

November 18, 2018  
Sunday Morning Service  
Thanksgiving  
Community Baptist Church  
643 S. Suber Road  
Greer, SC 29650  
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**PRAISING GOD FOR ALL WE HAVE HEARD AND SEEN**  
**Luke 2:20**

I have a friend who is slowly passing away with cancer. His mantra through this time of trial has been, “God is good – all the time!” It is true that God is good. He is good because He is perfectly wise. He is good because He knows all things all the time, and He is present everywhere all the time. He is able to do whatever He chooses to do because He is all powerful. And God is good because whatever He chooses to do is right and, ultimately, beneficial toward righteousness.

But most of all, God is good because He is gracious. A brief consideration of human history (if that were actually possible) proves beyond question that God is gracious. When our original parents Adam and Eve rebelled against God and brought sin into God’s creation and consigned the creation to groaning, failure, and misery, God could have spoken one word, obliterated the whole mess and started over. But God withholds the wrath we deserve and instead pours out blessing we don’t deserve. And that grace and mercy from God has been evident millions of times over throughout history.

In our own lives we have observed and experienced God’s kind, benevolent hand. It is true that many of our people have faced some insurmountable trials in life. Some of you have experienced unusual difficulties and stress this past year. But through it all, God has continued to sustain you by His grace. Many of you have testified to God’s faithfulness, and we all have heard the good news. Much of the time we have been able to observe (see) God’s sustaining grace helping us endure the trials.

But the lives of most of us also demonstrate that incredible mercy and grace that God has showered upon us in salvation. How important is God’s regenerating grace to you? Where does that experience of being born again through the regeneration of the Holy Spirit sit on your chart of things for which you are thankful? When was the last time you truly assessed all that God has allowed you to see and hear regarding His grace, with the result that you just burst out in praise to Him?

God chose to allow the shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night to experience the amazing fulfillment of His long-awaited promise of the Savior being born to the virgin. I realize this is a Christmas text and not a Thanksgiving text. But wait! The shepherds were just about the most unlikely class of people in first century Israel who others would have expected to be blessed to see and hear the fulfillment of God’s promise. When they realized how blessed they were to be chosen by God for this experience, they burst forth in praise and glory to God. Were they thankful? Most definitely. Then this will make a perfectly fitting text to set our hearts toward thankfulness as we celebrate the national holiday we call Thanksgiving.

We will consider just one verse in this grand story. “*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*” (Luke 2:20).

**Shepherds Heard and Saw.**

Shepherds were unlikely recipients of the good news. But that was a human conclusion. God proved through His work with them that He is gracious to the marginalized people. The shepherds were marginalized because of their station in life. In fact, it appears that shepherds were held to be outsiders for centuries in the Middle East. This interesting view goes way back to the day of Joseph when shepherds and keepers of livestock were held at arm’s length. When Joseph’s family moved to Goshen, Joseph told them to respond to Pharaoh’s certain questions about their occupation by saying they were “keepers of livestock” – which technically they were. The reason for that answer was that shepherds were an abomination to Egyptians.

Things were not much better for them in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel. Because they spent life outside with the sheep, shepherds were usually uneducated and illiterate. Most of the time people considered them to be robbers, criminals, and deceivers (maybe many of them were). The religious leaders really despised the shepherds because they were considered to be ceremonially unclean. According to the rulers' rules, the shepherds were not allowed to show up with a sacrifice at the temple to worship.

But God loves to bless the marginalized people. That truth is obvious in the number of Gentiles Jesus ministered to, much to the Jew's chagrin. Remember that God sent Elijah to a Gentile widow to do the miracle of resurrection. And Naaman the pagan soldier received God's miraculous healing from leprosy. Then on this special night, a host of heavenly beings burst on the scene at precisely that spot near Bethlehem where these particular shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks God revealed again that He loves the outsider.

Read the story again. *And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"* (Luke 2:10-14).

Are we much different than the shepherds of that day? We are outsiders who receive the good news only because God is gracious. But someone might want to argue that he or she was not an outcast. Who is more marginalized than people who are born in sin, separated from our Creator? We are not only born in sin, but there is nothing we can do to undo our condition of being outside the scope of God's favor. But God in His astounding grace and for His glory chose to pour out His mercy on us and draw us to Himself for the gift of salvation. God chose to show kindness to us sinners in the same way He chose to reveal the amazing good news to the shepherds.

