

Week 4 - The Shepherds: First Told - Luke 2:8-20

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:26-29

Introduction

At our Senior Ministry luncheon on Monday, we took some time to share our favorite Christmas memories, and we had a great time reminiscing over past Christmases and the different traditions of our various families.

When I was younger, I used to look forward to the Charlie Brown Christmas special every year, and even though I've now seen it countless times, I still enjoy it.

Creator Charles Schulz did an amazing job of using the Peanuts characters to cut through the commercialization of Christmas.

The story's climax is when Charlie Brown cries out in frustration, "Is there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Only to have the blanket-toting Linus reply, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about."

Then Linus walks to the center of the stage, calls for a spotlight, and recites the King James Version of Luke 2:8-14 before returning to tell Charlie Brown, "That's what Christmas is all about."

I love the fact that Linus quotes from Luke to show the true meaning of Christmas.

Let's read through that passage together [**Luke 2:8-14**]:

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Linus stops with the line, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men," because his focus was the angelic message.

However, we will be considering the shepherds and their role in the supporting cast of Christmas and will continue through verse 20.

As we start, we want to back up to the beginning of the chapter to notice a few things as Luke sets the scene.

First, Luke was a careful historian, and he presents this narrative as historical fact and provides the detail to back it up.

The birth of Jesus happened during the reign of Caesar Augustus and the occasion of a census.

And, as we saw when we considered Joseph a few weeks ago, the census caused Joseph and Mary to be in Bethlehem because everyone had to return to their ancestral home to be counted.

And we need to recognize God's hand in bringing these events about.

Little did Caesar know that God was moving him to do precisely as he did to fulfill God's schedule and the prophecy of **Micah 5:2**.

Caesar was counting the people to levy taxes, and he likely could not have cared less about Micah 5:2 if he was even aware of it, but we see God's hand at work just as we read in **Proverbs 21:1**

The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.

We also want to note the nature of the scene - the earthiness and the poverty surrounding it.

Luke's portrait of the birth of the Messiah is in stark contrast to Jewish expectations and desires at the time.

Having their necks under the authoritative boot of Rome caused the Jews to hope for a conquering Messiah who would throw off their oppressors.

They were looking for a hero on a fiery steed wearing flowing robes, not a baby in a manger wrapped in strips of cloth. No legend or tradition would have ever created such an account.

The stories of legendary heroes are always filled with pageantry and grandeur and contain minute details of just how special they are.

But God's plan was far simpler, and, as we will see, he declared its commencement to the simplest people.

Spiritually speaking, those days weren't all that different from today.

The Jews had a flawed view of sin, which caused them to have an inadequate view of the Savior.

Remember, God had been silent for 400 years.

Israel was, for the most part, spiritually bankrupt and had fallen into external religiosity, pharisaical legalism, and a superficial formalism in their worship.

They were surrounded by paganism and religious pluralism, and most people were caught up in materialism and maintaining a surface-level morality.

Much like it is today regarding Jesus's return, people would have admitted it and perhaps even said they anticipated it, but as a future event, and certainly not today.

Our passage this morning breaks down neatly into two sections.

Let's begin by looking at the angelic announcement in verses 8-14

I. The Angelic Announcement

This is the time of year when we start seeing stories highlighting the big events from the past year.

It's kind of fun to look through what were significant stories at the time and be reminded of things I had either forgotten all about or, at least, forgotten they happened this year.

Some people do something similar with their annual Christmas letters.

I receive those letters and see them as evidence that they keep better track of their doings than I do.

What Luke records in this second chapter of his gospel is, without a doubt, the most significant event not just of that year but of all of history.

I was thinking this week about how such a momentous event would be publicized today.

In years past, I suppose it would have gone out over the radio.

Then, in later years, we might have seen it on the nightly news, or perhaps it would have been a special bulletin that interrupted our nightly television programming.

Nowadays, I guess it would break as a press conference on all the cable news channels or as a viral post on Twitter - maybe by Tucker Carlson.

Certainly, if you or I were planning the announcement of such an event, we'd ensure it had coverage.

But that's not what God chose to do.

When he announced the birth of his Son, he sent an angel to a group of anonymous shepherds who were just going about their jobs.

There they were, at the end of their day, the sheep secure in the temporary sheepfold they had prepared and no doubt ready to take turns in alternating shifts of standing guard and sleeping.

We tend to have a rather romantic image of shepherds, probably partly due to this account, but that's not how shepherds were viewed in those days.

Although once a more noble occupation, shepherding had fallen into disrepute since the days when Moses and David had the job.

Shepherds were the uneducated and unwashed who resided near the bottom of the social ladder.

They were common laborers who were unskilled in any way that was valued and spent all their time outdoors with smelly sheep.

Shepherds were also generally thought to be irreligious.

Their 24/7 care of the sheep prevented them from complying with the religious strictures put in place by the religious leaders, making them ceremonially unclean even if they had been inclined and able to go to the temple.

The most generous of assessments would say they were humble, lowly people, and at worst, they were considered unsavory and unreliable characters who weren't even allowed to testify in a legal matter.

