

Concept C

December 24, 2012

Peter Hiatt

[A soloist sings, "I Wonder as I Wander" and the service begins with a live nativity performed by children, and Larry the Shepherd as one of the shepherds.]

[Peter is dressed like a "redneck" with a logger-man shirt with the sleeves cut off, an old baseball cap, old jeans, work boots and a walking stick.]

Dagum! Y'all look purty.

Sid you know that yer pastor is a genius? Yes sir.

He got hisself a time machine, traveled back in time, found me, and said "Come to the future n help with our livin' fertility scene, (er some such thang) then stick around and tell us about Christmas, cause I ain't so sure that folks get the concept."

So that's why I'm here, wrote down my story so I wouldn't forget nothin... "get-r-done."

My name is Larry, and I'm a shepherd.

Now before we begin, I knowed what some of you is thinkin: "Hey you stupid towel head, why'd ya take yer sheet off?" Well, that was for show. We wore sheets and towels alright, but only because we didn't have access to fine apparel like this. [Peter points to his shirt and jeans.] You bet yer dog we woulda worn this...even says "Levi" on the hind end. I supplied sheep for the Levites in the temple. See? I'm a Jew from Bethlehem just south of Jerusalem.

Just a second...I could use a dip. Now...don't worry, since I got religious I switched from Skoal to Folgers. I just keep it in this can for convenience. [Peter holds up a can of chew.] No need for high-tech coffee devices. Ya just put a pinch of Juan Valdez between yer cheek and gum. At first ya get espresso. (Ya don't like espresso...just spit er out and in a minute you got yourself a mello, yet full bodied, French roast.) I think I'll have a latte...or maybe mocha frappuccino.

Now, some of y'all may be a bit perturbed. Yer thinkin: "Dagum, it's Christmas Eve and I got dressed up n everything, and now I gotta listen to a redneck n watch him spit? Dagum! I've been to the mall and I seen the nativity scenes, them shepherd boys look nice and respectable and clean. Dagum! This feller looks like he stinks, and it's Christmas for gosh sakes."

Well, if that's you, maybe you don't get the concept. Religious folks in my day didn't get the concept neither: Concept C – Concept Christmas. To understand concept C you gotta understand Concept A and Concept B.

You might reckon A to be right over here. ["Larry" moves to his far right]

"A" stands for stuff like: A+, Antiseptic, Angelic, Alleluia, and Amen.

A stands for "hagios." In Greek that begins with A, and it means holy, God is holy.

Now, no one knew for sure what Concept A was, or what holy meant. Exceptin' we was perty sure it didn't mean sheep poop, spittin' or sin. It meant clean, and everything unclean was to be atoned for, like made up for, and the unclean things disposed of, "outside the camp."

In my day, Jerusalem was the "camp." Inside of Jerusalem was the temple and inside the temple was the Holy of Holies– The Sanctuary, and in that...Concept A–*Agnus Dei*–glory of God.

Them priests and Levites that worked the temple had to constantly clean themselves, take baths, use perfume and such. And not just them but every good Jew. Some bathed three times a day...looked like dagum prunes.

Well, think of Concept A right here. [Larry moves to his far right] It's clean, holy, God.

And over here [Larry moves to his far left] Concept B.

B stands for: Bottom, Behind, Butt (and I mean the conjunction of course) Booger, Burp, Bad gas, Barn (my barn) Concept B = My Barn.

Of course it wasn't my barn; it was my Boss's barn. It wasn't really no barn but more like a stable (a shelter for animals). It was full of sheep poop and spit (not necessarily sin, but the product of sin: death, decay and dirt.) It was just about as "outside the camp" as you could get.

Ya know, yer pastor showed me some of them nertivity scenes at the malls and we looked at several of those. We got ourselves some pictures n I think I figured out yer problem.



See? That don't look like Concept B. That feller on the left sure don't look like me!



See the problem? Everything's so clean.

We was stinky on the outside;

We couldn't hide the stink.

Maybe you're here tonight all narrow and scared 'cause you're losing a game of hide and stink.

Maybe you're drinkin yerself to sleep every night.

