

And There Were Shepherds

We've been talking about the main characters in the Christmas story for Advent this year. Two weeks ago we talked about Mary the Mother of Jesus. Last Sunday we talked about Joseph and this morning I want to talk about the shepherds. I know you may be thinking why do we even care about shepherds? We don't even know who these guys were. They are nameless to us. If Jesus and Mary are the stars of the story and Joseph is part of the supporting cast the shepherds are simply extras. They make a cute addition to your nativity scene but what can we possibly learn from the shepherds? I'm glad you asked.

Turn with me to **Luke 2:8-20** and let's read about the shepherds. As you are turning there, let me give you a little background. The hillsides of Bethlehem provided a good grazing area for sheep. In fact it was known as an area where the best sheep were raised. Although the shepherd boys in the nativity scene on your mantel are cute little fellows, the actual shepherds may have been a little rougher and tougher. Think about men who lived outside, who slept outside, who spent all of their time with the sheep, who didn't have opportunity to bathe too often, who lived a rather nomadic life with very little pay. Think about men who might have had a rough background or who had lived a rather difficult life. This might be the kind of guys we are talking about here. And what can we learn from them? Quite a bit actually.

(Read 2:8-20) I'm glad these guys are a prominent part of Luke's record of Christ's birth because the shepherds teach us some important lessons about God and about ourselves. **Lessons from the shepherds:**

1. God knows where you are. Luke said there were shepherds abiding in the fields. NIV says there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby. I suppose I never thought about this but these guys weren't clocking out at the end of their shift you know. They literally lived out in the field with their sheep. They didn't have a home. They didn't have a permanent address. They lived where ever the sheep went to graze. If you wanted to find a shepherd, you had some territory to cover and those hills all look just the same. If you want to get lost those hills would be a good place.

Once in Israel we had stopped along the road to look at something and we looked up at these barren looking hills. Nothing there. And then suddenly out of

nowhere came this shepherd and all these sheep. How could he possibly tell one hill from another, but the shepherd knew where he was going. He knew where to find water for the sheep and food for the sheep and more importantly, he always knew where the sheep were.

You may feel like God doesn't even know where you are. Your circumstances and your life are so messed up you just think God has forgotten all about you. Hear me today. God knew precisely where those shepherds were, in the middle of the Judean countryside, in the middle of the night, he knew exactly where they were and what they were doing and he chose to meet them there. God knows exactly where you are and what you are dealing with. He hasn't forgotten you nor are you lost to him and to his compassion and love. If you think you are hidden from God, he sees you. He knows where you are. If you think you are lost to God, he knows where you are even without a permanent address. He doesn't even need a gps. (It's not a global positioning system, it's God's positioning system). Not only did God know where the shepherds were, God knew who they were.

2. God knows who you are. We know the names for many of the other people in the Christmas story. Of course Mary and Joseph and Jesus, but we know about Zechariah and Elizabeth. Tradition tells us the names of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anne. We know about Simeon and Anna in the temple. There is even an unfounded legend about the wise men being named Gaspar, Balthasar and Melchoir (sounds like characters from a Disney movie to me. We don't even know how many wise men were present and they weren't at the birth). But no one even tried to suggest that we know the names of the shepherds. I don't know that anyone cared who they were. (Bert and Ernie and Steve?) You think maybe Mary got their names and sent them a Christmas card every year? Really, we don't know who these guys were. Nameless, faceless, non-descript in every way, but God knew who they were. He knew them by name. He knew their history. He knew their past and he knew their future. He knew their faults and failures and he knew their potential. It doesn't matter that we don't know who they were. It doesn't matter that no one else knew who they were. God knew.

