

Joy for the Overlooked

Luke 2:8-20

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Some jobs are necessary, but they are only sometimes appreciated. Think about those who collect waste, clean out septic systems, or even those who serve in a political position. In big cities, the job farmers do is unappreciated even though they expect the grocery store to be fully stocked whenever they enter. In truth, many jobs are the same way. In Biblical days, shepherds may have been necessary (to protect sheep for their wool and sacrifices), but they were not appreciated.

I don't know where it started, but Shepherds, especially those with a night watch, were considered untrustworthy. They were generally not welcomed in the city, and they had a reputation, right or wrong of being thieves. They likely did not have highly developed social skills because . . . well, they spent most of their time with sheep. They could not keep the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand-washings and rules and regulations because of their job. Therefore, they were despised by the religious leaders of the land. There is nothing in our text that even remotely suggests these shepherds were anything less than reputable, but stereotypes are always unfair.

The shepherds in the Christmas story have their story told in Luke 2, starting in verse 8.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.

Commentator William Barclay writes,

... these were in all likelihood very special shepherds. . . in the Temple, morning and evening, an unblemished lamb was offered as a sacrifice to God. To see that the supply of perfect offerings was always available the Temple authorities had their own private sheep flocks; and we know that these flocks were pastured near Bethlehem. It is most likely that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. It is a lovely thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.¹

The normal quiet night of was suddenly interrupted.

⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified,¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said.

¹ William Barclay, ed., *The Gospel of Luke*, The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 22–23.

Can you imagine the scene? These shepherds were spending the evening the way they normally did, guarding their sheep from wild animals. The sheep would have been in some kind of a pen, or even a cave that likely afforded some protection and there could have been several flocks there for the night.

I imagine the Shepherds sitting around a fire to have dinner and swap stories and conversation around the fire. We have no idea what time it was when the Angel of the Lord appeared with “the radiance of the Lord’s glory” surrounding them. I suspect it was before it was too deep into the night since they do not seem to have been awakened. After this experience, they sure were not going to fall asleep soon! They were, if you will, corralled by the glory of God. R.C. Sproul writes,

“Almost every time the Bible records a theophany, an outward visual manifestation of the invisible God, it is accompanied by the presence of the Shekinah. The shekinah was the blazing, refulgent, blinding glory of God. We read that when that glory was visible, people hid their eyes from it; they were overwhelmed by it, driven to their knees, because there was nothing in nature that could compare to the shekinah glory of God.” (R.C. Sproul, LUKE 107,108)

This is what the Shepherds saw! We are told they were terrified. Not only was the glory of God intimidating, but this kind of thing did not happen to *Shepherds!* The Angel tried to calm their fears, saying, “Don’t be Afraid.” This, of course, is something you say to someone who is already afraid. The angel continued,

“I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

I am disappointed in the translation of verse 11. The New Living Translation makes this sound like a news item. Every other translation adds something very significant: “For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (ESV) What is missing in the New Living translation is the phrase “unto you.” And this points us to a problem today . . . many people know the Christmas story (an increasing number of people do not) but they celebrate it in a detached manner only as an event that happened in history. They miss the fact that Jesus came to earth for them!

Like every other Jewish boy or girl, waiting for the Messiah was something they had done every day of their life. Many of the ceremonies of their faith pointed to a day when the rescuer would come. They likely saw this rescuer mostly in the area of political freedom (throwing off Roman

rule and restoring the independence and significance of Israel). This coming Messiah would show God to be faithful to His word and vindicate the Jewish people from all their enemies. Sadly, many Jewish people are still waiting for this Messiah.

The Shepherds didn't have to doubt whether they were understanding the message correctly. They saw and heard the Heavenly Choir singing "Glory to God in the Highest and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased." I suspect that was a pretty compelling moment. Perhaps they needed that extra testimony so they were not put off by the fact that the Messiah would be born in such humble circumstances.