Maybe you been abused or done some abusin'.

Maybe you're cheatin' on yer wife or fixin' to leave yer husband.

Maybe you been thinkin' about takin' your own life 'cause yer losin' a game of hide the stink.

And now yer in a room full of religious folks on Christmas Eve, feeling a million miles from God, and Christmas, and such. But I tell you what: You may be closer to Christmas than you think, for in order to see Christmas (Concept C) you gotta be honest about Concept B. In other words, you gotta lose a game of hide the stink.

Well, we shepherds lost at the game of hide the stink. Now, there was famous shepherds in the Bible, but unless you got a scratch-n-sniff Bible you can't smell them shepherds. You could smell us in Bethlehem. They all looked down on us in Bethlehem. We was unclean.

See? Leviticus, or somethin', says that you even touch a dead animal that you didn't kill...or you get the wrong kind of bodily excretion on you...you is unclean; we was always unclean.

The only way to get clean was to sacrifice a lamb, and we supplied the lambs. Now don't that beat all? They needed us to feel clean, but they wouldn't touch us 'cause we was unclean.

They sacrificed lambs everyday in the temple. At Passover, they sacrificed thousands and thousands of lambs. There was blood everywhere. I didn't exactly understand it, but the lambs was like a gift to God or payment to God or some such thing.

I figured we must of had a sick God—a cruel God. See? We raised sheep for wool. We'd eat one if we had to, but you gotta understand: Lambs was pets...not dogs (Read yer Bible). They was so cute and cuddly. Why they'd learn yer voice and follow you around. And that's how we'd shepherd the sheep. They knowed yer voice.

Well, them priests and pastors (pastor means shepherd), them shepherds didn't care for the sheep, and the sheep didn't know their voices. That's why they had to build so many walls and fences. They was lousy shepherds.

King David said, *"The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."* The Lord is a shepherd? That didn't make no sense to me. If the Lord was a shepherd, He just led His sheep to slaughter. See? I supplied the temple with them sacrificed lambs, and it wasn't perty!

My connection was a feller they'd make high priest in just a few short years. You can read about him in your Bible. The feller's name was Anus. Now that's funny! I don't care who ya are that there's funny. That there's some Concept B dressed up like Concept A. He'd always say, "It is pronounced Annas." And I'd say, "Yes sir Mr. Anus. Get-r-done...someone's gotta do it; get-r-done!"

He didn't like me...needed me but hardly talked to me. He didn't even know my last name. He called me "Larry the sheep guy or just "redneck." Everyone makes fun of rednecks till their camel breaks down in the desert or you need a lamb come Passover. Rednecks! Abraham was a redneck (few branches in that family tree). He was a shepherd that married his half sister, then pimped his bride to save his tail. Isaac did the same. Jacob means cheat and he fathered all Israel 'cause his four wives had a cheatin' fertility contest.

The whole bunch was constantly on the move. Dadgum! Israel practically invented the travel trailer. One giant trailer park. Even King David was a shepherd boy from Bethlehem. The Bible is the

history of God and the rednecks. Of course, I didn't see it that way back then 'cause the religious types worked so hard at playin' hide the stink. Well, they was using me, and so they hated me, and so I hated me; I hated everyone; I stunk on the inside and stunk on the outside. I knew I stunk. I was a piece of sh....Concept B.

And God? Well, He was over in Concept A, if there was a Concept A. And if there was a God, surely He didn't care about me...or worse: He did care about me...like ya care about a terd in the punch bowl, cared about me and wanted to dispose of me like a piece of Concept B outside the camp. He wanted to dispose of me—good fer nothin' Larry the Sheep Guy.

I covered my pain by makin light of everythin'...a comedian. I had a friend named Harold. He covered his pain with just plain mean. He was scary mean. He had a heart like stone. We called him "The Herald." The Herald wouldn't let anyone in except maybe his pet lamb. Ain't that somethin'? He had a "lamby." He was like one of them mass murdering psycho types with a pet kitten. You know, they're like that 'cause they been hurt so bad. Everyone's a threat. So they wrap their heart in stinky mean. Everyone's a threat except that dadgum kitten or lamby.

