

## The Simple Obedience of Shepherds

- Luke 2:8-20
- I don't know about you, but I never get tired of hearing the Christmas story again, and I am particularly drawn to the story of the shepherds. I have always loved the fact that God sent His messengers first to simple shepherds, not the powerful king. The shepherds got a spectacular invitation to the birth of the Christ child that lit up the sky, and filled the place where they were tending their flock with glory! I have always appreciated that the powerful message of the angels was met by the simple obedience of the shepherds. Caesar Augustus, the emperor of Rome, should have been there to worship Jesus, but he wasn't. Herod, the King of Israel should have been there to worship Jesus, but he wasn't. All the people of Israel should have been there to worship Jesus, but they weren't. All the nations of the world should have made their way to the manger to worship Jesus, but they didn't. As Daniel Darling writes, "Christmas is a powerful reminder that what is important in heaven is often unimportant on earth. While the world was sleeping, the Son of God made his entrance." The world is still sleeping, as the time draws nearer when the Son of God is going to make his second, and final entrance. But the people God chose to tell first about the birth were shepherds. Let's look at Simple shepherds, simple obedience, simple story
- **God loves simple folk.**
- Years ago, when I was in the musical Camelot, one of my favorite scenes was when King Arthur and Queen Guinevere sang the song, "What do the Simple Folk Do?"

What do the simple folk do To help them escape when they're blue  
The shepherd who is ailing The milkmaid who is glum  
The cobbler who is wailing From nailing his thumb
- He chose a couple of simple folks, a carpenter and his betrothed, to be the earthly parents of His Son, Jesus. He chose a poor setting, a feeding trough, to be the place where His Son first lay His head. He chose the shepherds to be the first evangelists of the good news. He chose a bunch of ragtag fishermen and other ordinary men to be the companions and disciples of His Son. He chose the nation of Israel, an occupied people, one of the least of all nations on the earth, to give identity and race to His Son. He chose the simple of the earth to follow Him: ***not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, that no human being might boast in the presence of God.*** (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)
- Shepherds were not known for being either wise or powerful. But God exalted them to a place of prominence in the coming of the Messiah. But God delights in taking ordinary people like the shepherds, who know and accept that they are ordinary, even simple people and give them, as Ray Ortland described it, "the insight of wisdom, the status of righteousness, the beauty of sanctification, and the freedom of redemption. It's all in grace."
- They were simple men, with a difficult, sometimes boring, and sometimes dangerous job. They had to keep up with hard-headed sheep, making sure they were well fed and

watered. They had to fend off predators, which in that country included wolves, bears, even lions. They also had to protect their flock from people, men of bad character who would try to steal them. That is why they were awake, at least some of them, because the job of a shepherd has always been to make sacrifices in order to protect the vulnerable in his care. That is why the Lord chose David from protecting the sheep to become a King who would protect his people. It is why the New Testament compares church leaders to shepherds, and why some of the last words we see Jesus speaking to Peter were, "Feed my lambs. Tend my sheep."

- One of my favorite Christmas stories (and I have told you before) happened back in the 60's and was written about in the Baptist Herald by Dina Donahue. It illustrates beautifully how God used a young boy who didn't have much going for him except simple faith. TROUBLE AT THE INN

For many years now, whenever Christmas pageants are talked about in a certain little town in the Midwest, someone is sure to mention the name of Wallace Purling. Wally's performance in one annual production of the nativity play has slipped onto the realm of legend. But the old-timers who were in the audience that night never tire of recalling exactly what happened. Wally was nine that year and in the second grade, though he should have been in the fourth. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was big and clumsy, slow in movement and mind. Still, his class, all of whom were smaller than he, had trouble hiding their irritation when Wally would ask to play ball with them or any game, for that matter, in which winning was important. Most often they'd find a way to keep him out but Wally would hang around anyway not sulking, just hoping. He was always a helpful boy, a willing and smiling one, and the natural protector of the underdog. Sometimes if the older boys chased the younger ones away, it would always be Wally who'd say, "can't they stay? They're no bother." Wally fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director, Miss Lumbar, assigned him to a more important role. After all, she reasoned, the Innkeeper did not have too many lines and Wally's size would make his refusal of lodging to Joseph more forceful. And so it happened that the usual large, partisan audience gathered for the town's yearly extravaganza of beards, crowns, halos and a whole stage full of squeaky voices. No one on stage or off was more caught up in the magic of the night than Wallace Purling. They said later that he stood in the wings and watched the performance with such fascination that from time to time Miss Lumbar had to make sure he didn't wander on stage before his cue. Then the time came when Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the Inn. Joseph knocked hard on the wooden door sat into the painted backdrop. Wally the innkeeper was there, waiting. "What do you want?" Wally said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture. "We seek lodging." "Seek it elsewhere," Wally looked straight ahead but spoke vigorously. "The Inn is filled." "Sir, we have asked everywhere in vain. We have traveled far and are very weary." "There is no room in this Inn for you." Wally looked properly stern. "Please, good Innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary. She is heavy with child and needs a place to rest. Surely you must have some small corner for her. She is so tired."

