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Series: *Christmas Through the Eyes...*

Title: *The Shepherds*

Text: Luke 2:1-20

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Many years ago, back when I was in my early teens, my dad---who you should remember was a pastor in Dover, Delaware---my dad opened the mailbox at our house at 385 Mimosa Avenue and inside he found a special, official-looking envelope. He opened it and learned that he, the pastor of a relatively small church in the second smallest state in the nation, had been invited to attend the President's National Prayer Breakfast in D.C. I honestly don't remember who the president was at the time, but I'm pretty sure it was someone after Abraham Lincoln and before Ronald Reagan.

In any case dad was thrilled! Think of it HE was invited to D.C. to have breakfast with the leader of the free world! I'm not even sure Dad voted for that particular president, but he was so happy. Of course, hundreds of others would be there--but hey, he was invited to be one of them.

I remember him excitedly showing mom the invitation and she shared his joy. They quickly sent in their RSVP. Then mom went out and bought a new dress, dad got a new suit. They made reservations in a hotel in downtown D.C. and the day before the big day they headed west.

When they returned, they told us that they had a great time. Dad talked about it for months--years. He described the food and what it was like to see the president in the flesh. He said he was pretty sure he nodded at dad. Mom talked about the decorations and food presentation and the other people at their table.

Ask me why dad, the under-shepherd of the 1st Southern Baptist Church of Dover, was invited.

I DON'T KNOW---but it was one of the highlights of his life.

That special unexpected invitation from the past came to mind this week because this morning we are looking at some other shepherds---not the pastoral version---although these guys did spend a lot of time in the pasture. All kidding aside, we're looking at some other surprised shepherd invitees---unlikely guys who received a far more impressive invitation than my dad did---and of course, I'm referring to those shepherds watching their flocks by night in the fields outside of Bethlehem the night of Jesus' birth. They received a personal invitation from God Himself, delivered by angels to come and visit His only Son on the night of His birth.

Think of it, dad was one of a couple hundred invited to the President's prayer breakfast, but these shepherds were the only ones God invited to the stable that night. Try and imagine what that must have been like for them?!

Better yet, let's read about it. Take your Bibles and turn to Luke 2. If able, stand in respect for God's Word as I read the familiar words in verses 1-20.

Luke 2: 1-20

1 - In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.

2 - (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.)

3 - And everyone went to their own town to register.

4 - So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

5 - He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a Child.

6 - While they were there, the time came for the Baby to be born,

7 - and she gave birth to her Firstborn, a Son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed Him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

- 8 - *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.*
- 9 - *An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*
- 10 - *But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.*
- 11 - *Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.*
- 12 - *This will be a sign to you: You will find a Baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."*
- 13 - *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*
- 14 - *"Glory to God in the highest Heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests."*
- 15 - *When the angels had left them and gone into Heaven, the shepherds said to one another,*
- 16 - *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*
- 17 - *So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, Who was lying in the manger.*
- 18 - *When they had seen Him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this Child,*
- 19 - *and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*
- 20 - *But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.*
- 21 - *The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.*

Okay, as we continue our Advent series "Christmas Through the Eyes," what can we learn from the perspective these shepherds had of Jesus' birth?

One thing they saw that Christmas night is this:

1. The Gospel is GOOD NEWS.

Look back at verses 10-11 where the angel said, ***"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord."***

Be sure to note the first four words in the angels' message? ***"DO NOT BE AFRAID!"*** Those comforting words are understandable. I'm sure these guys were terrified at the spectacular glory they beheld. I mean, they are out in the hills one night when suddenly out of the darkness the blinding light of an angel of the Lord appeared to them. Then just as their eyes are beginning to adjust and their minds are beginning to deal with the fear that ONE angel caused, the sky is filled with a multitude of angels---uncountable thousands---singing praise to God. I don't know about you but if I had been there, I would have welcomed those four words, ***"Do not be afraid!"***

Well, the wonderful news is these words were meant to calm much more than the anxiety of those shepherds. Those words were meant for all people---you and me---which is a wonderful thing because as fallen beings living on a fallen world, all of us have so much to be afraid of.

