

**“Shepherds”**  
*December 20, 2015*  
Luke 2:8-20

## **I. Introduction**

For hundreds of years before His birth, prophets foretold the coming of the Anointed One from God—the Messiah or, as He is called in Greek, the Christ. Around 685 BC the prophet Micah in [Micah 5:2](#) gave the place of His birth. Around 600 BC Daniel in [Daniel 9:20-27](#) gave the approximate date for His coming. As the time got closer to the fulfillment of God’s promise, as we saw a couple of Sundays ago, God’s messengers, the angels, carried out the final touches: Zechariah, Joseph, and Mary all had visits from angels. Things were as ready as they could be for the birth of the promised Messiah. Then just as Isaiah had written around 700 BC, the Messiah—Jesus the Christ—wasn’t born in a house of majesty and wealth—Jesus was born in a stable. His birth wasn’t announced to the most important people in the nation; not to political leaders or religious leaders or military leaders, not to wealthy merchants or men and women of distinction. None of them got the word. In Jerusalem only about 6 miles away from Jesus’ birthplace, King Herod, the religious leaders and all the people went about their daily chores without a clue. Only some poor shepherds, **“living in the fields,”** received the announcement.

Because of the census that had been ordered by the Roman government, the small village of Bethlehem, like many small towns in Judea, was filled with chaos. There were more visitors than there were rooms. There must have been people everywhere. Mary and Joseph were lucky to have any kind of roof over their heads when Mary delivered Jesus. Meanwhile, in the fields nearby, shepherds were watching over their sheep. What had been an ordinary day and evening for these men was changed dramatically and permanently. This morning, let’s consider some basic questions concerning the shepherds beginning with...

## II. Who were the shepherds?

In the beginning, shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by many others including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and, of course, David. God calls Himself the Good Shepherd and we're His sheep. But by the time we come to the first century, shepherding had lost its luster. Shepherds were now part of the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, a collection of rabbinic writings, we read these words: "*No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.*" Shepherds were definitely social outcasts.

As well as being social outcasts, their work with dead and dying animals made shepherds ceremonially unclean. Since they would spend weeks in the fields away from cities and the temple, they couldn't even go through the purification rites that would cleanse them. They were always unclean. This meant that if anyone even touched them, they would be unclean, too. So, except for other shepherds, no one else would have anything to do with them. As well as being social outcasts, *shepherds were unclean.*

They were outcasts and unclean and, as a class of people, shepherds had a bad reputation—they *were unreliable.* As a group, they had the bad habit of confusing what belonged to them with what belonged to others. Their reputations were so bad that they were even considered to be too unreliable to be allowed to give testimony in court. But God chose them to be the 1<sup>st</sup> to learn of the birth of the Savior. These shepherds, who were considered outcasts, unclean, and unreliable by others, were chosen by God.

## III. The second question is an easy one: **What were they doing?**

They were taking care of sheep. Since these shepherds were close to Bethlehem and close to Jerusalem & the Temple, many assume that they were "**keeping watch over their flocks**" which were destined for sacrifice in the temple. It would be quite fitting that the shepherds who looked after the temple lambs would be the first to see the One called by John the Baptist, "**The Lamb of God who takes**

away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). Just like the sheep the shepherds watched over, Jesus was going to be sacrificed for the sins of mankind. Turn to Isaiah 53:4-5. Paul put it this way in Philippians 2:8, “And being found in appearance as a man, he (i.e. Jesus) humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross.” In 1 Peter 1:19, Peter called Him “a lamb without blemish or defect.”

#### IV. Why appear to shepherds?

So why did the angel appear to shepherds instead of to the priests and scribes or to the ultra-religious zealots called the Essenes or even to King Herod? Paul explains why in 1 Corinthians—turn to 1 Corinthians 1:26-29. God doesn’t call many of the rich and mighty; He calls the poor and lowly. He doesn’t call those who rely on their education or their position in life or in their own strength; He calls those who will rely on Him regardless of their station in life. This is why the angels appeared to the shepherds—they were the poor and the lowly—and no one would let them forget it!

John 3:16 says that God has agape love for “the world”—all people—not just the “beautiful people.” The angel said, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” The angels appeared to the shepherds to show that everyone matters to God. On the day of Jesus’ circumcision, Simeon said the same thing—turn to Luke 2:25-32. Jesus came for everyone—for Gentiles as well as the Jews. In Romans 10:13 we read that “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” 2 Peter 3:9 says, “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

#### V. So, how did they respond?

**A. First, they were terrified.** In our reading in Luke we see the shepherds go through a variety of emotions and responses. When God’s messenger—the angel—suddenly appeared surrounded with the glory of God, no one should be surprised that the 1<sup>st</sup> response of the shepherds was to be “terrified.” These men who fought thieves, bears, lions and wolves—these brave men weren’t just a little bit afraid,

they were downright “**terrified.**” Who wouldn’t be afraid in the presence of God’s glory? Perhaps they thought the angel had come as an angel of judgment for their raunchy jokes and bad language and sticky fingers. Maybe they thought their sins were catching up with them and now they were going to suffer the consequences. Whatever the case, they were “**terrified.**”

But the angel brought them good news—the Gospel. The angel proclaimed that God had sent the promised Savior. The Savior—Jesus—had come to meet man’s greatest need—salvation from God’s wrath; salvation from the fires of hell. According to the angel, this baby born in Bethlehem was the Savior. He was the Messiah—God’s Anointed One. He is also the Lord. He isn’t just any Lord, He is the Lord God. He is God and He is Immanuel—God with us.