You may feel like you are invisible to the rest of the world. No one knows you or cares about you. No one notices you or respects you or pays attention to you. Think

about it, these guys were shepherds. This wasn't a profession to which young children aspired. No one was saying, "When I grow up I want to live outside in the heat and deal day and night with stupid animals that have brains the size of a pecan." The job of a shepherd was not prestigious or influential. Remember when Samuel went to Jesse's house in Bethlehem to anoint a new king of Israel? He looked at seven of his sons and asked if there was another. Jesse said, there is one more, the youngest, but he is attending the sheep. He hadn't exactly been rewarded with taking care of the sheep. It may have been the least glamorous job. And David was about to be overlooked because he was a shepherd boy. Shepherds were always overlooked and that may describe how you feel, but you've never been overlooked by God. He knows where you are and what you are dealing with and he knows who you are and he loves you in spite of faults and failures. He knows you completely yet he still loves you.

These guys were essentially homeless, unknown, overlooked, dismissed by the decent folks in town, and yet God sent angels to these nameless homeless guys to announce the greatest news the world has ever received: God was with them and had come to save them! The angels said this good news was not solely for them but instead it would be for all the people. You see, if it was good news for the folks at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, the shepherds, it was going to be good news for everyone. A savior is born, Christ the Lord. A third lesson we learn from the shepherds:

3. God has good news for the whole world and that includes shepherds and you!

God has good news and he is still looking for people to hear it and receive it. It strikes me as interesting that it was these old rough shepherds that heard the good news first. The theologians in town missed it. The priests and those serving in the temple, they missed it. Herod missed it. Those who should have been looking for the coming of the Messiah, they should have seen this, but they missed it. He came to his own John's gospel says, and his own missed it. They didn't receive him. But to everyone who received him and believed upon his name he gave power to become children of God. And what better illustration of that than to go to the poorest and lowest and the overlooked and to the people who never heard good news and tell them the greatest good news of all. The shepherds heard it first that God's good news is for the whole

world.

Unworthy? There is good news. A savior is born. Unpopular? Good news. A Savior is born. Bound by sin and guilt and shame? Good news. The angel said a Savior is born and his name will be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. He has come to save you. All alone and frightened, insecure, uncertain? There is good news. A child is born this day in Bethlehem and his name will be called Emmanuel. God is with us so you don't have to be afraid anymore. You are no longer alone. This good news is for all the people, for everyone who will hear it and believe it.

Good news - A Savior is Born and he wants to save you.

Good news - You don't have to be afraid anymore. He has come to deliver you from fear and set the captive free.

Good news - This is not just for a select few that can afford it or that have private access, this is for the whole world, for all the people - for everyone who will receive it by faith.

Good news - God has kept his word and his promise has been fulfilled. He confirms it with a sign. A virgin has conceived and delivered a Son who will deliver us from our sins. God's promises are true. You can believe him.

Good news - God's peace and his grace, his favor are available to all who will believe.

Good news - You can come and see and experience the salvation of the Lord. Come and know the God who rests in a manger. Open your eyes and see.

Good news, something the shepherds didn't usually get much of, but my, didn't they receive it that night? God chose them to hear and receive good news and the good news is still available for all of us. It's a scary world full of wickedness and evil, but there is good news yet today. A savior is born! He has come for you, to save you, to cleanse you, to change you, to be with you, to lead and guide you. Be like the shepherds and receive that good news with gladness, in faith, with an open heart and you will never be the same. Here is the fourth lesson from the shepherds.

4. God is looking for people who will seek after him. Verse 15 says when the angels had left them and gone back into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, **“Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has**

told us about. So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the manger.” Luke 2:15-16

These guys didn't hesitate. They didn't over analyze. They didn't debate the pros and cons of going or staying. And notice, the angel never told them to go. It wasn't a command (“Now, arise and go forth to Bethlehem and search until thou findest the Christ child.”) It sounded more informational didn't it. “Just wanted you all to know. Fyi.” But it seemed God already knew what they would do with the information. Maybe that's why he announced the birth of Jesus to this bunch in the first place. He knew already what was in their heart – they were God seekers. He knew they couldn't do anything else.

