

## Follow the Shepherd

- I love the Christmas songs that proclaim the birth of our Savior. We were talking on Congregate Podcast this week about how funny it is that you can walk into the mall or Barnes and Noble or just about anywhere this month and hear “Hark the Herald Angels Sing, glory to the newborn king!” Shawn said he sometimes wants to shout out, “Hey, does everybody hear that? Do you understand what you are listening to?” But sadly, you can’t hear songs about Jesus *everywhere*: Dave Barry used to write for the Miami Herald, and this is how he started one of his columns around Christmas time: “To avoid offending anybody, the school dropped religion altogether and started singing about the weather. At my son's school, they now hold the winter program in February and sing increasingly non-memorable songs such as “Winter Wonderland,” “Frosty the Snowman” and--this is a real song--“Suzy Snowflake,” all of which is pretty funny because we live in Miami. A visitor from another planet would assume that the children belonged to the Church of Meteorology.”
  - Well, Hark the Herald continues, “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled, joyful all ye nations rise, join the triumph of the skies, with angelic host proclaim, ‘Christ is born in Bethlehem,’ Hark the herald the angels sing, glory to the newborn king.” Question: To whom were the angels proclaiming this amazing news, the news of a king being born? The shepherds! And where were the shepherds? Another Christmas song tells us: the first noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay.” Why were they lying in fields? Because they were keeping their sheep. The song and the Bible tells us that! “In fields where they lay keeping their sheep.” All of that should put to rest any nonsense about the shepherds watching over a herd of cattle.
  - The Bible mentions shepherds and shepherding over 200 times. The first shepherd we find in the Bible was Abel, the brother of Cain. Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, and Amos were all shepherds. Some of the greatest men in the Old Testament were shepherds. BUT, in the first century, when Jesus was born, the role of a shepherd was scorned and despised by the orthodox people of the day. In fact, shepherds, the first people to see the Messiah with their own eyes did not have legal standing in those days to give testimony in a courtroom that they had seen the Messiah with their own eyes. Shepherds were not esteemed at all, and were not considered trustworthy to give evidence in a trial. That didn’t matter to God. He didn’t need man’s testimony to His glorious work! Let’s look at these men to whom God entrusted so much, and learn from them.
  - **Luke 2:1-20** You see in this great short story four simple yet powerful truths about the shepherds that we can walk in ourselves. They believed the Good News. They obeyed the Good News. They saw the Good News. Finally, they shared the Good News.
1. **They believed the Good News.** We know this because as soon as the angels were gone the shepherds started making plans to go into Bethlehem. This is the critical time for all of us, isn’t it? We have just heard the Lord speak to us in a sermon. Do we believe it? That will be proved by what we do next. We have just heard the doctor give us his diagnosis and tell us what to do to get well. Do we believe it? That will be proved by what we do next. We have just heard our boss give us his evaluation of our work and tell us what to do to improve. Do we believe it? That will be proved by what we do next. We can say we believe the word we’ve heard in all three situations and go right back to where we were before we heard the word...that would be proof that we do NOT believe it. Belief and obedience walk together or not at all. The shepherds believed the Good News.
  2. **They obeyed the Good News.** 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.* (verse 15) What do we know about the shepherds’ obedience from this passage? **FIRST**, their obedience was corporate, and that’s a great thing. The shepherds obeyed together. They exhorted one another to obey the Lord. If you are hanging out with people who make a habit of obeying God, and encouraging you to obey God, you are hanging out with good people. **SECOND**, their obedience was immediate. Verse 16, “And they went with haste.” They hurried to obey God and see. There were lots of reasons to delay: as many sheep as there were, those were each a reason. There is no concern for that, and we are not told what they did with the

