

Who's the loser?
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"Baby Steps"
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At the time of Jesus, shepherds ranked among the lowest of classes. They were migrants employed for jobs few wanted. Night work. Poor wages. The unwanted and rejected ones. Interesting, how they were among the first to be told the good news of Jesus. Interesting, how they who were caretakers of other people's sheep were first to receive care? The Bible never tells how many shepherds were out in the dark fields that night. We are told how Jesus didn't go to them, they had to go to him. Their night out in the fields didn't turn out as they expected.

Did those poor shepherds have any ember of hope glowing in their souls? They must have had. Why else would they agree to go and see? You don't always have to take a giant leap of faith. Little steps will do. A shepherd's first step toward the valley. Baby steps. Baby Jesus steps.

Within eyeshot of those shepherds that night would have been the oil lamp-lights and torches flickering from Herodium, King Herod's palace fortress, three miles southeast of Bethlehem. Herod's pride looking down on them all from its high hill, the fortress palace darkly silhouetted by moonlight. Built two decades earlier than this night of shepherds. Herodium – proof of King Herod's rule, magnificence, might, proof of his fear. The Royal Apartments. Four towers with high walls for security from attack. Herod's refuge. Seven stories high. Garrisoned by tough soldiers. Spacious central courtyard and atrium. Pleasure gardens, a pool, a colonnade. Exquisite mosaics on the bathhouse floor. A private theatre. A throne room for Herod the Great. One of the finest, most magnificent, most formidable luxury resorts in the entire Mideast. Within view of these losers, these shepherds.

Come now, what qualifies as greatness? What of Herod's kingdom endures? Which kingdoms offer promise? Herod's Herodium solitary on its high hill or the spiritual kingdom to be discovered in the homes and hearts in the valley below? Which one gives hope for lives of struggle and loss? For life unfair, hardships so very hard?

The shepherds ask: which of the two would welcome broken and forgotten men like us? Who will respect us? Herodium? Or in the village below? Which one deserves moving toward? Which one is worth the risk and effort to go and see what is hard to believe? Will we be defined by Herod's wasting weakling world of "my will be done, not Thine," a bullying lethal world that gives nothing, only takes, demands, dominates? Or the reality this child brings, reveals, offers?

Something is required of them. Taking a step. A choice. Choose your savior. Herodium? Or a warm room in Bethlehem smelling of livestock and fresh baked bread, where a new mommy nestles her dependent newborn against her breasts? Life purchased in blood and water.

Herod's Herodium? Me-first Herod who fails to cultivate beauty, to make the world better for others? Or this baby born in lowly, ordinary Bethlehem? Come as baby to understand the lonely weakness of humanity in order to embrace humanity, to serve humanity, to fulfill humanity, to release humanity from itself. Come to make us human. This power Herod forfeited. Who brings death? Who brings life? Who's the loser?

Bethlehem, never Herodium, offers lowly them a faith which welcomes people hungry enough to bring themselves, those who want to be heard, those willing enough and brave enough to listen. Our world wearies of hollow, selfish men. We deal with particular needs, particular situations, particular prayers. Jesus comes in the particular, not the absolute, not the universal. Jesus of the particular. What good is God without flesh? Hello, Christmas.

“Do You Hear What I Hear?” You might be familiar with this lovely Christmas carol. We rarely hear it in church. I like it. Bing Crosby made it a hit back in 1963 but it was written a year earlier. The two composers broke down every time they tried to perform the song. Why? They wrote it while listening to news reports about the Cuban missile crisis. They, the story goes, watched mommies push their babies in strollers, and they asked, “Are we deaf to words of peace, attentive instead to the reverberating drumbeat of conflict?” So they composed this gentle carol: “Said the king to the people everywhere, ‘Listen to what I say! Pray for peace, people everywhere, Listen to what I say! The Child, the child, sleeping in the night, He will bring us goodness and light.’”

What will we bring?