

The Christmas Omen

1. Warm-up: Everyone's invited to the Church Family Open House at Jeff and David's home, 10838 Midnight Dr., Indianapolis, from 1:30 pm to 8:00 pm on Christmas Day. You can swing by for the whole day or just a few minutes. Christmas dinner will be served buffet style, as well as appetizers and lots of scrumptious desserts. Speaking of dessert, what's your favorite Christmas dessert?

2. Sunday's sermon began with the story of a Honduran man named Mateo. He was an accountant, living a quiet life with his dog Bruno, when a powerful gang began targeting him. At first they extorted money for protection, then they began demanding financial information about his clients. When he refused, they invaded his house and beat him. He fled barefoot, leaving everything behind, knowing his government was too weak to protect him. In a situation like that, a person has three choices: (a) cooperate with the gang; (b) refuse to cooperate and be killed; or (c) flee your country and hope to find mercy in a new land.
 - a. If this happened to you, which choice would you make and what feelings would be swirling inside you?

 - b. Have you ever known a refugee? What kinds of experiences did they encounter?

3. Mateo's story is also the story of the first Christmas. We all know that Jesus was born in a barn because "there was no room for them in the inn." Luke 2:7. That was an omen of something even worse to come. Matthew 2 tells us that a Roman-appointed regional king named Herod got word that a child destined to be king had been born in Bethlehem. "Herod . . . was infuriated and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under." Matthew 2:16. Mary and Joseph barely escaped with baby Jesus and fled to Egypt.
 - a. We know little about Mary and Joseph's experience as refugees in Egypt, but we can imagine. As they sought housing and work and tried to fit in, what kinds of positive and negative responses do you imagine they encountered? Describe some scenarios of what may have happened – good or bad.

 - b. As Jesus grew up, he heard Mary and Joseph tell stories about their fearsome flight to Egypt and their time as refugees there? What do you think was going on inside of Jesus as he heard these stories?

 - c. Even when Herod died and Mary and Joseph moved Jesus' back to their hometown of Nazareth, he was probably the victim of rumors from skeptics about the circumstances surrounding his conception. He was likely regarded as a "bastard child." When describing this, Jeff asked, "Do you know what it feels like to be an outsider, someone who doesn't fit?" Tell us about a time in your life when you felt like a vulnerable outsider? How did that feel? How did you cope? How did that experience affect how you feel about others who are outsiders?

4. Jesus' early formative experiences as an outsider gave him a huge heart for all who are outsiders. We see that in his empathy for the religiously despised, for Samaritan victims of racial prejudice, for the woman accused of adultery, for the poor, and for the sick and disabled. For example, read Matthew 8:1-3, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Leprosy was as feared in ancient times as AIDS in the 1980s. People feared being near or touching lepers. Lepers were forced to live outside the gates of the city. How do you think Jesus felt in that moment when he reached out to touch the leprous man?
 - b. How do you think the leprous man felt when Jesus touched him? Why do you think Jesus chose to touch him?
5. Lepers weren't the only ones forced outside the gates of cities. Criminals were also executed there. When rejected by his own people and condemned, Jesus was forced to carry his cross out of the city to Golgotha to be crucified. His life had now come full circle. In death as in birth, there was no room for him.
 - a. Hebrews 13:12 says, "Jesus also suffered and died outside the city gates to make his people holy by means of his own blood. So let us go out to him, outside the camp, and bear the disgrace he bore." What do you think that verse means? What is it asking us to do? Give some practical examples of what this means.
 - b. Jeff shared the story about how in 1985 Tammy Faye Bakker boldly challenged conservative Christian prejudices by doing a compassionate, sympathetic 25 minute interview with Rev. Steve Pieters, a Gay pastor with AIDS. During the interview, Tammy Faye challenged prejudices against gay people. She declared that Jesus loves everybody and spoke to Steve like a fellow believer. There was a huge backlash against her. Tell us about a time in your life when you've deliberately "gone outside the gates of the city" to take a stand with Jesus for someone who was different and vulnerable. How did that feel?
6. We tend to think of shepherds in the Bible as wonderful people. That's how shepherds were presented in the Old Testament. But by the time of Jesus, cities had grown, population got denser, and farming became common. Roving shepherds whose herds trespassed on the property of others and trampled crops became villains. Scholars tell us that shepherds became lumped together with other despised professions like gamblers, usurers, and tax collectors. In short, shepherds were "sinners." With that in mind, read Luke 2:1-11, as printed on p. 3.
 - a. Given the foregoing background about shepherds, why do you think God chose to send the angels to the shepherds? What message or signal was God sending?
 - b. On Sunday, Jeff reminded us that our church property was once part of the Underground Railroad. That too feels like an omen signifying the kind of church we are meant to be. In what ways is our church like the Underground Railroad?

Matthew 8:1-3

When Jesus had come down from the mountain, great crowds followed him; ²and there was a leper who came to him and knelt before him, saying, 'Lord, if you choose, you can make me clean.' ³He stretched out his hand and touched him, saying, 'I do choose. Be made clean!' Immediately his leprosy was cleansed.

Luke 2:1-12

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good tidings of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'