

The Manger IV: The Shepherds - "Good News For All"

Sermon.

Good Morning/Afternoon! There is a note page in your bulletin so you can follow along with today's message; if you didn't get one and would like one, please raise your hand and one of our men will bring you one.

Well here it is...after a long month of waiting...Christmas Eve...Eve...Day. OK, maybe not as exciting as I put on. BUT...tomorrow night is our candlelight service and that will bring a close to this series entitled, "The Manger"!

This may not have been your "typical" advent season series, I guess, but I hope you've embraced the messages. Over the last month Pastors John and Erik have brought messages about each of the characters that we read about in the Christmas Story in Matthew and Luke. And it's important to note that these characters are not just the characters that we see in just about any Christmas play ever.

These are people that lived and are a part of the history of our faith. Their stories, while certainly historically important to us, go beyond just history. As John read to us last week from **2 Timothy 3:16-17** - *¹⁶All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* These stories...have real-world applications for us here and now.

Mary's obedience, Joseph's submission, the wise men's commitment to seek Jesus. Blend that all up and it sounds like something that we should maybe sip on every day, doesn't it?

The first three messages in this series have all addressed certain characteristics of the people that God calls to work in his plan.

Turn in your Bibles to **Luke chapter 2**...today we're going to talk about one more group of people that were yanked into God's plans for humanity all those years ago...the Shepherds.

Most of you know this passage pretty well, hopefully from actually reading it for yourself instead of getting it once a year when you watch Linus' famous speech in "A Charlie Brown Christmas". Let's begin in **verse 8** today, and read on through **verse 20**:

⁸In the same region, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: ¹¹Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

¹²This will be the sign for you: You will find a baby wrapped tightly in cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying: ¹⁴Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors! ¹⁵When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

¹⁶They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary was treasuring up all these things in her heart and meditating on them. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.

Let me tell you a bit about shepherds. They were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of. First of all, they were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean. Their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep.

Not only that, but shepherds were social outcasts. They were the 1st century equivalent of nomad bikers. They were always on the move looking for grass and water for their flocks, so they were often strangers in town, and not always worried about whose land they were on as they fed and watered their flocks. They were often accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds.

This wasn't a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water. They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attacks.

Spending all your time in the field and sleeping with livestock tends to make you smell bad. Most shepherds probably didn't have many dating opportunities. If these guys are standing in line at the airport, they're the ones that are going to be "randomly selected" by the TSA for a...what do they call that? A "more thorough screening".

Now, step back for a moment and imagine you're God...and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever; an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ. The birth of the One who will be the Savior of the whole world. The One for whom the nation of Israel has been waiting and hoping and praying for thousands of years.

A few minutes ago we sang..."Hark the Herald Angels Sing"...have you ever taken a second to just think about...why herald angels? A "herald" was a guy that was sent out by kings and other important types to spread news. Usually a governmental announcement, or word of an upcoming marriage, or even a birth. In 1st century culture, the birth of the first-born to a family was a heralded announcement. Of course, the higher up the wealth ladder you were, the bigger and more extravagant the announcement.

And here we find Joseph and Mary, not in their hometown, strangers that aren't even worthy of a room in a flophouse, laying their newborn in a filthy feeding trough. They have no money, they don't know anyone in Bethlehem, and even if they did know someone and had the cash to herald the birth of their firstborn son, the people they knew...well, come on, you know how people are...they probably weren't all on board with this "virgin birth" thing.

But this is God's son. Joseph ain't in charge of this party...God is! And he isn't wasting time with some guy with a trumpet scuttling around shouting that Jesus is born...no...he calls out the conductor of the angel choir and says "Hey...got a job for ya! You've been practicing and practicing for centuries getting ready for the big

moment...it's time! Go down there and herald the birth of my Son! No, no, stay away from the palaces, temples, even the town...go to these shepherds."