The angel finished the message by giving a sign. In Bethlehem that night, there may have been several newborn babies wrapped in swaddling clothes—stripes of cloth—because that was the accepted custom of the day, but there was only one baby lying in a manger—an animal feeding trough—Jesus.

**B. They hurried to Bethlehem.** These shepherds didn’t just accept and enjoy the message they received, they acted upon it. They hurried to Bethlehem. **Luke 2:16** says, “**So they hurried off and found 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!*” The Bible is clear that acceptance must lead to action, or as **James 2:17** says: “**Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.**” They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act.

The long-expected Savior had come, so when the angels finished praising God and returned to heaven, we see the 2<sup>nd</sup> response of the shepherds: they hurried to Bethlehem. Although they hadn’t been commanded to go to Bethlehem, they knew the message was from God. They wanted to see God’s gift, so they hurried to Bethlehem to see the Savior.

**C. They told others.** After searching, they found the baby just as the angel had told them. Unclean shepherds came to a smelly stable and found “**Christ the Lord**” lying on a bed of hay in an animal feeding trough. They weren’t put off by the surroundings or the smells; they only had eyes for Jesus and Him alone. They must have worshipped the Baby and no doubt marveled at God’s grace and goodness. They must have shared with Mary and Joseph what the angels had said. And beginning with Mary and Joseph, we see the shepherds’ 3<sup>rd</sup> response: *they told others what they had seen and what they had heard.* They didn’t pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They didn’t hang around the manger; they knew they were now entrusted with the message from the angels. They told others the Good News.

The message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels and there’s no reference to Mary’s magnificence or Joseph’s job. They came to see the Savior Jesus and now they went out to tell the good news themselves. As we read in **verse 17**: “**When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.**” The word “*spread*” means to “*make known in such a way that people can understand.*” The Bible says they amazed those who listened to them.

**D. Finally, they continued to glorify and praise God.** They went back to their same boring jobs, but they weren’t the same on the inside. They continued to glorify and praise God. He had kept His promise to mankind. Parts of **John 1** and the Psalms probably echo the words of the shepherds; “**The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.**” “**O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your Name in all the earth.**”

## **VI. Your Response**

Through faith, the shepherds believed the message that God sent them. They went and saw the Baby. After finding the Baby, they told the good news—the Gospel—to others as they “**glorified and praised God.**” Then they returned to their duties as shepherds, but they were changed men since they

continued to praise God even while they went back to the same jobs. So what is your response to the coming of the Savior of the world?

Like the shepherds, we have received a message from God; turn to Peter's sermon at Pentecost, [turn to Acts 2:22-24, 36-38](#). This is the message: "*Jesus loves you. He died for you and has risen from the dead for you.*" Have you accepted God's message? Have you made Him your Lord and Savior?

If you have accepted, unlike the shepherds, we have received a command from God; in [Matthew 28:19-20](#) Jesus gave the Great Commission: "*Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing or immersing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.*" Telling others about the Savior is a solemn obligation as well as a great privilege, and we, like the shepherds, must be faithful. As Paul wrote in [Romans 10:14](#): "*How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?*" Those of us who are God's children need to tell—NO, we **must** tell others that Jesus saves. Paul speaks for all of us in [1 Corinthians 9:16](#), "*Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!*" You may be the only Christian some people ever meet. Only you will have the opportunity to tell them the only way to salvation; the only way to be saved from an eternity in hell.

We must pick up where the shepherds and all those before us left off. It's now our turn—our responsibility. We must tell others that the King of kings, the Lord of lords, the Son of David has come to earth. He was sent from heaven to identify with us, to die for us, be raised for us, and to intercede for us. This is the story of Jesus, a story worthy of praise and worthy to be told again and again.

As children of God—people who have accepted God's gift of eternal life—the reason for our rejoicing starts with Jesus and the story of His birth, but it must not stop there. We aren't only celebrating

the birth of a very special Baby; we are also celebrating the Lamb of God who came to die for the sins of the world—for my sins and for your sins. We are celebrating the resurrection of Jesus as it shows that His sacrifice was accepted for the forgiveness of our sins. We are celebrating His Spirit who lives in each man and woman and child who belongs to God. Let us, like the shepherds, go forth “**glorifying and praising God.**” Not just today, not just around Christmas time but every day, we must tell others that the Savior has come. As the old hymn says:

*We've a story to tell to the nations  
That shall turn their hearts to the right,  
A story of truth and mercy,  
A story of peace and light.*