As Lucado puts it in his book, *Fearless*, *"Each sunrise brings new reasons to fear. Layoffs at work, slowdowns in the economy, flare-up in the Middle east. Some demented dictator is collecting nuclear warheads the way others collect fine wines. [A new strain of COVID is crossing the border---AGAIN.] We are peppered with bad news: global warming, genocide, wars, earthquakes, the latest mass shooting, [the threat of war in Ukraine]. News programs disgorge enough hand-wringing information to warrant an advisory: 'Caution: this news report is best viewed in the confines of an underground fault in Iceland.'* We fear being sued, going broke; we fear the mole on the back, the new kid on the block, the sound of the clock as it ticks us closer to the grave. We create elaborate security systems and legislate stronger military, yet we depend on mood altering drugs more than any other generation in history. Fear, it seems has taken a hundred-year lease on the building next door and set up shop."

Lucado is right---this is a scary world we live in.

My point is, the message the shepherds heard that night is welcome news indeed! Now, we need not fear because the SAVIOR has been born. His birth drives away fear the way light banishes darkness!

It's like that scene in the last STAR WARS movie, *The Rise of Skywalker*. Rey and her few but brave companions are battling the evil emperor. He's still alive, even though we thought he died back in *The Empire Strikes Back!* Plus, he is much more powerful and is the embodiment of evil. The emperor has kazillions of dark space ship destroyers crewed by evil clones. The good guys are vastly outnumbered---it looks like the end---and then the soundtrack changes and hundreds and hundreds of allied ships from all over the galaxy drop out of light speed. There's NEW HOPE--wait that's the fourth movie.

Well, in a very real sense that's the situation all people were in before Jesus came. We were behind enemy lines surrounded, outnumbered. Sin was defeating us—pushing us farther and farther from God. The situation looked grim. We were lost people with no hope of being saved.

Then that Heavenly choir sang for those shepherds, changing the “soundtrack” of life, letting us know something wonderful was about to happen---and it did! The Savior came!

Jesus' sinless life and victorious resurrection made it possible for our sin to be defeated—our sins washed away! Through faith in Jesus, we need not fear life because thanks to His forgiveness, Immanuel can be with us, guiding us through every fearful decision---empowering us to do things of eternal significance---giving us a peace that passes understanding. Nor do we need fear death because Heaven awaits all who put their trust in the child Who was born that Christmas night.

A moment ago I quoted Lucado where he lists some of the many things that cause people fear. But he didn't list one; you see many people fear the Gospel. They don't think of it as good news. One reason many think this way is because they have the idea that the gospel is an angry message. They feel like God is just out to get sinners---to punish them. Or they believe the Gospel is only about “don'ts,” rules that take the joy out of life. We have to help these people understand that none of this is true. The Gospel is literally GOOD news. God doesn't want to punish us---He sent Jesus to forgive us! Even though all we like sheep have gone astray; all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; even though there is none righteous, no not one---the message of the gospel is that even in the midst of the mess we've made of things that... ***“God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”*** (Romans 5:8 NIV)

The message of Christmas is that, ***“God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved.”*** (John 3:17) And when we are in a growing, personal relationship with Jesus---obeying God's loving laws---life becomes truly joyful, abundant.

The Gospel IS GOOD NEWS.

Here's a second thing those shepherds saw that night of nights.

2. The Gospel is good news for EVERYONE.

Remember, of all people, these shepherds were invited. You may be thinking, *“What's so bad about a shepherd? They take care of sheep 24-7---and isn't our Lord compared to a Shepherd?”*

You'd be right to think that. Shepherds did important work---they had to be brave to protect the sheep in their care from predators. They had to be compassionate and focused in order to take care of these wooly animals that are prone to getting hurt, sick, or lost.

And---YES---throughout the Bible, God is compared to a Shepherd---So is Jesus. It's a wonderful word that helps us understand how loving and care-giving God is. My favorite “title” as a pastor is “under-shepherd.”

But in the Jewish culture of the 1st century, “shepherd” wasn't a good title. These sheep-watchers weren't looked UP to, they were looked DOWN upon. They were despised and mistrusted by everyone of that day—for several reasons.

- First, since caring for sheep was indeed a 24-7 kind of job, they couldn't observe all the meticulous hand-washing rules and regulations required by the Jewish religion.
So, it was next to impossible for them to be made clean in the eyes of Jewish law.
- And, you would think that this demanding of a job would pay well but it didn't.
In fact, no job paid less than that of a shepherd which put these men at the bottom of the ladder financially.
- Plus, perhaps because of their nearly non-existent pay—they had the reputation for making off with things that did not belong to them—which led people to think of shepherds as crafty and dishonest.
- In fact, their reputation was so bad that they were not even allowed to bear testimony in a court of law. It was just assumed that people who worked as shepherds were people who would lie.
- On top of this they were illiterate—they had no formal schooling whatever. Who has time to go to school when you have to watch sheep 24-7!?