And the conductor is going... "Shepherds?" That's like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsing all year to perform Handel's Messiah in front of the world's greatest and wealthiest, and then they end up giving the concert for eight guys from the building's maintenance crew.

You would expect an event like the birth of Christ to be announced to the most important people in the nation. Political leaders, religious leaders, military leaders. Wealthy merchants. Men and women of distinction. The news media...well, maybe not CNN.

But none of them got the word. None of them were invited. Not even the wise men got an angelic messenger, or angel choir, or a personal invitation. Only **these** guys...the poor, dirty, smelly social and religious outcasts... received the announcement.

Why would God do that? Why send His angels to announce the birth of Christ to these shepherds, to invite them, and them only, to come and see the child?

Were these shepherds especially pious or unusually holy? In spite of the fact they couldn't participate in organized religion, were they just outstanding believers in God? It's doubtful, although the passage does say that when they got the news they believed what the angels said. But there's nothing in the text to indicate that they were more religious than anyone else.

Were they perhaps expecting this? I mean, they did have long periods of time when they just sat around watching sheep eat grass (and you thought your job sucked)...maybe they were studying the stars like the wise men and had figured out that God was about to visit them. Could they have anticipated this in any way? No.

So what was so special about these guys that God would choose to entrust the greatest message ever sent from heaven to them?

Well, we know they were attentive. The first thing we see about the shepherds is that they were committed to their jobs. Listen to **Luke 2:8**: *shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock*. They were so dedicated to their career that they never left their work. They not only worked the third shift, they pulled the first and second as well. This was a 24/7 deal for them. We also see from this verse that they were faithful, since they were “keeping watch.”

At night the flock was gathered up and herded into a fold with a gateway, and the shepherd would literally lie across the entrance to make sure none of the sheep would get out and no predators in, which gives new meaning to **John 10:9** when Jesus said: *“I am the gate. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture.”*

Notice that God came to those who were attentive at the jobs they were given to do. They might have felt unappreciated and lonely, but they weren’t slackers. When God came, he found them working. Whatever God has called you to do, be attentive to it and do it with excellence. **Colossians 3:23**: *Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people.*

We know the shepherds were awed. While they were attending to the responsibilities they were given, they are suddenly in the presence of angels! **Luke 2:9**: *Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified*. This is one of those times when the written word, I think, doesn’t accurately reflect the situation. If you were suddenly surrounded by God’s glory, would you be immediately frightened and humbled?

Maybe the shepherds were terrified because they didn’t know if this was an angel of judgment or not. Perhaps he had been sent as payback for their raunchy jokes, bad language and sticky fingers. Maybe their sins had finally caught up with them and now they were about to be vaporized. Whatever the case, they were scared and it probably took a lot for these tough guys to be terrified.

When we come face-to-face with God’s holiness, we too will fall apart because of our sinfulness. Isaiah had this response in **Isaiah 6:5** when he had a vision of God and said: *“Woe is me, for I am ruined, because I am a man of unclean lips dwelling among a people*

of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of Hosts.” God will meet us where we are but then he brings us to our knees.

I wonder, are you awestruck by God? Do you marvel at the Messiah? When was the last time you hit your knees before Him?

The shepherds accepted the angels’ news. At first filled with fear and awe, we read in **Luke 2:10**: *“Don’t be afraid, for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people: The angel calms them down, telling them that he is bringing good news of acceptance, forgiveness and hope.*

The action of the angel...the proclaiming...is literally the word from which we get “evangelize.” This is good news of great joy. The Greek word for “great” used here is “megálos” which means “exceedingly large, loud or mighty”. It’s a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: “I evangelize to you a great joy.”

This message is for “all the people” but I want you to notice the word “you” in there. The angels’ herald of the birth of Jesus *is* for the whole world but it must also become deeply personal. **Verse 11** says: *¹¹Today in the city of David a Savior was born for you, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

Then come the fun part; the sky explodes into countless angels singing praise to God. You just know there had to be some Northern Lights thrown in there for good measure, right? We know that the shepherds believed the angel’s message because in **verse 15** we read: *When the angels had left them and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”*

“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see...” Have you accepted the message and allowed the word of God to work in you? God’s good news is a gift, but if you don’t receive it, you can’t enjoy it for what it is.

