

A JOURNEY TO CHRISTMAS: THE STORY OF THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2:8-20, Isaiah 9:1-7

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Shepherds are always given a rather romantic role in the Christmas story. On Christmas cards they are often portrayed watching over their flocks while angels in the nighttime sky proclaim the birth of Christ. It's a beautiful scene. However, these artistic expressions disguise the fact that shepherds were at the very bottom of the social pecking order in the ancient world.

For one thing, they carried about themselves a rather distinctive and often offensive odor. Sheep are smelly animals. Shepherds also spent a great deal of time outdoors in all kinds of weather. They were on duty 24/7. Observing the religious traditions and practices of the Jewish community were difficult if not impossible. There was also the danger of wild animals and thieves. Being a shepherd was reserved for those who had no better prospects for employment. If you will remember when the Old Testament judge, Samuel, visited the home of Jesse in Bethlehem, young David was not even invited to participate in the family's festivities. Evidently sheep herding was reserved for the youngest and least important member of the family. He had to be summoned from the shepherd's fields after which he, instead of all of his older brothers, was anointed to be the next king of Israel.

These particular shepherds, the ones we are going to meet today, did possess one attribute that set them apart from all of the shepherds throughout the land. They watched over the sheep that were set aside for sacrificial offerings at the temple in Jerusalem. All of the sheep that were offered on the high altar as atonement for the sins of the Jewish people came from their flocks and herds. Little did they realize the perfect Lamb of God, who would take away the sins of the world, would be born very close to where their flocks were feeding that very night. So let's meet these shepherds who are even now are watching over their sheep out in the fields of the little town of Bethlehem.

There's a group of four or five of them, a rather scruffy looking bunch, sitting around a small campfire. It's a chilly night and they are observing the crush of people crowding into Bethlehem. Several of them are getting up in years. One of them, however, was barely beyond his childhood. They were discussing the recent census of the Roman government. The oldest one commented, "I can't believe it. All of those people crowding into our little town. I never realized there were so many people who could trace their lineage back to our forgotten little village." A second shepherd joined in the conversation, "Well, it was the home of our illustrious ancestor, David. I guess he had lots of children." "So what?" the third shepherd complained. "A lot of good they've done us. We're paying taxes to Rome so they can count our noses. They call it a census. One thing's for sure. We're not a free people." The fourth shepherd, the young

teenager, was a bit more optimistic. He said, "At least we don't have to mingle with that crowd over there. At least we're out here all by ourselves, even if we have to take care of these ewes who will soon be giving birth to their young."

It was that time of year when shepherds did not put the flocks at night into a large, rock walled pen that was, as you can imagine, a rather filthy place, especially for newborn animals. No it was better to watch over their flocks, especially at night, in the pastures around Bethlehem, where it would be a lot cleaner and nicer for the arrival of those baby lambs. Sitting around the campfire, this little gathering of shepherds was just about ready to doze off when there was a commotion in the heavens, the likes of which they had never heard. It was like a huge door being opened into eternity. Above them they saw what looked like a man but more than a man, surrounded by an ethereal light that lit up the darkness. Scared to death, the frightened shepherds could not help but look upon the face of this angelic figure as he spoke to them, "Do not be afraid," he said, "For behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you. You will find the Babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12). The shepherds could hardly believe what they were hearing, a Savior, born right here in Bethlehem. It was unbelievable but even more unbelievable was what happened next. Suddenly the shepherds were gazing upon not one, but a whole host of angels. The sky was filled with them and they were singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). With the sound of that angelic choir still echoing across the hillsides, the doorway into eternity swung shut and once again the darkness returned, bright stars shining in the evening sky. Looking at one another one of the shepherds said, "What do you think we should do?" The oldest one in the group replied, "Didn't you hear what the angel said?" "But where can we find this Baby?" another one asked. "Come on fellows," that older shepherd once again reminded them, "The Baby is going to be born where they stable the animals. The parents are going to wrap Him in bands of cloth to keep Him warm and place Him in a manger, the place where they feed the livestock." "Then let's go!" said the youngest shepherd. "We've got to find this Christ Child, this Savior right now."