The shepherds heard good news and decided to verify it. In fact, God invited the shepherds to check out the good news. His message to the shepherds through the angels was, *"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger"* (Luke 2:12). In other words, God said, "Go check it out for yourselves." What good is good news if it's not so? That's what the shepherds concluded. So, when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, *"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us"* (Luke 2:15).

What "thing" had the Lord made known? *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord* (Luke 2:11). The news was that the promised Savior from sin was born. He is Christ, the anointed one, the One sent from God the Father to provide the means for reconciliation with God. He is the Lord, co-equal with God the Father. He is born **to you** or for your benefit.

In a similar way, God invites us sinners to verify His wonderful grace. The shepherds received the same invitation we received from God while we were still sinners at odds with Him. It is the same invitation we find throughout Scripture. There is good news. The Savior IS. Go check it out! Consider God's invitation in the Old Testament. *"Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen diligently to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food"* (Isaiah 55:1-2).

That is the same invitation Jesus offered when He said, *"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light"* (Matthew 11:28-30).

And this is the same wonderful invitation God offers to sinners for the ages. Paul articulated it when he explained the invitation of righteous that comes by faith say. *Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For*

*the Scripture says, "Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame" (Romans 10:9-11).*

What amazingly good news this is. That we who are born as God's enemies can be justified from sin and guilt is worthy of praise. That we who are born into Satan's family are brought by God's kindness into His family is something for which to be thankful. We have heard this news. We have seen this grace worked out. What is our response?

### **Shepherds Glorified and Praised God.**

The shepherds obviously understood the good news. But how were the shepherds able to comprehend news that was so deeply theological? We have heard sermons about the message the angels delivered. Many times preachers have explained the angels' message of good news to us. But these were uneducated shepherds. How would they know? "A Savior who is Christ the Lord" was likely a promise they had been taught and had contemplated.

How do we know the right response to the good news about the Savior from sin? How can we figure it out? God's grace makes us comprehend His good news. That is the only possible explanation for a person who is born spiritually dead, spiritually blind because of sin, being able to comprehend the good news of salvation. We know this from our experience of trying to explain to the typical sinner that Jesus of Nazareth was actually God in the flesh, that He lived perfectly sinless under God's law, that He was murdered though innocent, but that His blood is the acceptable sacrifice to pay for the sinner's offenses against God, and to prove it is valid Jesus rose from the dead. We should not be surprised if people in those settings react to us as though we just arrived from Mars.

Jesus explained this miracle of grace, this ability for spiritually dead people to understand the good news, when He commissioned Paul to preach His word. Jesus told Paul he was "*... sending you to open their eyes, so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me*" (Acts 26:17-18).

When you really grasp the marvel of this miracle, how do you respond? The shepherds expressed praise for the good news. Their praise and thanksgiving was God-ward. Luke recorded that they were *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*. To glorify God is to attribute to Him the honor He deserves. It is to have a right view of God's astonishing person and character. The shepherds kept on doing that. To praise God is to extol Him, typically in song. It is to recognize God's greatness and declare it. The shepherds kept doing this also.

The reality is that people who truly understand God's good news thank Him. Salvation is the greatest of all miracles. Stop for a moment and consider some of the miracles Jesus did. If you were blind, sight would be a wonderful miracle, but you will still die and live somewhere forever. If you were lame, healing to walk would be a wonderful miracle, but you will still die and live somewhere forever. If you were deaf, hearing would be a wonderful miracle, but you will still die and live somewhere forever. If you were dead, life might be a wonderful miracle, but you will still die and live somewhere forever.

If you are spiritually dead, destined for eternal condemnation as the penalty for your sins, the miracle of forgiven sins, reconciliation with God, and promise of eternal life is worthy of thanksgiving.

### **Shepherds Returned to Work.**

The verse ends by telling us that the shepherds returned to their station in mundane life. The blessed men had to go back to normal life. Experiencing the blessing of God's grace was exhilarating. They had seen amazing things. They had heard amazing and eternal truths directly from God. To say that the angel, trip to Bethlehem, witnessing the Savior's birth was the highlight of their lives would be an understatement.

But God ordained for them to be shepherds. For the most part their lives were boring. It consisted of leading the sheep to water. Leading the sheep to green pastures if you could find green pastures. Sleeping under the stars listening to the sheep snore. Sure, maybe an occasional storm would break up the monotony. On rare occasions a robber or bear or wolf would show up and make things exciting.

