

Followers of the Way

THE JOY OF THE SHEPHERDS

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Luke 2:8-20

From our kitchen and lounge windows in Northern Ireland, we can see in the distance sheep grazing in a field. Watching these sheep brings joy to our hearts.

In first century Judea, shepherds were looked down on and classed as the lowest in society, outcasts, very far removed from kings and rulers. They were generally distrusted and looked upon as ceremonially unclean because of their work. It is interesting to note that shepherd was the first profession mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 4:2, referring to Abel. We know from scripture that this shepherd made the first blood sacrifice.

Yet the first amazing thing to notice from our reading this morning is that God chose to reveal this Good News, this significant announcement about the Birth of the Saviour, the chief Shepherd, to these humble shepherds! Lenski says about the shepherds that, 'God found them the kind of people to whom He could communicate such news.' I wonder are we as willing to hear, respond and obey as the shepherds did that night?

When we pause and think about these humble shepherds, all mankind is in the same situation, lost in sin and needing a Saviour. Yet God displayed His grace by revealing Himself to these shepherds through an angel, and He has been speaking to the whole world ever since. This shows an inclusivity towards everyone, regardless of age, status or gender.

The job of the shepherd was to protect the sheep from any ferocious animals or bandits around and to provide food and water. A shepherd carried a rod or stick with a knob at one end, which was used for protection. He also carried a staff, using it as a walking stick and also to guide the sheep when necessary. When we think about what the shepherds carried, surely our minds think on Psalm 23:4, where the Psalmist David says, 'Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.' Shepherds also carried a sling which was a leather pouch on a string with stones in it. This reminds us of the shepherd boy, David, winning the battle with Goliath.

It is quite possible that the sheep these shepherds were looking after were going to be slaughtered at the Passover in Jerusalem a few months later. Isn't it very significant that these humble shepherds were invited to Bethlehem to see the Passover Lamb of God, who was going to take away the sins of the world!

Another task of a shepherd is attending to new born lambs. Is there any other profession that would be more excited and interested in THE Lamb being born? When we consider all these facts, surely it is no surprise that God sent an angel to these shepherds to announce this Good News which was to bring great joy!

We are told that when the angel appeared to the shepherds, the glory of the Lord shone around them. I'm sure the light must have been dazzling. It was not surprising that they were terrified. We

remember the bright light that shone around Saul when Jesus met with him on the road to Damascus, which certainly got his attention!

This glory here is referring to the visible divine presence in all His majesty and splendour. In heaven it will be glory to be where God dwells. The apostle John tells us in Revelation 21:23 that in the New Jerusalem, because of the radiant glory of the Lamb, there will be no more need for the sun or the moon.

The God of Glory appeared to Abraham in Ur, (Acts 7:2); and Moses encountered His glory on Mount Sinai, (Exodus 31). For 400 years there had been silence, and the nation of Israel had no visible sign of God's presence. Now the time is right for the long-awaited Messiah to come. I am reminded of the Christmas song, O Holy Night – 'Fall on your knees, O hear the angel voices! O night divine! O night when Christ was born, O night, O Holy Night, O night divine.' It is most likely these humble shepherds fell on their knees that night. I wonder how often do we fall on our knees in humble adoration to this new born King, the Saviour of the world?

We notice from the text that this angel is not named. Whereas we are told that it was the angel Gabriel who came to announce the Good News to Mary, and it was also Gabriel who visited Zechariah. Angels are spirits who magnify God, bringing adoration and praise to His Name; God's messengers ministering to people.

Fear seems to be the normal response when an Angel is sent from God with a message. Can you imagine what you would have felt like that night, or what your reaction would have been when the angel appeared? Those who experience the presence of God are reminded of their sinfulness. The prophet Isaiah cried out, 'Woe is me, for I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips!' (Isaiah 6:5) The Apostle John, when he saw the Glory of God, fell at His feet. (Revelation 1:17)

That night Jesus came for the first time, and we all know He is coming back for the second time. It is of paramount importance that we are all ready to meet Him in all His dazzling glory.

I remember a Christian song by Larry Norman saying, 'I wish we'd all been ready!' Let us make certain, while we still have the opportunity, that we shall be able to say, 'I am ready!' This advent season is a wonderful time to accept Jesus as our Saviour, or to rededicate our lives to Him.

Verses 10&11 tell us the announcement the angel gave to these humble shepherds, 'Do not be afraid. I bring you Good News of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you, He is Christ the Lord.' Normally, the announcement of a King's son would be a grand ceremonial occasion. This announcement was very different. It came during the night and was a very private occasion, without any extravagant worldly celebrations. Notice what the angel says first – he issues a command to the shepherds not to be afraid. He then gives the reason because he has Good News to share which will bring great JOY. This Good News is the birth of the Saviour. The waiting for the Messiah to come is over. He has arrived in David's city, Bethlehem. When the shepherds heard this about David's town, it would have been very significant for them, because they would have known about all the Messianic promises made to David about the coming Messiah.

We notice the angel tells the shepherds that this Good News was 'for all the people.' It was not only for the Jews but also for the Gentiles.

Remember Simeon, at the Temple, said, 'For my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Your people Israel.' (Luke 2:30-32). At that time life was indeed very difficult, just like today: high taxes to pay; low wages; and the military state was in control. Warren Wiersbe states that, 'Roman law, Greek

philosophy, and even Jewish religion could not meet the needs of men's hearts. Then, God sent His Son!

The angels' announcement was a huge privilege given to the shepherds. As believers in the Lord Jesus, we are given this same privilege, in order to share the Good News of the Gospel with others. What joy this should bring to our hearts. Joy is a gift from God to believers, which gives an inner gladness and is energised by the Holy Spirit.