This sounds like quite the sound and light show. It was better than anything that Branson could put together. Have you ever wondered how far away could people see that something was happening out in the fields nearby? Did people look out their windows to see what was going on? Did God somehow put a seeming bubble around the Shepherds so they were the only ones to see the heavenly choir? If you have never wondered about that . . . you will now!

This whole thing had to be staggering to the Shepherds who were marginalized by the world in which they lived. People didn't see them, or when they did, they turned away. But they were not marginalized by the Lord. He brought the news to them personally so they would know it was true. Everywhere they went, they were treated as if the Kingdom was not for them because they were not good enough. But now God was telling them: "You have worth," "You are a person of eternal value," "You are seen and loved."

Perhaps you feel marginalized as you sit here tonight? Do you feel the world overlooks you? Do you feel like God might do the same? Like the shepherds, let me say this: Unto YOU, a Savior was born in Bethlehem. He wants, yes, you, to be part of His family! He came to address your sin and brokenness. He came to be your Savior!

With all this background, consider what happens next.

¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

These socially awkward individuals were suddenly going up to total strangers to tell them about their experience with the angels and their visit to see Jesus. I am sure it didn't matter if people were put off by the fact that they were shepherds, they had news to share and a divine imperative to do so. I suspect their enthusiasm would have been enough to get the attention of the people.

Why Did God Announce the News to Shepherds?

Of all the people, why did God bring the Son into the world in this way? Why was He in a stable with the animals? Why did He first announce the birth of the Son of God to Shepherds? It is a question that is worth asking.

The Lord was making a statement. The first answer is that this is the way God wanted it. But why? God certainly doesn't answer to us, but I think the Lord is sending a message. Jesus did not come into the world for the elite (He also does not exclude the elite, but they must first humble themselves). He came for even people of the lowest social status. The Shepherds were unassuming, but that does not mean they were unimportant.

You can be sure that in this congregation today, many feel like the Shepherds may have felt. You feel dismissed, overlooked, unseen. Perhaps you are

- Facing a holiday for the first time without a family member.
- Feeling bullied by others at school or work.
- Feeling like a failure, worthless, because you just don't seem to be making any progress in your career or in life.
- Divorced and feeling lost because the kids are with your former spouse.
- One who has had a great failure in life and can't seem to get out from under it.
- You have a job that isn't one you want to brag about.
- An elderly person who everyone seems to look past with annoyance because you move slowly.
- You are in foster care because of a bad home life, and you feel unwanted.
- You are a product of a broken family, and you feel like you spend the season caught in a tug-of-war between families.
- You are single (and not by choice) and feel more alone than you do the rest of the year.

If you are a member of that list or the club that list describes, then I urge you to hear the message of the Shepherds: God sees you! He loves you. He wants you to know that Christmas is about you! It does not leave you behind. What you feel and what is true are two different things. You feel forgotten but you are not. You feel like you are second class (at best) but God values you as much as He does anyone else. I believe the message came to Shepherds because God wanted all mankind to know that the Messiah came into the world to make anyone who trusts in Him a child of God that He will guide in this life and will make it possible for them to live even after they die.

He came to the Shepherds because they were willing to listen. Do you know what I think would have happened if this angel and the heavenly host would have appeared to the religious leaders? I think they would have been peppered with scores of questions. They would have wanted to know where in the Bible it said the Messiah would be born in a stable? They would say it in such a way as to indicate that it was a preposterous idea. The Messiah would certainly be born in more regal circumstances. And if they bothered to go to the manger to see the baby, they likely would

have dismissed the notion that this was the Messiah as soon as they saw Mary and Joseph. Perhaps God came to the Shepherds because He didn't want the hassle he would get from others.

He knew they would respond with wonder. These Shepherds were so honored and thrilled about the Messiah that they didn't ask a single question . . . they went to Bethlehem (leaving the sheep?) to see this child they were told about by the angels. They bowed in worship and shared with Mary and Joseph about all they had seen and heard. Imagine how this must have encouraged this couple and how deeply they would have enjoyed the Shepherds' visit.