Shepherding might have been similar to piloting an airliner. A few years ago I heard Steve Scheibner, the pilot who skipped United Flight 175 from Logan International Airport on 9/11, describe piloting as “Endless hours of boredom interrupted by 15 seconds of sheer terror periodically.” In a similar way shepherding was for the most part a rut.

But think about it. Even in the ordinary rudiments of herding flocks, they were engaged in a demonstration of the coming fulfillment of God’s promise of grace. The shepherds had just experienced the fulfillment of God’s promise to send the Seed of the woman to crush Satan’s head. The Seed of the woman would win the battle by shedding His own blood as the final and acceptable sacrifice for sin. Until that came to pass, about 30 years from that night, the shepherds would continue to raise sheep to be slaughtered at the annual Passover celebration. Each Passover moved one year closer to the grand fulfillment of God’s promise of providing Himself the sacrifice for sin.

We, too, live out the blessings of God’s grace in very ordinary circumstances. For the most part our lives are ordinary and predictable. We live in the same house, work the same job, go to the same church, fellowship with the same people, rear the same family year after year. Along the way, God allows circumstances that break up the monotony. Sometimes there is an accident, a sickness, a loss that reminds us of how fragile life is. There are those times of heartbreak that draw us back to the reality of how much we need God’s mercy and grace.

And even the passing of vacations and holidays to remind us that we are speeding on to the great fulfillment of God’s promise that He will take us home to be with Him. The holiday seasons especially mark the passing of time for me. At this age, I really do sit down sometimes and contemplate how many more Thanksgivings, Christmases, New Years, and tax days I will experience before I reach the end. I can say with assurance that I have fewer cycles to experience than I have already experienced.

Along the way, we need to praise and thank God continually. It is good to set aside time each day to open the Bible and be reminded about God’s amazing grace. It is good to remember why we should be thankful. It is good to lift our hearts at least, if not our voices, to

praise God for His goodness daily. It is good for us to meet weekly for corporate praise and thanksgiving in which we all are encouraged. It is good to call for special services or seasons when we can tell the wonders of God’s work in our lives. Still, for the most part, we live out the grace of God in mundane lives.

We also must conclude that as the shepherds returned to mundane duties, they also returned to being religious “outcasts.” They who had received God’s amazing grace didn’t impress the important people. The important religious people in the shepherds’ culture presumed they didn’t need God’s grace. The Pharisees, Sadducees, scribes, and their friends all claimed to believe in the true God, the “Yahweh of Israel.” In fact, they prided themselves as the keepers and protectors of God’s law. More than that, they were very satisfied that they had taken upon themselves the hard work of creating many additional laws to help people keep God’s law. And since they were the keepers of God’s law and inventors of assisting laws, they didn’t need God’s grace. They didn’t need that emotional experience the shepherds had that caused them to praise and glorify God.

The religious leaders still concluded that the shepherds did not meet **their** criteria for “God-fearers.” The shepherds were still shepherds. They were still ceremonially unclean. They still didn’t conform to the “acceptable” rules of righteousness. And life went on for them as they lived outside the circle of religious acceptability. But they knew and had experienced something that the religious leaders could not imagine.

Still, religionists are not likely to thank God along with you. Don’t expect people who are content to be religious to understand your experience with Christ. Dead orthodoxy coupled with legalistic zeal is still alive and well. Many people are content to attend some kind of religious meeting somewhat regularly, engage in a religious sounding liturgy, and go away satisfied for a few days or weeks. Others work feverishly to pile up enough good works to force God to be kind to them. They try to make God happy enough with them because of their tradition keeping that He will grant them eternal life. So for what do people like that thank God?

People like that cannot identify with the joy you experience in your fellowship with God because of His grace. They will hold you

are arms-length concluding that you are a bit nutty for believing that the Bible is true. They will avoid you because they know at some point you are going to bring up a Bible truth. They will never understand your experience with grace, mercy, and compassion, and will, therefore, misinterpret it and misapply it in their own lives.

Therefore, we should not expect merely religious people to praise the Lord genuinely. People who have not experienced God's grace will express thanksgiving to Him poorly. They often sound like the Pharisee who was thankful. *The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get" (Luke 18:11-12).* Your friends and family may say they are thankful for good health and stuff but then live as though none of those blessings come from God.

During this Thanksgiving season, remember that the reason for our thanksgiving is God's amazing grace. It might be risky, but consider reading James 1:16-18 at your Thanksgiving meal this year: *Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures (James 1:16-18).*