Either way, they weren't the kind of people one would expect to be the recipients of history's most significant announcement.

And the only way to explain it is that God found the shepherds to be the kind of people to whom he could communicate the news.

The gospel is, first of all, good news, but it's also simple enough for anyone to understand.

Had God gone to the powerful, the educated, or the religious elites, one could plausibly argue that the gospel is selective and only for the elite.

But God first told the least of people so that no one might boast.

If you've ever had the privilege of being in a truly remote area at night, far removed from artificial light, you know just how dark a night can be.

I think of that when I picture the shepherds on that particular night.

I see them lounging and relaxing when suddenly an angel shows up with the glory of the Lord, making it like noon.

It's no wonder Luke records that they were filled with great fear - the literal Greek is, "They were filled with great fear."

Fear was the usual response whenever anyone in Scripture encountered an angel in all his glory.

Finite men are always frightened when the veil is removed from the normally invisible spiritual realm.

So the angel begins, as angels in such encounters do, with words intended to comfort and quell the shepherds' fears.

"Don't be afraid because I come preaching the gospel of great joy."

The condition of sinful man is always made evident when we come into contact with what is holy.

But the angel's message isn't a message of judgment or condemnation but of salvation.

The Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world.

The angel, in effect, says, "Rather than quaking in fear, you should be dancing with joy at the news I have brought."

Notice that the angel's message was personal - "For unto *you* is born..." and universal - "For *all* the people..."

We aren't told that the angel expected the shepherds to seek Jesus, but he gave them all the information they would need should they choose to do so as he revealed where he could be found and how they could identify him.

I picture the shepherds just starting to get over their initial fright and trying to digest the news the angel has just shared with them when, all of a sudden, a whole army of angels shows up singing.

Luke doesn't tell us how many angels showed up, saying only that it was a "multitude."

But I would suspect, given that the baby they were announcing was the very Creator of the angels and the Son of God, it might have been all the angels.

I've been to conferences where a few thousand men gathered and sang praises to God.

It was quite moving to hear that many male voices joined in song and I imagine the shepherds' experience being exponentially greater as the heavenly choir broke forth.

In those days, no one would have thought God would be interested in a bunch of shepherds or that shepherds would have been all that interested in God, for that matter.

But God bypassed Jerusalem and the religious leaders, and he didn't go to Herod's villa or Caesar's palace; he sent his angel to announce the birth of his Son to shepherds who were busy tending their flocks.

And the angel's announcement was simple, even though it was accompanied by a dramatic celebration of the heavenly host.

Luke doesn't give us any indication that the shepherds were in the least skeptical of the angel's message.

But, even if they were, the arrival of the host of heaven had to get their attention.

And in verses 15-20, we see how the shepherds responded to the angelic announcement.

II. The Shepherds' Actions

The word Luke uses in verse 15 implies that, unlike their sudden appearance, the angels receded away from the shepherds and returned to heaven, leaving them alone with their sheep just as they found them.

Again, I imagine the shepherds standing there blinking a bit as their eyes adjusted again to the dark, and their minds tried to absorb what had just happened.

But it doesn't appear they stood around very long talking about what they had heard.

The way Luke describes the scene, they were united in their response, saying, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

They responded in faith - they **believed** the angelic message and **acted** on it - that's the definition of faith.

Hearing the gospel message isn't sufficient, nor is believing it; one must act for faith to be present, and the shepherds, simple and crude as they were, acted in faith by leaving their sheep and heading out "in haste" to find the Savior.

They didn't stop to pray about it or seek the counsel of a rabbi they went.

They heard a message from God and acted accordingly, and that should be our response when we read or hear a message from the Bible and the Holy Spirit delivers it to our hearts.

And, as we saw last week, we can't help but compare their reaction to that of the religious leaders back in Jerusalem who knew the prophetic word and had heard of Jesus' birth but couldn't be bothered to check it out.

The religious rulers were looking for a different Messiah and were concerned about their positions, whereas the shepherds heard of a Savior for them and placed more value on seeking the Savior than their livelihood.

And when they got to Bethlehem, verse 16 [**Luke 2:16**] tells us they found things just as the angel had said.

I suspect that, unlike the wise men with a star guiding them, they had to look around a bit when they got to town, and what they found was a regular, relatively poor couple from Nazareth with their baby.

Unlike the fanciful scenes rendered by artists, Jesus wasn't glowing; he and his folks didn't have halos, and they weren't sitting in a beam of heavenly light.

Other than the fact that they bore all the marks the angel said to look for, they were a normal, small family.

But the small, wrinkled newborn baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a feed trough was confirmation of the angelic message, and they recognized him as the Savior.

And when they saw that things were as the angel revealed, they responded by telling everyone - they shared their testimony [**Luke 2:17**].

They saw, and they shared.

I titled this morning's sermon "The Shepherds - First Told," and not only were they the first to be told about the newborn Savior, but they were also the first to go and tell others.

They became the first evangelists after hearing God's message through the angel and seeing with their own eyes.