These shepherds didn’t just accept and believe the message they received, they acted on it. Look at **Luke 2:16**: *They hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph, and the baby who was lying in the manger.* The word “hurried off” means they left in haste. The idea is “come on, hurry up, let’s go!” This is pretty amazing in itself because shepherds

normally did nothing quickly. They were patient men, accustomed to moving slowly through the pastures.

The Bible is clear that acceptance must lead to action, or as **James 2:17** says: *...faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself.* They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act and they moved. And here are the two actions they took:

- They went and saw. The first thing they did was bounce to Bethlehem. They wanted to see the baby with their own eyes. Going to a smelly stable to find a baby wouldn't have been a problem to men who were used to the scent of sheep. So they went. Scripture doesn't say they gathered up their flocks and drove them before them into town...these guys whose sole purpose in life it was to keep sheep safe...just up and left.

Sound familiar? Peter, Andrew, James and John heard Jesus' call... "Follow me", and they left what they were doing to be with him. The shepherds did the same and found everything exactly as the angels had told them. And with that confirmation what did they do next?

- They left and shared. It's striking that they don't pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They don't hang around the manger, because they knew that they were now managers of the message. Notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with Mary's magnificence or Joseph's profession.

They came to see Him, understood who he was, and now they head out to do just what the angels had done to them...herald the good news. Look at **verses 17 and 18**: *After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.* The word "spread" means to "make known in such a way that people can understand." If you're a Christian, you're here today because they couldn't keep quiet.

Does the Good News excite you like that? We'll go on and on about some new article we read or some movie we've seen...share the living snot out of some cute little puppy video...but how do we treat the Gospel of Jesus Christ? Are all who hear it amazed, or are we keeping the Christ Child under our hats this Christmas in favor of Santa Claus, a dancing snowman and some magical reindeer?

This God you say you serve is calling you to some action! He's asking you to herald his birth. It's not enough to just say you have faith, or to feel good about something; there comes a time that after seeing Christ, we must be involved in sharing him.

Finally, the shepherds adored Christ. The text seems to indicate that the shepherds fairly quickly went back to their same boring jobs tending sheep...but they weren't the same on the inside. They returned to where they started and were attentive again. They didn't quit what they were originally doing to write a book or go on a speaking tour or launch a ministry. They continued where they were, but where they were...would never be the same again.

Luke 2:20: *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had seen and heard, which were just as they had been told.* Allow yourself to adore Immanuel as you glorify and praise Him for all you have seen and heard. After Christmas we may have to go back to the same ol' routine, but we've seen the Christ! Maybe you have to return to the same place after Christmas, but you don't have to return as the same person. Now you can do it with rejoicing.

We've come to the end of our passage for today, and nearly to the end of our Christmas series. So...what does all this mean to you personally? Well, it should be very encouraging. Can you identify with any of the characters we've studied over the last 4 weeks?

Maybe you don't think you're one of the "beautiful people," not especially wealthy or powerful or influential. Not likely to ever see your name in the paper for some great accomplishment. On the fringes socially. If you were to compare your level of religiosity to others, you just wouldn't feel "holy". Spotty church attendance, little Bible reading, infrequent prayer.

You think that if God is even aware that you exist (which He probably isn't), He probably doesn't have a very favorable opinion of you. And you know what? A lot of people, deep down, secretly feel like that. Even people that you would think of as "having it all together". On the surface, everything is going great. But on the inside, you feel like you don't fit in. You feel like God doesn't really care, couldn't care, about someone like you.

I wonder if that's what Mary thought. Here I am just living my life..."under the radar". Then an angel shows up to tell her she's been chosen to be the mother of the Son of God. So much for normal. But her response was obedience.