Then the angel continues with his message and tells the shepherds, 'This will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger.' Ralph W. Sockman said, 'The hinge of history is on the door of a Bethlehem stable.' We know that this 'sign' was not a palace or a throne, nor was there any halo over the head of the baby Jesus. He was the sign, the One who would point the Way. That night, in Bethlehem, there would be no other baby found in a manger. Just think about it for a minute, if these shepherds had been directed to some palace, they would not have found acceptance there, whereas in this stable they were welcomed and accepted by Joseph and Mary. Doesn't this display the simplicity of Christmas, and yet we want to make everything complicated. Luke always emphasises the humanity of Jesus. How comforting for us to realise that He understands all our problems and difficulties. He knows each one of us here this morning, intimately. We cannot hide anything from Him.

Then the text tells us that, "... suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 'glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom His favour rests.'" As soon as the angel had made the announcement of the Birth of Jesus, suddenly he was joined by many angels. This must have been an amazing experience for these shepherds. They were given a vision into the invisible world.

Many times we wait a long time for God to act, and then suddenly He does. The purpose of the plan of salvation is to bring Glory to God. God's glory had dwelt in the tabernacle and in the Temple, but because of the sin of the people it had departed. Now, His glory was returning to earth through His Son. The manger had become the holy of holies.

Notice here, it was the angels who were the first to praise and bring Glory to God when Jesus was born. This was because they had never sinned, they were the ones who had never fallen, unlike Satan. Now that Jesus has come into the world, He will display God's attributes of justice, holiness, mercy and wisdom. What an example for us to follow. How we need to praise God more each day, and as we do we will exude more joy! Jesus took our place, paying the penalty for our sins so that we might receive forgiveness and His peace. When we seek to give God all glory, then we will experience His peace.

Then the angels left the shepherds and returned to their home in heaven. The announcement was given, but how are the shepherds going to respond? They acted immediately. They were full of excitement. Halford Luccock called this 'the first Christmas rush'. Leaving their sheep to seek the Saviour was symbolic of leaving behind what God had done in the past, in pursuit of what He would now do through Jesus. The old order had passed away and the new order had arrived. The animal sacrifices needed to be repeated over and over again, whereas Jesus would offer the perfect sacrifice for sin. Look at the treasure these shepherds found. When we pause for a minute at this time of year, isn't it true we are rushing about, but are we looking for the right kind of treasure?

There were no doubts, no questioning, no hesitation or procrastination. The shepherds believed what the angel had told them. They knew that this was a divine sign and they wanted to go to Bethlehem to see with their own eyes. The Good News of salvation always requires a response. It is not enough to hear about Jesus, we have to make a decision for ourselves to reject Him or accept Him into our lives. At Christmas time we are reminded of that lovely carol, *O Little town of Bethlehem* by Phillips

Brooks, 'No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.' When God calls us to do a certain task, we need to act like the shepherds and be willing to obey. Then we will be blessed and be able to see the results of our obedience.

This was the case for the shepherds, they obeyed what the angel had told them and they found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. Another thought worth considering is that these shepherds did not get lost, they were diligent in their seeking for Jesus, whereas the wise men had to stop and ask for directions. Isn't that true today; while shepherds, humble people, find Jesus and accept him, many learned and wise men often miss Him! Apart from Mary and Joseph, the shepherds were the first to see Jesus. How amazing was that for them! What a reward for their obedience! They must have felt such joy in their hearts to see the promised Messiah, the Saviour, right in front of their eyes.

It was no wonder they began to witness to others what they had just seen. They had taken on a new role, they were now evangelists! At that time, there would be many people in Bethlehem who had come to register in the census issued by Caesar Augustus.

I wonder, is there anyone here today wondering if and how God might use them? I am too afraid, you might think, I wouldn't know what to say if I was witnessing to someone. Take heart from these humble shepherds, who would not have been permitted to testify in court, that if God chose to use them, then He can equally choose to use YOU! Witnessing to people is a command from God, and it is a great privilege, as I have experienced on many occasions. It is our responsibility to be obedient and faithful.

Whenever the people heard what the shepherds reported, they were all amazed. That is no surprise, but that is all the text tells us; it does not say how the people responded. Maybe some of them didn't know their Old Testament Scriptures, which had prophesied that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Again, sadly isn't this true today? People hear the Gospel, but are often very slow to respond or commit to following Jesus in their lives.

We are told that, 'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.' Treasured is such a lovely word, and Mary would keep thinking over and over again at this miraculous birth of her Son.

There was so much happening in her life, but, through all the events, Mary was able to react in a very calm and serene manner, displaying a humble heart and one that trusts in God alone. The angel Gabriel had told her that her baby would reign forever. Now the shepherds were saying that He is the Saviour of the world. She knew her Old Testament Scriptures and realised that prophecy was now being fulfilled. What an example for us all to follow. When we read the Bible and hear God speaking to us, don't we need, like Mary, to ponder and meditate? Then we will be able to prove God's faithfulness to us.

After all the excitement and seeing the baby Jesus for themselves, the shepherds returned to their job. They were elated with joy and gave glory and praise to God. When we think about it, the religious leaders in Jerusalem did not truly or fully worship God, whereas the shepherds in their fields were worshipping God with their hearts. Today, there are many religious leaders who are not fully committed to the Lord and are not giving Him the praise and glory that is due His name. John Calvin points out a very interesting fact that, 'if seeing Jesus in the manger filled the shepherds with such joy and adoration, surely we who know that Jesus died for our sin and conquered death and was gloriously resurrected should be overflowing continually with joy and praise.'

May we all afresh, this Christmas season, fall down on our knees and worship the Lord, putting Him at the centre of our lives – our planning, preparations and celebrations – that we too might encounter the JOY that the shepherds experienced that first Christmas time. AMEN.

