

The Christmas Story According to the Shepherds

Today is the last Sunday of Advent 2015. I hope you have prepared your heart for not only the celebration of Christ's birth but I hope you are prepared for his second coming as well. As we prepare to light the advent candle, let's read responsively portions of Isaiah 9.

Reader: Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan...

Congregation: The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.

Reader: For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Congregation: Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.

And from the epistle of 1 John 4

Reader: Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God because God is love.

Congregation: This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love; not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

Reader: Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

Congregation: We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in

God. And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for loving us so much that you gave your one and only Son in order that whoever believes in Him would not perish but would have everlasting life. With gratitude and faith we light this Advent candle, celebrating the birth of your holy Son Jesus, symbolically announcing that the Light of the world has come to dispel the darkness. May we respond to your love for us by not only loving you in return, but by living in obedience to you and your word every day and by loving our neighbor and our brother just as we love you. We ask it all in the name of Jesus, your holy Son and our blessed Savior. Amen.

The Christmas Story According to the Shepherds

Last Sunday we talked about the Christmas story according to the angels and we focused on the glorious message the angels shared with the shepherds – good news of great joy to all the people, for a Savior was born in Bethlehem and he was Christ the Lord (prophet, priest and king!)

This morning I want to look again at the shepherds in the Christmas story because there are a couple of things someone needs to hear in this story. I love to talk about these guys! I find them to be fascinating characters in the story of Christ's birth. As I thought about this it occurred to me that someone had to relate their story to Luke. Luke was well educated, a physician by training who also was something of a historian and researcher. He writes at the beginning of his gospel, **“Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. Therefore, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, it seemed good also to me to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught.” Luke 1:1-4**

Luke had talked to eyewitnesses so it seems entirely possible and plausible that Luke might have found one or more of the shepherds who had been in the fields that night. He might have located some of those men, now elderly, who had gone to Bethlehem that night to see this thing of which the angel had spoken. Think of that, if Luke had found one of them and they began to relate to him the story they must have told and retold a thousand times. “It was a dark and silent night when suddenly a light shined as brightly as a million suns and an angel spoke to

us. He told us not to be afraid but that he had good news of great joy which would be for all people. He told us a Savior was born and where to look and what to look for, so we did and we found it just like the angel said. We saw him! We beheld his glory like that of the Son of God. Can you believe it? The good news announced to us. Shepherds!”

Perhaps it was like that. Regardless, there are a couple of simple things I want you to notice about the Christmas story according to the shepherds. Turn to Luke 2 and as you do, let me give you some very quick background. We mentioned last week that shepherds weren't exactly well regarded in first century Palestine. Kenneth Bailey in his book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, said, “Shepherds in first century Palestine were poor and rabbinic traditions label them as unclean.” The truth is, flocks of sheep ate private property and that didn't exactly set well with everyone. Shepherds had a hard life, living outside, sleeping outside. It was a nomadic life with little pay.

At the same time, the hillsides around Bethlehem provided good grazing for sheep. This area was known as the area where the best sheep were raised, the perfect lambs used for temple sacrifices. These fellows knew their job but they were about to learn something even more important. Let's read the story. (Read Luke 2:8-20). First of all, notice this....

God knows where you are. Luke said there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. I suppose I never thought about this but these guys weren't clocking out at the end of their shift you know. They literally lived out in the field with their sheep. They didn't have a home. They didn't have a permanent address. They lived where ever the sheep went to graze. If you wanted to find a shepherd, you had a lot of territory to cover and those hills all look just the same. It would be a great place to hide and yet God knew exactly where they were. The angel didn't have to hunt for them.

You may feel like God doesn't know where you are. Your circumstances and your life are so messed up you've started thinking God has forgotten all about you. Hear me today. God knew precisely where those shepherds were, in the middle of the Judean countryside, in the middle of the night, he knew exactly where they were and what they were doing and he chose to meet them there. God knows exactly where you are and what you are dealing with. He hasn't forgotten you nor are you lost to him and to his compassion and love. If you think you are hidden from God, think again. He sees you. He knows where you are. If you think you are lost to God, he knows where you are even without a permanent address. He knows where you are

regardless of how dark your circumstances. He knows where your loved one is, even if you don't. Even if they are lost to you, they aren't lost to God. Be encouraged. God knows where you are, right now and he has a message of hope and salvation. Not only did God know where the shepherds were, God knew who they were.

