) so that they might know that the promises God made have come true...
 - iii) AND...AND (in verse 9) so that the Gentiles (anyone not a Jew including us) may glorify God for his mercy...this, too, was God's promise from the beginning...

- iv) Christ came so that all who are made righteous by accepting Jesus as Lord and Savior might be saved...not just one group or another, one race or another, one social class or another...
- v) It's not about us, it's about God's transforming work through Jesus.
- vi) God reached out to the Gentiles...to us so that we would understand God's plan...

4) Reaching Out

- a) Growing a community of faithful believers is the mission of the church. For us to reach out, we have to understand what that mission means...what it means to grow the kingdom of God on earth...
- b) That mission is loaded, but there are three things, again, that we are called to do in response to how God has reached out to us...
- c) First, we are to...reach out to Jesus...
 - i) In order to grow a community of FAITHFUL believers, we have to start by reaching out to Jesus...
 - ii) How do we do that? You've heard me say this before...reaching out to Jesus is allowing the Jesus in the gospels, the living Lord to whom we pray, and the one who is praying for us to come alive in our lives.
 - iii) Read your Bible...start with the Gospel accounts of the life of the historical and personal Jesus. Imagine him sitting next to you teaching you...imagine him guiding you and praying with you.
 - iv) Jesus is real! And our first step to building unity in this world is knowing Christ ourselves...
- d) Second, we are to...reach out to each other...
 - i) Paul was writing this letter to the CHURCH in Rome, not to the Roman Senate or the community leaders...he knew his audience...he knew them by name...
 - ii) Effective witnessing...practicing our faith...learning from each other...challenging and loving each other when we say things we

shouldn't...asking for and offering forgiveness...these are the things we are called to do.

- iii) I think we sometimes lose sight of the fact that we are all here by choice...and staying involved in a church family means sometimes getting our feelings hurt...being disappointed...screwing up our relationships...and being down-right sinful...
 - iv) And yet, there is no place else in this community, in our lives, or in this world that we can do what we do here...where we can whole-heartedly accept each other, even through our differences...where we can practice being like Christ, reaching out to each other.
 - v) Building our faith together is the only way to have the church stand in the midst of this post-Christian culture...where it's perfectly acceptable to lie and cheat and steal from each other because there is no standard.
 - vi) In the church, with each other, there is a standard...there is a commitment...there is an expectation...and by the grace of God and our spiritual growth...we can reach out to each other and truly love like Christ loves...
- e) Lastly, we are to...reach out beyond the walls...
- i) The whole point of Paul's words in Romans, the whole point of Jesus' birth...the whole point of the shepherds and the wisemen and the prophets and angels...is to bring people into a saving relationship with God Almighty.
 - ii) If spend time always calling our list of faves...if we spend all our time reaching out to understand Jesus...and never turn our eyes on our friends and neighbors – inviting them into our lives and into our homes...loving them even in their cruddy sin...then the work of Christ is cut short.
 - iii) We have something to offer this community...we have a message that really can transform lives...we've all seen it...we've all had the opportunity to experience it...we are growing and God is working in amazing ways...this place will be filled...but not because of us...because God is here! WE ARE WITNESSES! What more do we need...
 - iv) God reached out to the world...he reached out to the Shepherds...he reached out to us Gentiles...we're reaching for Jesus and for each

other...let's continue to reach out to this community that is in as much need of a Savior as each one of us...and everyone may not be in our faves, but we aren't called to ministry only to our faves...Jesus wasn't.

5) Conclusion

- a) The Shepherds stood in the fields that night...minding their own business...
- b) And then the world changed...
- c) The news of that night is for everyone . . . everywhere. The Savior of that night is for everyone . . . everywhere. The baby of Bethlehem, the baby of heaven, came to change everyone in all ways . . . always. No matter where you've been or what you've been through, Jesus came to heal and help, to forgive and set free, to calm and care, to serve and save. Hope has been born and given the name Jesus.
- d) We have been through so much this year as individuals and as a church. You and I have each come with special needs, holding on to hope. The Lord has graciously called us to lead others to Bethlehem to behold the Lamb of God, who has come to take away the sins, hurts, and longings of the world. He leads us as we reach out to his people.
- e) God reached out to us...prepare to reach out to Him and to others...so that the hope the shepherds had will be the hope that others will have as well...
- f) Let's pray...