So, to summarize, in most people's minds, shepherds were like vagrants, carnival workers, and con men—all rolled into one. They were looked down on as being part of the lowest class of the lowest class of their culture.

And yet God invited THEM! As the Christmas Carol puts it, *"The FIRST 'Noel' the angels did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields where they lay."* This tells us that the gospel—the GOOD NEWS of Jesus' coming—is for everyone. It's not just the educated and influential—the "good" people—no, it's for all members of society. God chose to break the news to a scruffy bunch of shepherds late at night because the message of the gospel is that EVERYONE matters to God—even shepherds. Every person on the planet is equally dear to the heart of God.

This is exactly what the angel said when he appeared to these shepherd boys as they watched their flocks late at night. Look at verse 10 where he says, ***"I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall BE TO ALL PEOPLE."***

Let me underscore two implications of this statement.

- a. First, this ***"good tidings of great joy"*** includes YOU.

Yes—YOU! You can't be too low on the totem-pole; you can't be too much of a failure and not matter to God. You can't mess up too much, for God to stop loving you. I mean, God doesn't RANK people; He loved THE WHOLE WORLD so much that He sent His Son so that ***"WHOSOEVER believes in Him will not perish but have everlasting life."*** It doesn't matter what sins you have embraced or even now are embracing, it doesn't matter how educated you are, or how successful or unsuccessful. God loves YOU as if you were the only person in the universe. The good news the angel heralded that night includes YOU.

But there's more—you see, the Gospel is not only for you.

- b. It includes EVERYONE ELSE.
 - This good news—is for your enemies.
 - It's for the people in the other political party.
 - It's for the people who disagree with you about vaccines and face-masks.
 - It's even for those people who embrace a lifestyle you know the Bible teaches is sinful.
 - It's for people who embrace a false faith system.
 - It's people who make fun of you for believing in absolute truth.

Do you get the point? The GOOD NEWS the angel was referring to is that God loves ALL people the same. You see, He doesn't love us because of us—but because of Him. God IS love—and that love is all-inclusive. Jesus was born for ALL people.

Steve May puts it like this, *"Whether you're a shepherd boy or a sheik, whether you live in the first-world or the third-world--whether you work in the mail room or the board room, we're all the same to God."*

Here's a third thing the shepherds saw that night:

3. The Gospel calls for a RESPONSE.

The angel's message that the Messiah had been born in Bethlehem and that He could be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger--well, that left these shepherds with a decision to make. And they had several options as to what to do with this invite, this GOOD NEWS.

- They could have DOUBTED what they had been told.
They could have said, *"This message can't be true. In fact, why should we have been told at all? We better just forget about all this."*
- They could have IGNORED it.
I mean, they could give any number of excuses not to check out the news they had just heard sung. After all, theirs was a 24-7 job!
- They could have DEBATED it.
They could have sat down and analyzed what they should do. Could they afford to leave the sheep? What if something happened while they were gone?
- And they could have REJECTED the angels' message outright.
They could have said, *"This is not for us! In fact, this whole thing sounds kind of flaky!"*

But each of the shepherds chose to respond with BELIEF. Note the exact wording. They didn't say, *"Let's go see IF these things are true."* No, they said, *"Let's go see this thing that HAS come to pass."* So, they did! ***"They hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the Baby, Who was lying in the manger."*** (verse 16)

You know, there are a lot of people in this world who know the Christmas Story. They KNOW about the trip to Bethlehem and about there being no room in the Inn. They know about the swaddling clothes and the manger. They know about the angels, and the shepherds and the wise men. They have manger scenes and know where to put Joseph, and Mary and Baby Jesus, and Shepherds and the Wise Men. They've heard the Christmas Story again and again and can recite it point by point—even verse by verse. They know every detail. But guess what? We're not saved by knowing the details. We're saved by RESPONDING to the details. We're not saved by KNOWING ABOUT JESUS—but by KNOWING Jesus. And that salvation comes through our personal belief—our choice to put our faith in Jesus. If we don't use our God-given free-will and choose to believe, we are still lost in our sin. The GOOD NEWS the angels proclaimed that night requires a RESPONSE.