Now, for the first time, the Innkeeper relaxed his stance and looked down at Mary. With that, there was a long pause, long enough to make the audience a bit tense with embarrassment.

"No! Be gone!" the prompter whispered from the wings.

"No!" Wally repeated automatically, "Be gone!"

Joseph sadly placed his arm around Mary and Mary laid her head upon her husband's shoulder and the two of them started to move away. The Innkeeper did not return inside his Inn, however.

Wally stood there in the doorway, watching the forlorn couple. His mouth was open, his brow creased with concern, his eyes filling unmistakably with tears.

And suddenly *this* Christmas pageant became different from all the others.

"Don't go, Joseph," Wally called out. "Bring Mary back." And Wallace Purling's face grew into a bright smile. "You can have my room!"

Some people in town thought that the pageant had been ruined. Yet there were others...many, many others...who considered it the most Christmasy of all Christmas pageants they had ever seen.

- **The Shepherds Simply Obeyed**

- The angel said in verse 12, ***And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger.*** There was no command, just a simple instruction of how they would know they were in the right place.
- The shepherds said after the multitude had praised God, (15) ***Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.***
- **God not only loves simple folk; God loves folk who simply obey.** What do we know about the shepherds' obedience from this passage? **FIRST**, it was collective, and that's not a bad thing. The shepherds obeyed together. They exhorted one another to obey the Lord. Let's do that with each other! **SECOND**, it was immediate. They said, "let us go," and then they "went with haste." They hurried to obey God and see. That's the thing we just don't understand when we are young, most of the time. I know I didn't. I hesitated to obey the Lord many times as a young man because I was afraid of what I might find. Or what I might lose. But there is delight and surprise waiting for those who will make haste and obey God's command. **THIRD**, it 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 went) 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**, it was rewarded. (16) ***And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*** God will always reward obedience. Always! We may not see it all on this side of glory, but it will always be rewarded.
- **The Shepherds gave God glory.**

- Not only were they the first to hold the Lamb of God, these roughhewn men who knew a few things about tending to lambs. But they were the first to tell the greatest news the world has ever heard. They didn't get sidetracked by the angels and sit on the hillside for the rest of their lives waiting for a return visit. Nor did they settle for just seeing and meeting Jesus the Messiah. They told the story. (vs. 17) ***And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child.*** They could not keep this news to themselves. They didn't just marvel at the message. They believed it, they believed in HIM, and that changed the direction of their lives forever. And others' lives, as well! Notice the result: (vs 18) ***and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*** I have to ponder on that. Because I will be honest. I have told the story many times of what I know God has done, but I can't say that all those who have heard it marveled. I can't even say that most of those who have heard it marveled. In fact it is rare that anyone marvels when I tell the story. Hmmm. What's the problem, I wonder? Is it the story? I don't think so. It's still just as marvelous as ever. Is it the world? Has it grown more callous? Perhaps that's part of it, but we have to admit that the world the shepherds told the story to was hard-bitten and tough. Is it the storyteller? I have to admit that sometimes I get sidetracked by peripheral issues like tending sheep. I forget that God's glory is in the story of Christ and His coming to us. Sometimes I speak in a monotone when I should be shouting from the housetops. Sometimes I get intimidated by the world we live in that tells us they don't want to hear it and why don't all you Jesus people take your Bibles and crawl back under a rock where you belong? And I say, with my actions at least, "Yeah, you're right." But then I remember that the shepherds were just simple folk, not a powerful person in the bunch. They had never had a seminar on sharing their faith in a hard world. They 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 had been changed, just like we have. And so they simply went out and told the story. And people marveled. And the shepherds returned, ***glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*** (verse 20).
- Prayer