Imagine this scene in heaven. “I want you angels to announce the birth of Jesus.” “Sure thing. We'll announce it in the palace to the people of power, the important people.” “No, they will only be threatened and want to kill him.” “Well, we'll announce it to the religious leaders of the day. They'll know what to do.” “No, they'll have to debate and argue over whether it is kosher for a baby to be born in a stable.” “Well, we'll announce it to the people of the city of Bethlehem. Surely they'll be excited to hear it.” “No, they're too busy making money off of the travelers and tax-payers that have come to town. They wouldn't even stop to make room for Mary in her condition. They are too busy to hear it.” “Then who can we tell?” And God says, “Tell it to the shepherds in the fields outside town. I know them. They'll be quick to listen and hungry to see the truth and the glory of God. Tell them because they are hungry for good news. Tell them and they will come to see for themselves.”

I believe God is still looking for people like the shepherds who will respond to him by seeking after him. God reveals himself to us so we will hunger for him even more, so we will seek for an ever deepening relationship. The Lord says, **“You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord.” Jeremiah 29:13-14**

God is hiding in plain sight. He has made himself known to us - that his name is Emmanuel and he is with us. He told us the sign and what to look for and now he leaves it up to us like he did the shepherds. What shall we do? Let's go see for ourselves. Hear the word of the Lord through the prophet Isaiah: **“Seek the Lord**

while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on him and to our God for he will freely pardon.” Isaiah 55:6-7

Let's be like the shepherds. Let's hurry and go right now to see what the Lord has done. Let's respond without delay to the Lord, to obey him and to please him and to seek after him. Let's allow the desire to see Jesus, to be with him, to experience his glory and his presence, let's allow that to motivate us, to move us to seek him with a whole heart.

Let's go see for ourselves. It has to be your relationship with the Lord, not your parents' relationship or your spouses or your friends. It's about your choice to seek him now. Let's lay aside everything and seek the Lord right now. That's what the shepherds did.

5. God is looking for people to share his good news. When the shepherds had seen for themselves that everything the angel had told them was true, **“they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”** The shepherds became traveling evangelists telling everyone what they had heard, what they had seen, what they had experienced. That's what evangelism is about, just telling what we've seen and experienced. Evangelism isn't a program, it's the natural expression of a heart that has encountered God's mercy through his Son Jesus. They couldn't keep it to themselves. “We've seen the Messiah, the one who has come to save us from our sins, the one who is the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy. Come see for yourself.” That's our message. Like the shepherds – come and see with us what we've seen. Come experience this for yourself. Finally,

6. God is looking for worshipers. The bible says after seeing Jesus, **“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen which were just as they had been told.”** They returned to their job and to their sheep but their lives had been forever changed. They came back glorifying and praising God. They worshiped God because he had sent his Son and our Savior into the world. They worshiped because they realized they were not alone any longer. God was with them. They worshiped because they knew God was faithful, that he kept his

word and did what he said he would do. They worshiped because everything was just as they had been told. They worshiped God because he had chosen to reveal himself to them of all people. They worshiped God because he is worthy of praise.

I want to be a worshiper like the shepherds. I know this doesn't seem to fit the profile of the shepherds, the way I described them earlier. We think of them as being rough, sunburned, toughened old guys, but you see, when you've met the Savior, when you experience the glory of God's grace, it has a way of softening your heart, of filling your life with joy and then spilling over into praise and adoration to God for all he has done. No one had to teach these guys to worship. Again, worship isn't what we do in church on Sunday morning or Wednesday night, worship is the natural response of a heart that has heard and received the good news. We have seen the Christ and we can't help but rejoice and give thanks to God.

It's Christmas time and we are busy and overwhelmed but I want to take time to be like the shepherds. I want to be available and listening, ready to respond. I want to believe his word and I want to experience his glory for myself. I want to sing and glorify him with praise and I want to share the good news with others. Joy to the world the Lord has come. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad.

So the next time you see that nativity scene and you see a couple of shepherds, give thanks to God for those guys and tell the Lord, "I want to be like the shepherds."