

When God Throws Us Together

Luke 2: 1 – 20

Farmville Baptist Church

December 24, 2022

Earlier this week, I was on my way home when I saw a most unusual sight: a woman chasing a scraggly little dog down the sidewalk. The woman was trying her best to call the dog and catch it, but the dog kept eluding her. Unfortunately it was also weaving in and out of traffic. I had visions of this little pup not making it to Christmas, so the next thing I know, I had cut my flashers on, pulled to the side of the road, and hopped out to help.

I wasn't the only one. A woman driving the other way leaned out of her window to give the lady chasing the dog a biscuit to lure it back. A man further up the street started flagging traffic to slow down. And two

roller bladers braving the chill December air glided up the sidewalk to help. Eventually, though we didn't catch the dog, we did herd it into its backyard, safe from the dangers of the passing traffic.

As I walked back to my car, I reflected on the random assortment of folks who had taken time at the end of their day to help a woman in need corral her dog. Some of us were coming from work. Some were out for exercise and recreation. At least one was having a snack. And then, in an instant, we were interrupted and engaged in a common mission: to keep this skittish dog from getting hit and get it back where it was supposed to be.

What happened to me and the other helpers that day this week has probably happened to you, too. And even if it hasn't, it's the sort of story you've heard before.

Random collections of people drawn together for a purpose – whether that purpose is relatively limited or worldwide in scope – that theme is common to life. It is so common that it finds expression in our cultural stories. We see it driving the plot of many sports shows and movies, from *The Sandlot* to *Ted Lasso*, it is the foundation of the appeal of military adventures like *Band of Brothers*, and Tolkien's masterpiece *The Lord of the Rings* centers on a motley collection of random characters with a mission to save the world. We tend to like, or at least see, lots of stories about folks thrown together, because that's true to life.

So maybe we shouldn't be surprised that it happens in the Christmas story, either.

It starts with a man and a woman, engaged to be married. They are from Nazareth, in the northern region

of Galilee, and she is pregnant. But because of a Roman-mandated census, this couple must journey south, to the man's ancestral home of Bethlehem in Judea, near Jerusalem.

They are hardly the only ones. Indeed, so many folks with deep roots in Bethlehem are there that the couple, Mary and Joseph, can find no lodgings. The inn is booked up. No spare rooms are available. So when Mary goes into labor, far from home and family, she gives birth among the animals. We traditionally picture her in a stable, but all we know or certain is she laid the baby in a manger, an animal feeding trough, because so many random people have been thrown together that there is no room in the inn.

And there is yet one more group of people to be thrown into the mix. Bethlehem, like virtually every

town in the ancient world, was an agricultural town. Crops would have been grown wherever a field could be found, and animals would have been encountered at every turn. Among the animals were sheep, and sheep require shepherds. While the out-of-town crowds filled every building in Bethlehem, the local shepherds were where they always were – out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. And there they would have stayed - except God was about to throw them together with Mary and Joseph for a divine purpose.

[Read Luke 2: 9-12]

The messenger of God tells the shepherds good news of great joy: after centuries of waiting and hoping, the Messiah has come! The Savior is here, right here, in Bethlehem, lying in a manger as a helpless baby. It was a bolt from the blue for the shepherds, the last people

who could have expected to be involved in events of such magnitude. But here they were, thrown into the mix of God's cosmic plan, and they didn't question it or tarry on the way. They went in haste to find Mary and Joseph and Jesus. Then they went off as the first evangelists, the first to bear the news to others, spreading the word that God's plan was in motion and the Savior had arrived.

What an oddball cast of characters! What a tale of random people, from far away and right in town alike, brought together by God for the start of the greatest story ever told! It's improbable in the extreme that these would be the people thrown together for the incredible things God was doing-but they were.

And it really shouldn't surprise us.

You see, God, it seems, likes to throw together the unlikeliest, most random people to accomplish his work in the world.

Noah was a man out of step with the world around him.

Abraham was a childless nomad and a stranger in a strange land.

Moses was a disgraced foster child on the run from the Law.

Ruth was a despised foreigner who just happened to marry a man who died and who came back home during a famine with her grief-stricken mother-in-law.

David was the runt of Jesse's litter of children.

Esther was a teenaged girl who was commanded to join the harem of the king.

Even the disciples, the followers of Jesus who would lead the church he started, they were fishermen and tax collectors, uneducated laborers and despicable collaborators who no one expected to lead anything of consequence.

Yet God used every one of these folks in powerful ways to accomplish his mission of love and grace in a world that desperately needs it.

So maybe it shouldn't surprise us that Jesus arrived amidst a group of people who seemed to be randomly thrown together – for that seems to be how God usually works.

It didn't appear to surprise Mary that night. As the shepherds departed to spread the word of her son's birth, the text tells us that she began to ponder all that had happened. The Greek word translated as "ponder" is

the word "*symballo*." A more literal translation is "thrown together." Recognizing the mysterious, powerful ways God was moving, the postpartum Mary saw the seemingly random threads and pulled them together to see the great work of God and the one holding it all together at the center: her newborn son, Jesus.

Tonight, we are here for all sorts of random reasons and from all sorts of random places. Some are here because of family connections, others because of location. Our motivations probably vary, but include some combination of relationship, tradition, and devotion. We truly are a random collection of people gathered here tonight. But God has always been at work among folks randomly thrown together.

What might God be looking to birth in our midst this night? How might Jesus be planning to find room within your heart and mine? If we, brought together from many places and for many reasons, will open ourselves to his coming in our lives, how might God's love arrive in our midst and take root in our town, community, and world? When God throws his people together, great and amazing things happen. What will happen as a result of this night, as we are thrown together in celebration of the birth of Jesus?