

The Poinsettia Perspective

By Rebecca W. Dolch

Perspective is everything. Our experiences are colored by our point of view. Take the Christmas poinsettias. If you look at the poinsettias from the perspective of being in the balcony, they are a beautiful bank of color, artfully arranged.

If you look at the poinsettia up close, you see a radiant golden star shining from the center of a flower.

If you look at the poinsettia from the per-

spective of a person who donated the flower in memory of someone they love and miss very much at the holiday season, the poinsettia is a symbol of how grief and beauty, the emptiness of sorrow and the fullness of love are all at work at the same time.

If you look at the poinsettias from the perspective of the people who take them in and out of the sanctuary several times to give them water and light, the poinsettias are a lot of work.

If you look at the poinsettia from the perspective of a person who is homebound, and will receive it some Sunday afternoon in Advent, then the poinsettia is a friend from the church. It is a reminder that you belong and are not forgotten. It is a gift.

If you look at the poinsettia from the perspective of rural Mexico, it is an unpotted wildflower, a weed. If you see it in the grocery store, it is tinted bright yellow or pale lavender and sprinkled with glitter, a consumer marketing ploy to widen its secular appeal.

Your poinsettia perspective defines how you experience the flower.

The Christmas story is one big exercise in perspective. Take the shepherds, for example. If you hear about the shepherds from the point of view of one of the boys or girls who will be a shepherd in the Christmas Eve pageant, you might be thinking how cool it is to carry one of those big shepherd sticks. You might fantasize about having a sword fight with another shepherd, or taking the crook of the shepherd's stick and hooking one of the little kids dressed up like a sheep, or fighting off a big bad wolf who might be trying to eat your flock.

If you heard about the shepherds from the point of view of religious people of Jesus' day, you would be quite shocked. Shepherds were looked down upon by the orthodox people for a variety of reasons. They could not keep the details of the ceremonial law such as all the meticulous hand-washings. They could not get to the temple for all the religious services, because they couldn't leave the flocks. They touched animals and blood. Socially and politically, the shepherds were *personae non grata*, they lived an ungodly lifestyle. Why would they be the first ones to hear about the messiah from the Angels of the Lord? Is this a mistake? Is God crazy?

If you hear about the shepherds from the perspective of marginalized people, demonized people, poor people, or people who have made huge mistakes, you would be filled with grace and hope, knowing that God's love and acceptance is not limited by societal interpretations of "who is in, who is out" with God.

If you hear about the shepherds from the perspective of social justice, you may be ashamed and sad that our ancestors in the faith were so prejudiced. Also, you may be hopeful, trusting that the ridiculously generous grace of Christ is stronger and broader than the ideas of people, and it will prevail.

And if you hear about shepherds from the point of view of the angels looking down upon the faithful servants abiding in the hills, keeping watch over their flocks by night, you will remember forever the sky luminous with holy light, celestial music, more beautiful than anything you have ever heard. Every day you will look for those holy beings, angels, from a transcendent realm giving YOU the message that the world so wants to hear:

Don't be afraid. I bring YOU good tidings of great joy. Unto YOU—the shepherd, the person that the world thinks is not worthy—unto YOU is born this day, the messiah, the Christ. YOU can go and find him. He is not a king living in a place where you are not allowed to enter. He is a baby, lying in a place where animals feed.

Part of the spiritual journey is being conscious of where we stand when we engage the world. One reason church life is so amazing is that we are forced to deal with others' perspectives if we are going to serve together. Christian community stretches us. It is not always fun, but it has

the potential to save us from our limited perspective.

It was the Sunday before Christmas when a certain member of the congregation showed up early for worship. His life was profoundly influenced by mental illness, and he often came early to talk to people and to tell me things. We all loved him, but sometimes when I heard his voice in the hallway, I would scurry away to be doing something else so I didn't get caught in his endless monologue.

"Rebecca," he yelled from across the sanctuary, "Pastor Rebecca, you will not believe what happened to me. You will not believe the good luck I had this morning."

I had to respond, but I thought to myself, "I can't believe my bad luck of being trapped in conversation ten minutes before worship starts."

"Oh, tell me about it," I said in my most pastoral voice. He began to describe in great detail his walk to church. I looked at my watch. He went on and on, and finally told me that when he was near the church he looked down, and there on the sidewalk was a quarter. He showed it to me.

"I couldn't believe it," he said. "Can you imagine my luck? I think the Lord must have put it there for me to find on Sunday morning."

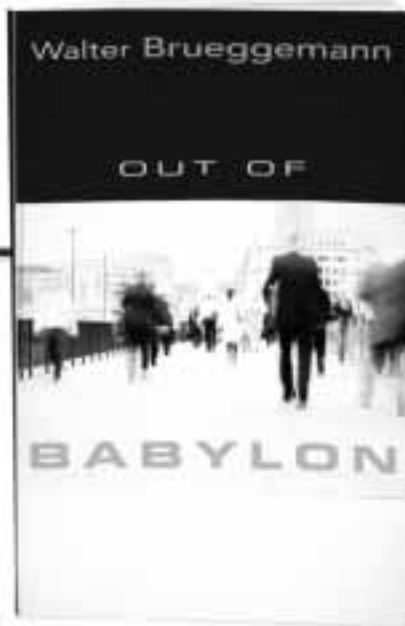
"Wonderful," I responded. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Are you kidding? I'm going to put it in the offering plate. This quarter belongs to Jesus. He's the one who helped me find it."

Suddenly my perspective changed. I heard an angel proclaiming good tidings of great joy. I encountered a shepherd bringing a gift to Jesus. I saw a poinsettia up close, its radiant golden star shining from the center. □



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BABYLON IN THE 21ST CENTURY

It was the center of learning, commerce, wealth, and religion. Devoted to materialism, extravagance, and the pursuit of sensual pleasure, it was a privileged society. But, there was also poverty and injustice in the great ancient Babylon.

We now find Babylon in today's society, exhibited in consumer capitalism—a never-ending cycle of working, buying things produced with little regard to resources, societal violence, excluded people, and potential climate calamity. How can we escape these gated communities and high-rises of overindulgence, and the darkness at the core of an apostate consumer society?

In *Out of Babylon*, Walter Brueggemann, a scholar, preacher, and prophetic voice for our time challenges us to examine our culture, turn from the idols of abundance, and turn to lives of meaning and substance.

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