sheep. Maybe the angels told them that they could leave the sheep in the field and they would be fine. Maybe they found some substitute shepherds who were off that day and hired them to come lay in the fields. Maybe they just looked at the sheep, looked at each other, and then said, "Good luck Fluffies!" and took off to town. Probably not; they were shepherds, which means they were first and foremost protectors of sheep. But God had spoken to them through a heavenly host, an army of angels. And it was with great joy that they obeyed God with abandon! There is delight and surprise waiting for those who will make haste and obey God's command. **THIRD**, their obedience was grounded. They said, let's go see this thing ***which the Lord has made known to us***. They were going into the city (where they almost NEVER ventured) and looking for a baby in a feeding trough. That took faith. But at the same time, God had revealed it to them. There are times to step out in faith, and certainly there was a measure of faith involved in what the Lord told the shepherds. But most of the time, our obedience will not be to something we are not sure of, but to that which has been clearly revealed to us. The shepherds understood exactly what God was telling them to do, and they simply obeyed. **FOURTH**, their obedience was rewarded. ***And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger.*** (vs. 16) We don't know how long it took them to find the right baby. Remember, the angel had said "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." The key word was manger. There were surely other babies in Bethlehem, wrapped in swaddling cloths, but the One they were looking for would be in a manger, a feeding trough. They looked until they found. This is one of those main things and plain things in the Bible. In Jeremiah we read, "You will seek Me and find Me, when you seek Me with all your heart." (Jer. 29:13) And in Isaiah, "Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near." (Isaiah 55:6). Wisdom speaks in Proverbs 8 and says, "I love those who love me, and those who seek me diligently will find me." Seeking the Lord will lead to finding the Lord. Seek and you shall find, Jesus said. They believed God's Word. Then they obeyed God's Word. God will always reward obedience. Always!

3. **They saw the Good News.** It is interesting that the shepherds said, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." They believed it was true, but believing leads to seeing. They saw it for themselves. How about you? Have you seen the Good News for yourself? Or is it somebody else you trust, your friend or your parents, who have seen it and that's enough for you. NO! It cannot be enough. The story is told about a shepherd who was a youth on that first Christmas night. And now he is old and as his grandson sits on his knee he recalls that night, "A long, long time ago, when I was a little more than a boy, I was out on the Judean hills one night with some other shepherds, keeping watch over the flock. And an angel of the Lord came upon us and the glory of the Lord shone round about us. And we were very afraid. But the angel said, "fear not... for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord... you shall find the baby in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." When he had said this, the old man's lips quivered and ceased to move and there was silence. Then the grandson turned and looked with wide, puzzled eyes into his grandfather's face and said, "But, grandfather is that all? What did you do when you heard the good news? Was what the angel said really true? Was the Christ child ever really born?" The old shepherd sadly shook his white head and answered, "I never knew. I never went to see. Some say they found in Him, the light of God and the forgiveness for sins. But for me I could never be quite sure. Because I never did go to see." You cannot know Christ until you have seen Him for yourself. How do we see Him? We see Him through the truth of the Word, in the pages of Scripture. We see Him through the changed lives of those who know Him. And ultimately, we must see Him through the testimony of our own life-changing faith. The shepherds went to Bethlehem looking for the word, and did not stop seeking until they saw.
4. **They shared the Good News.** The shepherds did not settle for just seeing and meeting Jesus the Messiah. When they got to the manger, and saw that it was exactly as the angel had said, they could not keep silent. They told the story. First, they told it to those who were at the birthplace. I can imagine Joseph asking when the men arrived, "How did you know we were here?" And the shepherds began excitedly to tell the story of the angel's announcement. Mary and Joseph looked at each other perhaps and said at the same time, "The angel." But then the next verse is interesting: ***and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*** (vs. 18) Who are these "all who heard?" Maybe there was a crowd at the birthplace, but I doubt it. I have to believe that the best scholarship on this is true, that the

shepherds, after seeing the Savior with their own eyes, went to others with the story. Their friends and family? Probably. The whole city? Maybe! Perhaps this is why God chose the shepherds in the first place, because He knew they would not be sidetracked by the unimportant when they came face to face with the eternal. These shepherds were just simple folk, never had a seminar on sharing their faith in a hard world, had never even been to a church like ours where the Spirit of God is alive and well in the lives of the saints. But they believed and obeyed and saw the Good News. And then they just went and told the story. My prayer for all of us is that we would simply tell the story, as a shepherd who had seen the Messiah would do. God will do the rest.

One final thought. And they returned ***glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen*** (verse 20). They went back to their sheep. But the shepherds were never the same again, I guarantee you. They had new occupations: glorifying and praising God. Because now they were tending sheep for Him. Now they were tending sheep and listening for news about the Messiah they had seen with their own eyes. They had witnessed the coming of the Messiah, the One who would ultimately put them out of business, because He was the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. They still took care of sheep, but that wasn't what they lived for any more.

Hebrews 13:20 reminds us how much God loves shepherds, and how our very faith was bought by the blood of the Great Shepherd and sustained by his work in us. I speak it over all of us as a blessing: "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever." (Hebrews 13:20-21)