Well, come Passover time, I half expected "The Harold" to just go psycho with rage, psycho on them priests and even God. The Harold said he didn't believe in no God, which meant he hated God. I s'pose I hated God too. You hate God? You been hidin' that stink?

Well, I was depressed. However, I was in therapy. I'd tell my troubles to Harold, and then he'd say: "Blow it off. It don't matter; there ain't no God, and you're a butthead." Well, late one night, along about oh...A.D. or B.C. not exactly sure...we was out abidin' in the fields (that's what was great about them sheets...you was like wearin' yer sleepin' bag wherever ya happened to abide). Ya might ask: "Now what ya fellas do when yer out there abidin' in the fields?" Well, we wonder as we wander of course.

So, I says to Harold: "I wonder as I wander (out under the sky) if God gives a rip for fellers like you or like I." And Harold said, "Shut up Larry." I said, "But we just poor lonely shepherds in fields where we lay...in fields where we lay keepin' our sheep on a cold winter's night that was so deep." Harold says, "We're standin' up and it ain't cold, and it ain't deep. How could a night be deep? Is that the only thing you could think of that rhymes with sheep? And why do ya keep rhymin' things anyways?

And just then, *Kaboom!* This huge glowin' angel thing appeared over our heads. (At first I thought it was one of them alien abductions. Aliens like us rednecks ya know.) But it wasn't that kind of alien. It just glowed with Concept A. I mean, it was more Concept A then I ever even imagined.

KaBOOM!

We hit the dirt. We was "sore afraid." That's what "sore afraid" means. So afraid you're sore.

This angel named Lo...Lo the angel says to us: "Fear not!"

Yeah right Lo! I'm gonna have to change my sheet!

"Fear not," says the angel, "For behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be to ALL the people. For unto you (Larry, Harold and ALL people) is born this day, in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

And suddenly, with the angel, there was a multitude of the heavenly hosts. Now, the "heavenly hosts" is not like Martha Stewart at the pearly gates with a quiche. The heavenly host is an army of angels, about twelve legions. I figured them bad boys had flaming swords, and fire, and they was clean.

When I seen 'em, I figured: "This is it for planet earth—Judgment Day!" I braced myself and then...I heard singin'. They was singing: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." I looked over at "The Herald" and He was white as a sheet. I spose he was re thinkin' that "ain't no God" statement.

I said, "Hark, the Harold! Angels are singin'" (You saw that one comin'. I apologize.) I joke around not 'cause it's so sad, but so dagum glad, and glorious, and holy, and powerful, and strange. I mean their song was so powerful I figured they didn't need them swords, just the song and the walls would come tumblin' down: walls of Jericho, walls of Jerusalem, walls of Larry the sheep guy.

And it was an invasion of planet earth, but it was like they all stopped as they stormed the beach and one of 'em said, "Hey look, there's Larry. Let's invite him to sing along." It was like an invasion of Concept A, and I was asked to sing along...by the heavenly host...the heavenly host. And then I thought: "Well, where's the Lord of the host—the commander of God's army—the God-man." Then it hit me, what Lo the angel was sayin': "Unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord. [I figured, well maybe that's the Lord of Hosts (King of Concept A)] And this will be a sign for you, you'll find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ...a manger!

Well, you see, the only manger between us and Bethlehem was in my barn—most unclean place in all of Israel—the epicenter of Concept B (boogers and spit surrounded by sheep poop and Baby Ruth bars).

Now, we was rednecks, but even we fellers wouldn't even think of puttin' no baby in a fee bin, in a barn. That'd be a sign alright...but most folks would read it as a pointin' in just the opposite direction—not King of Kings but last and least of all the rednecks.

I figured a fittin' sign would be more like that the baby glowed or floated or somethin'. That's what you figure too. I seen yer light up Nertivity scenes. You sing that song: "Radiant beams from thy holy face..." Well, if he glowed, King Herod wouldn't a had to kill all them babies. He could a just said to his soldiers: "Boys, only kill the floatin' glowy ones."