God knows who you are. We know the names for many of the other people in the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph and Jesus. We know about Zechariah and Elizabeth and John.. Tradition tells us the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne. We know about Simeon and Anna in the temple. There is even an unfounded legend about the wise men being named Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchoir (sounds like characters from a Disney movie to me.) But no one tried to suggest that we know the names of the shepherds. If Luke actually found them and heard their story, we don't know why he didn't mention their names. It wasn't pertinent to his story. These guys were nameless, faceless, non-descript in every way, but God knew who they were. He knew them by name. He knew their history. He knew their past and he knew their future. He knew their faults and failures and he knew their potential. It doesn't matter that we don't know who they were. It doesn't matter that no one else knew who they were. God knew.

You may feel like you are invisible to the rest of the world. No one knows you or cares about you. No one notices you or respects you or pays attention to you. Think about it, these guys were shepherds. This wasn't a profession to which young children aspired. No one was saying, "When I grow up I want to live outside in the heat and deal day and night with stupid animals that have brains the size of a pecan." The job of a shepherd was not prestigious or influential. Remember when Samuel went to Jesse's house in Bethlehem to anoint a new king of Israel? He looked at seven of his sons and asked if there was another. Jesse said, "there is one more, the youngest, but he is attending the sheep." "Ewwh... well...maybe I'll come back later." David hadn't exactly been rewarded with taking care of the sheep. It may have been the least glamorous job. David was about to be overlooked because he was a shepherd boy.

That may describe how you feel, overlooked by everyone else, but you've never been overlooked by God! He knows where you are and what you are dealing with. He knows who you are and he loves you in spite of faults and failures. He knows you and he still loves you.

These guys were unknown, overlooked, dismissed by the decent folks in town, and yet God sent angels to these nameless homeless guys to announce the greatest news the world has

ever received: God was with them and had come to save them! God knows who you are.

God's good news is for the likes of us! I remember years ago hearing a preacher named Malcolm Smith tell a story about walking as a boy with his mother on the streets in London. He said we would walk past the stores with beautiful window decorations and when Malcolm would ask if they could go in and look around, his working class mother would answer, "It's not for the likes of us." Smith said that shaped his theology for a long time until he realized the gifts and grace of God, the good news, was for the likes of us. It's good news for the folks at the bottom of the ladder, like the shepherds, and it's good news all the way to the top. Like we talked about last Sunday, it's good news of great joy for all the people! God's good news is for the likes of us!

Isn't it interesting that it was these old rough shepherds that heard the good news first. The theologians in Jerusalem missed it. The priests and those serving in the temple missed it. Herod missed it. Those who should have been looking for the coming of the Messiah, who should have been expecting and watching for it missed it. John's gospel says He came to his own and his own missed it. They didn't receive him. But to everyone who received him and believed upon his name he gave power to become children of God. What better illustration of that than to go to the poorest and lowest and the overlooked and to the people who never heard good news and tell them the greatest news of all. The shepherds heard it first that God's good news is for the whole world, even for the likes of us!

Are you unworthy? There is good news. A savior is born. Are you unpopular? Good news. A Savior is born for you. Bound by sin and guilt and shame? Good news. The angel said a Savior is born and his name will be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. He has come to save you. All alone and frightened, insecure, uncertain? There is good news. A child is born this day in Bethlehem and his name will be called Emmanuel. God is with us so you don't have to be afraid anymore. You are no longer alone. This good news is for all the people, for everyone who will hear it and believe it. Broke? No money? The prophet Isaiah said, "Come you who have no money, come without money and without cost," because the good news is for all of us!

Good news - A Savior is Born and he wants to save you. Good news - You don't have to be afraid anymore. He has come to deliver you from fear and set the captive free. Good news - This is not just for a select few that can afford it or that have private access, this is for the whole

world, for all the people - for everyone who will receive it by faith. Good news - God has kept his word and his promise has been fulfilled. He confirms it with a sign. A virgin has conceived and delivered a Son who will deliver us from our sins. God's promises are true. You can believe him.