Those lowly shepherds were the first hearers, believers, and preachers of the Christmas message.

It's a sad fact of life that new believers are often just like the shepherds, only to have their missionary zeal fade away over time.

I think a large part of the reason that happens is because of feelings of self-consciousness and embarrassment.

It doesn't take many raised eyebrows, sighs, and snickers before we lose our enthusiasm to share Jesus.

But look at the shepherds.

They were considered so unreliable as a class of people that they weren't allowed to testify in court, but they didn't care what others might think.

I'm not sure how God arranged the angelic visitation, but it seems only the shepherds had seen it, so telling that story had to be somewhat akin to being visited by a UFO today.

They had gone on the word of an angel and seen the Savior with their own eyes, and they had to tell all about the message they had heard and the Savior they had seen - regardless of how it might be received.

If we are honest with ourselves, we must admit that we are too often content with personally receiving a message from God's Word.

But seeing the infant Jesus wasn't enough for the shepherds; they had to tell, and so should we.

And in verse 18 [**Luke 2:18**], we see the result of their testimony: those who heard the shepherds' story "wondered."

The Greek word translated as "wondered" is used eight (8) times in the New Testament, and all but one of those is used to describe people's reactions to some miracle or teaching of Jesus.

And in all those uses, the word is translated as "marveled."

The only other use is also translated as "wondered," and it's used to describe the reaction when Zachariah writes on the tablet that his son will be named John.

We hear a lot today about "the wonder of Christmas," and sadly, for many people, wonder is as far as things go.

Wonder and marvel are the normal reactions to an encounter with the divine.

From the earliest beginning of Jesus' earthly life and for all his ministry here, people responded to him in amazement, but seldom, just as it is today, did that amazement produce commitment.

There's no evidence that the people who heard the shepherds' tale rushed to find the infant King as they had.

Of course, we know that absence of evidence isn't evidence of absence, but it seems that if the wonder of those who heard had resulted in action, Luke would have mentioned it.

So I think it's safe to say that those who heard were struck with wonder but shrugged it off and went on with life - just as most do today.

We see the better example in Mary's reaction as verse 19 [Luke 2:19] tells us she remembered what the shepherds had said and repeatedly turned their account over in her mind.

The wonderment of those who heard the shepherds appears transient, but Mary received the news with calm contemplation and rumination.

And that certainly is noble, but I contend the shepherds are more commendable because of their evangelism.

The last image we have of the shepherds is them returning to their flocks and their routine working lives.

But they do so while glorifying God and singing his praises.

God had spoken to them through his angel; they received and acted on the message and were privileged to be the first to gaze upon the Messiah.

And when we see God's Word confirmed in our lives, we should also be moved to praise and worship.

After all, we know more of the story today than the shepherds did on that long ago night.

We know about the cross and the resurrection, and we have the completed Word of God and the indwelling Holy Spirit to guide us - things the shepherds had no idea of.

Since the fall of Genesis 3, mankind had needed a Savior, and the hopes and longings of the world were realized on that long-ago night in sleepy Bethlehem.

The shepherds were privileged to be the first to whom God revealed his Son after his birth, resulting in belief, witnessing, and praise.

Then the shepherds returned to their sheep, never to be heard from again.

But we can praise God for the record of their involvement and their example to us.

Conclusion

Tomorrow is Christmas Day, and most of the world notes it in one way or another.

For many, Christmas means getting a day off from work, decorations, food and drink, time spent with family and friends, and exchanging gifts.

But many, perhaps most, miss the most important aspect of Christmas - the coming of the Savior.

One hundred twenty years ago, on December 17, 1903, brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright successfully got the world's first motor-powered airplane off the ground for a short flight.

To mark the occasion, the brothers sent a telegram to their sister, Katherine, saying: "We have actually flown 120 feet. We will be home for Christmas."

Katherine hurried with the telegram to the editor of her local paper only to have him read it and remark, "How nice. The boys will be home for Christmas."

He completely missed the big news that they had flown!

It's not wrong to celebrate and have fun at Christmas.

But if that's all that Christmas is to us, we are burying the lede, so to speak, and missing the true significance of the day.

Linus was right when he quoted from Luke's gospel [Luke 2:10-11] -

Fear not, for behold, I bring to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown.

Today, as much as at any time in history, people need to hear the message of great joy for all the people.

Imagine the privilege the angel experienced at being chosen to announce the Savior's birth - it had to have been a great honor.

I suppose God could still use angels to spread the word, but after they had alerted the shepherds, it appears the angels' work was done, and it fell to the shepherds to spread the word.

God chose a group of lowly shepherds to be his first witnesses, and he still delights in using the weak things of the world.

Since the dawn of the church age, the task of sharing the gospel has fallen to those who have already been saved.

And now the torch has been passed to us.

Let's seek to follow in the shepherds' footsteps and act promptly and deliberately to fulfill our responsibility to share the gospel with those around us and to live a life of continuous praise and worship of God in gratitude for his priceless gift.

Let's pray.

1 Corinthians 1:26-29 (page 952)

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.