So they hurried off without even thinking about who was going to watch over the sheep. Asking around when they arrived in town about any new born babies, it didn't take them long to find the Child. Just as the angel had said, He was lying on a bed of straw in a manger, swaddled in bands of cloth wrapped around His tiny little body. Gazing upon Him in awe, they told His mother and father about the angelic visit announcing His birth. Instead of being surprised, His parents seemed to take it all in stride, as if they already knew that this was a night unlike any other night since the dawn of creation. Realizing that Mary and Joseph, especially Mary, were truly exhausted, they quietly departed, but not for long. As they made their way back through the dark streets of Bethlehem, they began shouting and singing. They told everybody whom they

met about what they had seen and heard. God had finally kept His promise. He had sent a Savior to deliver His people and not just the Jews. The angel had clearly stated that this Savior was for all people, everyone, everywhere! In fact, they were so boisterous as they returned to the fields that they aroused a few people who were less than thrilled about being awakened in the middle of the night. But they didn't care. It was time to sing praises and glorify the Lord for everything that they had seen and heard. Just as the angel had said, God had sent a little baby boy to be the Savior of mankind.

Well, what do these shepherds have to say to us this morning as we reflect upon what they experienced. There are a couple of things that we should take note of. First, God often chooses to speak through those who reside in the lower echelons of society. The announcement of Christ's birth was not proclaimed in the hallways of Rome, or for that matter among the religious elites at the temple in Jerusalem. It was certainly not proclaimed in Herod's palace and for good reason. Instead the first people to hear of Christ's birth were lowly shepherds. God has a way of uplifting the least and the forgotten and elevating them to a place of prominence. It's a theme often repeated throughout the pages of the Bible. For example, Psalm 113:7-8 declares that God "raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes, the princes of their people." That was certainly true of the shepherds and it can also be true for you and me.

Let's be honest. Compared to the wealthy, the famous, the celebrities on TV and the politically well connected, most if not all of us are small potatoes. Additionally there's another multitude who are even more forgotten, who, like the shepherds, live on the fringes of society. Does God care about us? Does God care about them? The answer is "YES!" That's why the shepherds were the first ones to hear about the birth of Christ. The keepers of the sacrificial sheep were the first ones to be informed of the birth of the sacrificial Lamb of God who would take away the sins of the world. That was an honor reserved just for them.

Likewise one of the earliest fragments of English literature cannot be traced to a well-known poet, but to a bullied and abused herdsman, who was ridiculed because he couldn't sing, because he couldn't give voice to the lovely ballads that everyone loved to hear. Sleeping in a stable to get away from his tormentors, this herdsman, an old man by the name of Caedmon had a dream one night. An angel appeared who told him to sing. "But I cannot sing," he bemoaned. "Then I will teach you," said the angel and he imparted to Caedmon a beautiful song. The next morning, Caedmon went to the Venerable Bede, a well-known priest who lived during the Middle Ages. This priest was a well-educated man. He wrote the first history of the English speaking people and how they came to Christianity. Caedmon, of course, could neither read nor write, but he remembered what the angel had told him and he repeated it to the Venerable Bede who wrote down his words. To this unlettered peasant belongs the honor of having created "the earliest Christian poetry in the English language." Here's a portion of what he recited and what the Venerable Bede

wrote down: "Creator all holy, He hung the bright heaven, a roof high upreared, o'er the children of men; the King of mankind then created for mortals the world in its beauty, the earth spread beneath them, He, Lord everlasting, omnipotent God." Pretty good poetry for an uneducated cowherd.

Yes, God has a way of blessing and uplifting the humble and they in turn have a way of expressing their thankfulness with great joy. Certainly that was true of the shepherds. They returned to the fields of Bethlehem singing and shouting for joy about all that they had seen and heard. They woke up the whole town. In fact, you might say that they were the first evangelists, the first ones to proclaim the good news that our Savior had been born, that God had sent His Son in the form of little baby to save us from their sins. But they are not the only ones. I'm reminded of the Christmas song "Go Tell It on the Mountain." It's an African American spiritual that was introduced to the world by a professor at Fisk University. Back in the early 1900's at this African American school in Tennessee, students would gather very early on Christmas morn, going from dorm to dorm singing this beloved Christmas carol. Like those students and like those shepherds in Bethlehem, we too should be about the business of joyfully declaring to all the world, "Go tell it on the Mountain that Jesus Christ is born."

There's one final note that we also ought to sing about, that we ought to share with this war torn world in which we live. To the soldiers fighting in Ukraine and those embroiled in the conflict in the Middle East, as well as in a thousand other places throughout our world, people need to hear the words of the angel who proclaimed to the shepherds so long ago, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Luke 2:14). They also need to hear Isaiah's prophetic declaration. Hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, Isaiah proclaimed, "For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the government shall be upon His shoulder; and His name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6).

Yes, to the lowly shepherds watching over their sheep on the hillsides of Bethlehem as well as to lowly folks like you and me sitting right here in this sanctuary on Christmas Eve, God has delivered a wonderful message unto us. It's a message that He wants us to share with everyone, a joyous message. It's a message of peace for those on whom God's favor rests, a message of peace for those who have welcomed His Son into their hearts and lives.