Point bein': He looked like every other dirt poor redneck baby. Maybe every dirt poor redneck baby is a sign, and ya miss it 'cause ya can't see past the stink and Concept B.

Well, all at once Lo the angel rose, they just vanished into Heaven. The Harold, me, and the boys just kinda stumbled in a daze toward Bethlehem. I remember peeking around the back side of the stable, and sure enough, I see these two kids, and I smelled blood, birth water, and sweat...unclean bodily excreta. A pile rags in the feed bin, and outa the rags came cryin'—just wailing'. You sing that stupid song: "Little Lord Jesus, no cryin' he makes." You try bein' born in a barn and stuck in a feed bin...you'd cry too!

And don't ya see? That's a dadgum miracle.

That Christ the Lord would cry His tears in my stinky manger,
That the King of Glory would choose to be born in my barn.

I stood there...just takin' it all in and then just exclaimed: "Sweet mother of God..." and this sweet young gal looks up and says, "I'm sorry sir, but there was no room in the inn." Just think: "no room" in the inn, no room in Jerusalem, "no room" in the temple. All of Concept A wrapped in swaddling cloths and placed in my Concept B.

Religion was all about hiding Concept B in Concept A (or at least what people pretended was Concept A). But this was Concept A born into Concept C—Christmas.

Concept A + Concept B = Concept C

And it was an invasion, a surprise attack through my manger. God was invading planet earth with Concept A. And Concept A wasn't just a concept...but a Person. And that Person (the Lord of Hosts) was a redneck. The Lord was a redneck and a comedian 'cause this was funny...not sarcastic funny...like my kind of funny (funny that covers up a world of stink). No. This was a deep, laugh yer guts out kind of funny, like a joke deeper than this whole world of stink. Not covering the stink but changing the stink into perfume.

The whole world was chasing glory and running away from my barn. And the King of Glory was born in my manger. Them priests and pastors were all building walls to keep the holiness in and keep me out, and my barn becomes the Holy of Holies. That's funny! I don't care who you are; that there's funny! And the joke's on you 'cause the joke's for you, and if you could just laugh at yerself He'd be born in yer barn too.

See? He's fixin' to surprise you with unspeakable joy (good news or great joy)! And ya know, that's what every Daddy wants on Christmas. Ya set yer kids up for joy! You want their joy so ya say, "I don't think we could afford the deluxe plastic action shepherd fun set this year. Then...on Christmas morning...*Yahoo!!* You give 'em their dream! The deluxe plastic action shepherd (and entire farm) fun set.

And you see? If the kids think they earned it, ya can't give it. By definition it's not a gift no more; it's payment. Most grewed up folks don't give gifts nor get gifts on Christmas; they negotiate trade agreements. That's what Anus and Caiaphas was doin' with God Himself. They was so full of themselves...they had no room for Grace. And I think that's why Jesus was born in my manger... 'cause I knew I couldn't hide the stink, and so I got the gift. And so Concept A was born into Concept B, which makes Concept C—Christmas.

Say it with me: "Concept A was born into Concept B, which makes Concept C—Christmas.

Back to the story...

I'm standin' there "wonderin' as I'm wanderin'" and The Harold just walks over and picks him up. He picks the Lord up and the Lord stops cryin' like He's found His home in Harold's arms. Harold starts laughin' and singin'...singin' to Him—the Lord!

I ain't seen Harold remotely like this exceptin' perhaps when he used to hold his lamby..his pet lamb. A shiver went down my spine. I thought: "Good God, don't let them priests get hold of this lamby." I buried that thought. We stayed there for hours, and then The Harold went psycho but not with rage. He really was "The Herold." He went running through the streets yellin' about angels, sheep poop, and the love of God. And all the people come from their homes and said unto "The Herold": "Shut up you stupid drunk redneck shepherd!"

Well, you know the story. King Herod, the flight into Egypt, return to Nazareth. Nazareth is a redneck town. See? He was a redneck from Nazareth, born in a barn to an unwed, pregnant, teenage virgin. That there's about as redneck as you can get.

