

Blessedness

BY JOY JORDAN-LAKE

To say that God chose to walk on earth among the lowly makes for quaint nativity scenes and lovely hymn lyrics, but what if Jesus still chooses to move among those from whom we would most like to distance ourselves?

He's such a redneck," my brother David muttered, recounting some latest antic of a middle school teammate who came from the 'back side' of our Tennessee mountain hometown.

The eager little sister, I nodded. "Yeah, what a redn—"

"We *don't*," our mother scolded from the kitchen, "call people 'red-necks.'"

So David repeated, louder this time, his teammate's behavior, uncouth and crude.

Backing big brother up, I snickered.

"Yes," our mother called over the pop and splatter of frying chicken, "but we *don't* call people 'rednecks.'"

My brother and I exchanged glances that said simply, *why the heck not when that's what someone just is?*

Our mother's linen closet shelves bore labels every eight inches: fitted twin sheets, baby blankets, pillowcases.... Labels were how you knew what you were dealing with, weren't they? A fitted twin sheet or a first-cabin redneck. It was helpful to know.



Over the years, my brother grew a compassionate heart and began a professional life in Washington, D.C., where he polished a politically correct vocabulary which mostly excludes the term *redneck*.

I, on the other hand, began my professional life in Boston, where I quickly learned that I was one: a redneck of the first order.

I first understood I was an inbred, backwater hick when I moved to New England. True, I started life in the North with a southern accent, a too-

big '80s blonde perm, a Tennessee license plate, a favorite pair of fringed, cut-off shorts, and a deep discomfort in and around shoes.

Still, it irked me when Bostonians, after they had gotten an earful of my accent, would ask, enunciating slowly as one speaks to preschoolers and the not-very-bright, "where *in the South* are you from?"

So I tried to instruct my northern friends in the differences between The South and The Redneck South (since my mother was a thousand miles out of earshot). I spoke of the home of my childhood best friend, whose parents quoted Shakespeare at the dinner table, whose walls displayed African masks, and whose bedside tables boasted recent issues of *The New Yorker*. I distinguished between the kinds of southerners who listened to "Dixie" on the horns of pickups and the kinds who, like my mother, prefer Wagner to Vince Gill.

In the face of assumptions that labeled all southerners as Beverly Hill-billies and Bull O'Connors, I defended myself with even more labels, by sorting people into discernible types: *Us* and *Them*.



Yet, surely more than any story of a god's contact with mortals, the earthly appearance of Jesus messed with categories of Us and Not Us. This God chooses a young woman not for urbane sophistication or status, but for her spirit of servanthood and her pluck. Jesus' mother, Mary, was not remotely part of the respectable middle class.

There is the tough-to-explain-to-the-neighbors prenuptial pregnancy, the donkey ride to Bethlehem where nobody's giving this couple the time of day (much less a room), and the barn that serves as maternity ward. The stuff of *Very Not Us*.

From November through January every year, a hand-painted nativity scene graces my dining room: it is the romantic Hallmark-card scene we all treasure. No manure clings to the tails of the camels or sheep. None of the shepherds are missing teeth or a shave. The Wise Men, handsome and pleasantly racially diverse, have arrived a couple of years ahead of schedule in order to be included in the ceramic casting. Slender, well-manicured ceramic Mary has lost all her pregnancy flab while Joseph appears well-rested and calm, as if he has been helping deliver babies who are not his and laying them in cattle troughs every day for the past year.

I love this nativity scene.

Yet the real scene must have been far more disturbing: the truth is, the shepherds in that culture were several social rungs below rednecks – if you'll forgive my using the word.

From what biblical scholars tell us, shepherds as a social group did not *choose* watching sheep as a professional calling so much as they were already on the run from the majority culture: outcast, uneducated, crude,

and more than a little murky on personal hygiene. *Abiding in the field* was where the townspeople preferred them. Shepherds were people who could not afford the double-wide mobile homes of their richer kin and so slept outdoors with the sheep.

These were a people who were not well-traveled, well-read, or well-bred—both boorish and boring. In the poem “At the Manger,” one of W. H. Auden’s shepherds comments that they have “walked a thousand miles yet only worn / the grass between our work and home away.”



Just yesterday, my own middle school child startled me.

“He’s *such* a loser,” she concluded a story to her younger brother, who chortled, and nearly choked on his grapes.

“Yeah,” he agreed. “What a los —”

“We *don’t*,” I called from the kitchen, “call people ‘losers.’”

A room away, I could not see their two faces, but I still knew their glances said how Mom did not get how some people just *were*.

“Got *that*?” I called in to the smirks.

“Yes, ma’am,” they quickly called back.

Middleschoolers function much the same way as adults, don’t they? Is it that we never quite outgrow our childhood tendencies to divide the rocks we have collected into igneous and metamorphosis and the people we know into winners and losers, into nice people *without* rusted-out cars in front yards and, oh, rednecks? Or do children learn from adults about the thrills of categorization: the rich and the poor, the majority and minority race, the educated and uneducated?

Jesus, the gospel writer Luke wants us to hear, comes into this story of a minority-culture, surely illiterate, Nobody girl. An angel announces she is highly favored by God.

Then a whole sky of angels shows up to a group of loser-rednecks in the fields, just them and their stench and their pasts and their flasks. Then the heavens are blazing and ringing with song, and the shepherds choke on their wads of tobacco and trip over their bottles of Jack Daniels and shake in a huddle together. And then they are all sobbing, just like you and I would be, because they are so scared, and so amazed.

Because the God who tossed the planets in place has just announced that for those made in the divine image, the old labeling systems will no longer work. Except for one word.

“Blessed,” says Luke, quoting the baby born in the cow barn who grows up to be Jesus, “blessed are the poor.” *Blessed*.

Blessed are you who scrape together the dollars and dimes to buy groceries, to take a feverish child to the doctor.

Blessed are you when your appearance — skin color, gender, or the tattered rags of your past — has caused wrong assumptions about who you are.

Blessed.

Because: God sees. God cringes. God weeps. God lowers the gavel.

Because God has shown up in flesh in a way that announced with one heaven of a public address system that if there is any partisanship in the eternal realm, it's on the side of the crowd who is misunderstood, who never yet got their fair share. But *will*.

The truth is, this good news is appalling news, really, if we are still at the table dividing our rocks and our stamps and the people we know. If we have got ourselves in the box with the gemstones, the wealthy, and the winners. The Arrived. The Accepted.

The news is horrific if we have got ourselves at the top of the food chain, and someone just upended the chain.

The gospel becomes good news only if we have somehow wised up and lumped ourselves alongside the losers and strugglers, or alongside those who have somehow, at some point, messed up. It is good news only if we know the inside story about who we are, despite all that the outside world thinks we have achieved.

Good news: to all of us rednecks and losers left out of the loop and to all of us with the lingering stench of old sins, the done and not-done.

There are in the same country, shepherds. Fear not.

For unto us is begun a hierarchy turned on its head. A mixing up of the segregations. A muddling up of the social classes.

A messy, glass-all-over-the-road kind of collision of Us and Them.

Not exactly what we were hoping?

Maybe that's why it is a command: *Fear not*.

For unto us rednecks and losers who have discovered we bear the image of God, us screw-ups who have become the breath-knocked-out-of-us grateful, unto us who fall with our faces to the frozen scraggly field, unto us *blessed* is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.†

NOTE

† This article is adapted from my book *Why Jesus Makes Me Nervous: Ten Alarming Words of Faith* (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2007). Used by permission of Paraclete Press, www.paracletepress.com.



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