This week I read about a man named Tedd Kidd who was five years older than a young woman he loved, a woman named Janet. Tedd finished college before Janet, and started to work in a city hundreds of miles from her. They always seemed to be at different places in their lives. But they had been dating for seven years.

Every Valentine's Day, Tedd proposed to her. Every Valentine's Day, Janet would say, *"No, not yet."* But her negative response didn't stop Tedd. He kept asking---every year.

Finally, when they were both living nearby in Dallas, Texas, Tedd reached the end of his patience. That Valentine Day, he bought a ring, took Janet to a romantic restaurant, and was prepared to reinforce his proposal with that diamond. Another "No" would mean he had to get on with his life without her. And, after salad, entree, and dessert, it was time. Tedd summoned up his courage. But, knowing that Janet had a gift for him, however, he decided to wait.

"What did you bring me?" he asked.

She handed him a box the size of a book. He opened the package and slowly peeled away the tissue paper. It was a cross-stitch Janet had made that simply said, *"Yes."*

Isn't that romantic! Everyone say "AWE" as you squeeze the hand of your husband or wife.

Well, as much as Tedd longed to hear that word--God longs so much more to hear it from us. The word "YES" is the word that God, in His tireless pursuit of the sinner, longs to hear. God waits for that response from each of us and when we

give it--when we reach out in faith we learn that the message of the angels is true: We see that ***“Unto YOU---unto US---has been born a Savior”*** as we meet Jesus Himself just as certainly as the shepherds did!

There’s one more thing we can see from the shepherds’ perspective. You see, they SAW that:

4. The Gospel is meant to be SHARED.

Look at verses 17-18 where it says, ***“When they had seen Him, 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.”***

Listen, the good news of Christmas is TOO good to keep to yourself. In fact, we are commanded to share it. Do you remember, Jesus’ words in Matthew 28? We are to GO---as we GO throughout life---we are to share the message of Christmas---making disciples of everyone we can. As the carol that was surely inspired by Jesus’ command puts it, we are to be like those shepherds and, ***“Go and tell it on the mountain and over the hills and everywhere.”***

We are to be moving marbles---having faith conversations everywhere we go---every chance we get. Sadly many of us shy away from this because we have been taught to think of sharing the Gospel as sort of a sales pitch. And that’s not a good way to think of evangelism---sharing the good news. Thinking of yourself as a salesman, well it makes sharing the Gospel like selling a vacuum cleaner. Here’s a better word picture---you and I are not salesmen and saleswomen---we are REPORTERS. Sharing the gospel means telling the people around you, whenever you have the opportunity, all the good things God has done for you, and the good things he has done for others. It’s sharing YOUR perspective on Jesus’ coming---coming into YOUR life.

You don't have to persuade anyone or convince them or convert them. That’s the Holy Spirit’s job. Your job is to REPORT in any way you can---anywhere you can. As Paul put it, ***“I have become all things to all people so that by all possible means, some might be saved.”*** (1st Corinthians 9:22)

This week I came across a wonderful example of a believer doing this in an article in *Christianity Today*, by David Roach. The title of the article is *“Playing for Souls.”* In it, David tells about a man named Roman Khripunov, who, until the COVID-19 pandemic, didn’t realize the evangelistic potential of video games. Khripunov ran soccer academies for refugees and immigrants in Houston, using the sport as a platform to share Christ with children.

When the coronavirus paused in-person outreach, the ministry came up with an alternative: Soccer coaches would begin playing video games on the livestreaming platform Twitch and invite players to watch and ask spiritual questions. On Twitch, participants talk with each other as they play or type back and forth in a chat box. It was a hit. Teenage soccer players reluctant to spend 15 minutes discussing spiritual matters in person were willing to engage for three to four hours over video games online. Eventually, the ministry opened its Twitch channel to the public and began to establish a presence on other gaming platforms as well, with coaches talking with people online. Among the success stories, a man from the Netherlands professed faith in Christ while gaming, then brought five friends to hear the gospel too. Khripunov said, ***“The people that we’re starting to observe on these [gaming] platforms are actually seeking a lot of spiritual things. They’re very hungry for the gospel.”*** I wonder how many of you would sign up if we announced that our next mission trip was on the Internet---playing games as we shared the Good News?! It is SUCH eternity impacting news---that it HAS to be shared---anyway we can!

So the shepherds saw:

- The Gospel is GOOD NEWS.
- The Gospel is Good News for EVERYONE.
- The Gospel calls for a RESPONSE.
- The Gospel has to be SHARED.

Let’s pray.