Do you feel the wonder of Christmas? Are you stunned by the incredible message that God has come to earth in the person of Jesus to save you and me? Do you get so wrapped up in the secular trappings of Christmas that you have lost the natural beauty of the season? The Shepherds embraced it all. So should we.

They told others. The text says, "After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child." They didn't wait until they understood all the details. They didn't take a class on how to share their faith. What they did was tell people what they had seen and heard. They gave their testimony. It was honest, exuberant, and effective because the people were astonished at what they heard. Were they astonished because of the message? Were they stunned Shepherds were sharing the message? Did they question why angels would appear to lonely Shepherds instead of the religious leaders? We don't know. All we know is the people marveled at what was said.

Applications

Maybe these things are some of the same ways God wants us to respond. First, He wants us to take Christmas personally. It is easy to see even this Candlelight service as just part of your Christmas tradition. It is part of what makes the season merry and bright, like Christmas cookies or special family gatherings. However, he wants this to be about your relationship with Him. He wants you to see that what happened in Bethlehem so many years ago was about God entering the world to reach you and me.

He wants you to see this as an event that says, "You matter to God." He doesn't want you to think this is about good people . . . He came to redeem broken people, to love people who seem to live in the shadows, and to forgive people for their failures and rebellion. There is no one too bad for the love of Christ to be withheld from him; no one too broken for Him to heal; No one too invisible for Him to see; no sin so bad that it cannot be paid for through Christ.

Make this a very special Christmas by opening yourself up to His love. This Christmas, take it personally! If you have never done so, in the quiet of your own heart admit that you have largely ignored God's laws and standards in your life. Tell God that you are sorry and want Jesus to save you and to make you into a new person. Then, believing that God hears and answers prayer, thank Him for His mercy and His grace toward you. Ask that He live inside of you to lead you to the life He created you to live.

Second, tell others what you have seen and heard. You may think you are the only one who didn't really understand what Christmas is about. But you are not! Many people so not understand.

- Define the celebration. Tell people what you have learned about the meaning of Christmas.
- Give gifts that point to Christ: give Christian books, Bibles, and music. You might give DVD's of The Chosen.
- Read the Bible Story with your family as found in Matthew and Luke.
- Discuss the words of Christian carols (you may find people humming or singing mindlessly). You can say, "I love that carol; do you know what it is about?"
- As you talk to people about Christmas, ask them if they know "the rest of the story" of Christmas. If they are open, tell them about the life, death, and resurrection of the same Jesus we celebrate at Christmas. If they are resistant move on to a heart God has prepared to receive your testimony.
- Whistle Christmas Carols and smile a lot. Someone is bound to ask you what you are so happy about. Do this for days and weeks after Christmas. When someone rebukes you saying, "Don't you know that Christmas is over?" you can respond . . . "the story of Christmas isn't over . . . it is just the first chapter of a story that goes on forever and ever and then share as much of that story as you can."

Third, live in the light of Christmas for the rest of the year. As I said, for most people, the celebration of Christmas is over when all the gatherings are over, and the decorations are put away for another year. But we know differently.

These shepherds undoubtedly returned to their flock after sharing the news with everyone they had seen. But, they went back to the flock as changed men. They were different shepherds. They had a new self-confidence and sense of worth. They had a new anticipation as they faced trials and hardships. They knew the Messiah had come, and they were eager for Him to take His rightful place. I wonder if their ears perked up when they heard about the work and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth many years later.

Like the Shepherds, we can now work and live with a new sense of purpose and joy. Don't leave the good news of the gospel here in the sanctuary. Take it with you! Allow it to wash over you. Every time you look into the mirror, see a person loved by God and pardoned for sin through Christ. Yes, we were broken and deeply stained . . . but not since we met Jesus. Now you and I are persons of great worth who God loves in a way that staggers the mind. We are changed forever and should live our lives like changed people. We should be more joyful, confident, hopeful, and compassionate than the rest of the world. We are not who we used to be. It is not because we are better than anyone else . . . it is because we have met Jesus. And like the Shepherds, we have met the Savior, and we will never be the same again. Thanks be to God!