Certainly Joseph felt that way. Here he is working away trying to get some money set aside for his new life with his new wife...and probably felt like someone sucked the air out of the room when he found out Mary was pregnant. And probably really felt that way when an angel told him to go ahead and marry her anyway! But his response was submission.

Maybe you're one of the social or religious elite, the gifted, the accomplished, the powerful? Everything is working out for you. The wise men were doubtless like that. Most likely men of influence, guys that could have sat back on their accomplishments and coasted along. But they weren't satisfied with knowing what was known. They were looking for more. The result of their search was to see the sign that pointed them to something new. And their response was to leave behind the known to seek the unknown.

Perhaps you see yourself as kind of on the outside looking in. I imagine that many nights, as the shepherds sat out in those cold, lonely fields, with nothing but dumb animals to keep them company, they looked over at the village, saw the lights of the homes and heard the faint sound of families, people laughing, and wished they could be a part of that.

Maybe you've felt that way too.

If any of these descriptions strike a chord with you, then I have good news. Great news. The best news possible. God is very aware that you exist. And he does have a pretty favorable opinion of you...in fact, God loves you. Just like He loved those shepherds. And you are special to Him. Just like those shepherds were special to Him; so special that He gave them the incredible privilege of being the first to hear of Christ's birth, being the first people other than Joseph and Mary to lay eyes on the Son of God, being the first to tell others about Christ.

He didn't give those privileges to Caesar or to the Jewish high priest, he gave it to the shepherds. Not in spite of who they were, but because of who they were – humble, ordinary people with no high opinions of themselves. Simple people who were willing to believe what God told them and to tell others about what God had shown them.

When they heard the news, they didn't seek out the religious big boys for a second opinion. They simply accepted what the angels told them. When they were invited to visit Bethlehem to see the newborn Messiah, they didn't worry about who was going to watch their sheep.

They didn't get bogged down in debates about how they were going to find one small baby in such a large town. And notice they weren't following a command; the angels simply told them where to find the baby and they had a desire to go see him. Wouldn't you? If an angel told you about something that was happening down the street, I'll bet you would.

And when they'd seen what the angels had told them about, they went out and told other people. They didn't go off to seminary first to become trained religious professionals, they just told people about what they had seen and heard...and the effect it had on them.

Do you do that? Do you tell others about what you have seen and heard from God? I pray that you do, especially at this time of year. People need to hear that they are loved, and known, and that they have a purpose in this life that leads them right into eternity with a loving God. Go tell someone today.

Maybe you aren't telling people about God because you think you're not prepared enough, or you think people wouldn't listen to you or take you seriously. I get that. When Jesus got hold of me after my years of being a shepherd, I doubt that even my wife and kids took me seriously...but an encounter with God's holiness changes you...and when you talk about that change to others, and follow it up with the way you live...they'll see it in you. It's not up to you to save people...God does that. It is your job to share the story though.

Maybe you aren't telling people about God because you don't know him yet...you don't have that relationship. Well, God didn't send an angel to you in the middle of the night to give you the news, but He did bring you here today, and that's no accident. And he did give you His word...the Bible.

God is inviting you today to come meet his Son, just like he invited the shepherds. Will you receive His love? Will you believe what He says and do what He asks? Will you acknowledge your need of forgiveness and put your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation? You don't need to be a genius or a member of the "in" crowd. You just need to believe and obey. Listen to Christ's promises:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. – John 3:16 (NIV)

Whoever comes to me I will never drive away. – John 6:37 (NIV)

In all the get-out-of-my-way, spend more, pile-up-those-presents-under-the-tree madness surrounding this holiday, don't miss this gift. God's gift of life through his Son. It is the greatest gift you could ever get. It's the whole point of Christmas, after all. The proclamation of the angels leads you to the manger, which leads you to Jesus Christ, which leads you to eternal life with a God who loves you beyond your wildest dreams.

May the peace and joy found in Jesus be with you this Christmas, and remain with you always.

Let's pray.