Good news - God's peace and his grace, his favor are available to all who will believe. Good news - You can come and see and experience the salvation of the Lord. Come and know the God who rests in a manger. Open your eyes and see. Good news, something the shepherds didn't usually get much of, but my, didn't they receive it that night? God chose them to hear and receive good news and the good news is still available for all of us. It's a scary world full of wickedness and evil, but there is good news yet today. A savior is born! He has come for you, to save you, to cleanse you, to change you, to be with you, to lead and guide you. You don't have to stay where you are, trapped in sin. It doesn't have to be this way. Your life doesn't have to be like this. There is good news for you.

"But are you sure? Are you certain things can change? How can I be sure this good news is for the likes of me?" **God has a sign for the shepherds and for us.** The angel said "**This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.**" I've often commented about what a strange sign that was. A baby swaddled in cloths and lying in a manger. We've tried to understand the significance of that sign for us, but it was a sign for the shepherds and for us! It was a sign they understood and they shared that fact with Luke. It was a sign that convinced them this was a Savior for the likes of folks like them.

I quoted earlier from Kenneth Bailey's book *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*. He wrote, "In Luke 2:8-14 the first people to hear the message of the birth of Jesus were a group of shepherds who were close to the bottom of the social scale in their society...From their point of view, if the child was truly the Messiah, the parents would reject the shepherds if they tried to visit him! How could shepherds be convinced to expect a welcome? The angels anticipated this anxiety and told the shepherds they would find the baby wrapped (which was what peasants like shepherds did with their newly born children.) Furthermore, they were told that he was lying in a manger! That is, they would find the Christ child in an ordinary peasant home such as theirs. He was not in a governor's mansion or a wealthy merchant's guest room but in a simple two-room house like theirs. This was really good news. Perhaps they would not be told, 'Unclean shepherds - be gone!' This was their sign, a sign for lowly shepherds."

God has a sign for the shepherds and for all of us. It is a sign of acceptance. A sign of welcome, a sign that reads, “whosoever will may come.” Mark 12:37 speaks of the crowds that received Jesus and the King James Version reads, “...and the common people heard him gladly.” He was one of us. Born of a common woman, swaddled and placed in a manger. It was a sign for all of us, that all that come to him in repentance and faith he will never cast out. He welcomes all who seek him from the poorest to the wealthiest, from the weakest to the powerful.

Imagine this scene in heaven. “I want you angels to announce the birth of Jesus.” “Sure thing. We’ll announce it in the palace to the people of power, the important people.” “No, they will only be threatened and want to kill him.” “Well, we’ll announce it to the religious leaders of the day. They’ll know what to do.” “No, they’ll have to debate and argue over whether it is kosher for a baby to be born in a stable.” “Well, we’ll announce it to the people of the city of Bethlehem. Surely they’ll be excited to hear it.” “No, they’re too busy making money off of the travelers and tax-payers that have come to town. They wouldn’t even stop to make room for Mary in her condition. They are too busy to hear it.” “Then who can we tell?” And God says, “Tell it to the shepherds in the fields outside town. I know them. They’ll be quick to listen and hungry to see the truth and the glory of God. Tell them because they are hungry for good news. Tell them and they will come to see for themselves.”

I believe God is still looking for people like the shepherds who will respond to him by seeking after him. God reveals himself to us so we will hunger for him even more, so we will seek for an ever deepening relationship. The Lord says, **“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord.”** **Jeremiah 29:13-14**

God is hiding in plain sight. He has made himself known to us. He told us the sign and what to look for and now he leaves it up to us like he did the shepherds. What shall we do? Let’s go see for ourselves. Hear the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah: **“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him and to our God for he will freely pardon.”** **Isaiah 55:6-7**

He knows where you are. He knows who you are. He has good news and that good news is for the likes of you and for the likes of me and for the likes of shepherds. Are you ready to believe it and receive it? Are you ready to take him at his word, repent of your sins and make

Jesus Christ the Savior and Lord of your life? The choice is up to you but if you will turn to him and call upon him, he will have mercy and he will freely pardon! The shepherds found it to be true and we can too!