For the next thirty years, I continued to wonder as I wandered." I started goin' to synagogue. Once I heard the rabbi read from Isaiah: "*Surely he has born our griefs and carried our sorrows...like a lamb that is led to slaughter.*" Every Passover, I'd get nervous.

After thirty years he showed up near Bethlehem, and John the Baptiser said, "*Behold the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.*"

For three years He preached, and I followed Him like a little lamb. I knew His voice. If He's a lamb, He's also the Good Shepherd.

Well it was Passover, when the false shepherds spilt His blood in the city and then took Him outside the camp and tried to dispose of Him on a cross. I figured that any second, the twelve legions of angels would show up, and it would be Judgment Day, but the angels didn't show...but actually it *was* Judgment Day. Right before He died He cried out: "*Father forgive them.*"

At that...it all hit me...like board to the head: Passover, Lamb of God, Perfect Sacrifice, Perfect Offering, Atonement, but not to a God who is cruel, Atonement for us and to us—the people that are cruel. God was in Jesus, and Jesus was The Lamb.

Jesus is the Love of God poured out on this whole stinkin' world.

Them angels didn't invade with swords of steel 'cause their Commander was invading with Grace. Then I knew just what it was: Concept A, the Holy Fire is burning Love, it's Grace.

So God consigned *all men* to Concept B...

In order that He might have Concept A on *all*...

In order that *all* might become Concept C...like me.

Christmas is Concept A in Concept B making Concept C—me.

Christmas is Christ in me—the living Nativity scene is me.

The Sanctuary—me—is us.

But it can't happen, or at least you won't see it till ya stop playin' Hide the Stink!

You gotta confess the stink!

Maybe you're mad at God.

Maybe you're addicted, embarrassed, or afraid.

Maybe ya think ya got no stink and that's the worst stink!

Whatever the case, you're looking fer God (We all are)...

So...where ya gonna find Him?

Well...the *last* place you'd expect: You'll find Him wrapped in swaddlin' cloths and lyin' in yer stinkin' manger."

God is Grace, and when you see Him, really see Him, covered in yer stink, fer the love of you, well...yer manger won't stink no more.

There's an old legend they tell in France about us shepherds. They say we all brought presents for the Christ child that night...except one shepherd. The truth is, none of us brought presents; we didn't have any.

Well, accordin' to the legend, this one shepherd was named L'Enchante' (the enchanted one) and they say that, as we talked to Mary and Joseph, someone said, "Where's L'Enchante'." We searched all over and finally found him under a blanket, slung over the manger. There was L'Enchante': "like a flame takin' the direction of the wind" they say, "so L'Enchante' found his love." He stayed there till dawn whispering: "Jesu, Jesu, Jesu," giving the gift that the Lord wanted for Christmas: Gratitude (unspeakable joy)—Gratitude for Grace.

Well ya see? That part's true...exceptin' His name wasn't L'Enchante'. It was Harold...no longer the Mean One...but Herald the Enchanted One...Enchanted by Grace..

It was Concept A in Concept B...making Concept C...It was Christmas.

Now, sing this song like you really mean it, and it'll really be Christmas.

And I'm gonna go get yer pastor.

[Congregation sings “Oh Little Town of Bethlem”]

Communion

[Peter returns out of the character of Larry.]

“Oh come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.”

Emmanuel—“God with us.”

I’m going to re-preach Larry’s entire message, just by doing this:

On the night that Jesus—The Lamb of God—was betrayed, He took bread and He broke it saying, “This is my body given to you. Take and eat, and do this in remembrance of me.” And in the same way, after supper and having given thanks, He took the cup and said, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins; drink of it all of you, and do this in remembrance of me.”

We invite you tonight. The Lord calls you to come to the table.

Take Concept A and put it in your stinky manger, and that’s Christmas.

You might be thinking: “Well, can I do that? Don’t I have to first clean my manger?”

Well, I think that thought comes from Hell because Jesus came to clean your manger; that’s why you need a Savior.

The Lord calls to you saying, “You can’t clean your manger. You don’t even have anything to clean it with. I want you to surrender it.” So surrender your manger. Say, “Lord I know I can’t clean it; I need you to clean it.”

Now know that our God is Grace.

Come to the table.