

Pentwater Bible Church

Christmas Message
December 25, 2022



The Nativity and The Star artist unknown

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THE SHEPHERDS WHO WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS

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Luke 2:1–20

¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Cesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ²(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹²And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying,

*¹⁴Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace,
Good will towards men.*

¹⁵And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them (KJV).

SHEPHERDS ABIDING IN THE FIELD

In verse 8 we are told there were shepherds “*abiding in the fields*” near Bethlehem, which is only eight miles from Jerusalem. These shepherds were probably tending the many sheep needed from flocks that were uniquely designated for sacrifice at the Temple in Jerusalem. The shepherds were educated in the specific quality of animal required for the sacrifices, and it was their job to

make sure that none of the animals were hurt, damaged, or blemished. These lambs were apparently wrapped in “swaddling cloths” to protect them from injury, and were also used to wrap the Lord Jesus at His birth. The angels only told the shepherds that they would find the Babe wrapped in “*swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.*” In verse 7 we learn Mary used what was available to wrap the baby Jesus in the “*swaddling cloths*”, just like baby lambs were swaddled.

These fields surrounding Bethlehem are more significant than verse 8 tells us, and more information is found in the *Mishna*. The *Mishna* is “an authoritative collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law and forming the first part of the Talmud” (dictionary.com 2018). Regarding the surrounding “*fields*”, it states:

- A. Cattle found between Jerusalem and Migdal Eder— and in an equivalent range on all sides of the city—
- B. [if] male, they are deemed to be burnt offerings;
- C. [if] female, they are deemed to be peace offerings.
- D. [Rabbi] Judah says, “That which is suitable for Passover offerings are Passover offerings [if they are found] thirty days before that festival.” (Neusner, 1988, 263)

Furthermore, the *Mishna* (Baba K. vii. 7) expressly forbids the keeping of flocks throughout the land of Israel, except in the wilderness - and the only flocks otherwise kept, would be those for the Temple services (Baba K. 80 a). Migdal Eder named in letter A above is a location referred to in the book of Micah as “*the tower of the flock*” located near Bethlehem:

Micah 4:8

⁸And thou, O tower of the flock, the hill of the daughter of Zion, unto thee shall it come, yea, the former dominion shall come, the kingdom of the daughter of Jerusalem (ASV, 1901).

Migdal Eder or the “*tower of the flock*” has been viewed by the Rabbis as also describing Israel as “a flock of sheep” (Kimchi, 2009, 32). The same Jewish commentary puts forth the statement that this location would point to the Messiah of Israel (Kimchi, 2009, 32). It is in this town that the Messianic King of Israel initially revealed Himself. This “watch tower” from ancient times was used by the shepherds for protection from their enemies and wild beasts. It was also the place ewes were safely brought to give birth to the lambs. In this sheltered structure, or cave, the ewes who which were about to birth their lambs were gathered in order to protect them. When the angelic announcement came, the shepherds knew exactly where to go as Luke 2 indicates, for the sign of “*a manger*” in verse 12 could only mean their manger at “*the tower of the flock*” (Easton, 1897 found in Edersheim, 31).

The Lord again spoke through the prophet Micah to declare exactly where Jesus would be born:

Micah 5:2-5a

²But thou, Beth-lehem Ephrathah, which art little to be among the thousands of Judah, out of thee shall one come forth unto me that is to be ruler in Israel; whose goings

forth are from of old, from everlasting. ³Therefore will he give them up, until the time that she who travaileth hath brought forth: then the residue of his brethren shall return unto the children of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand, and shall feed his flock in the strength of Jehovah, in the majesty of the name of Jehovah his God: and they shall abide; for now shall he be great unto the ends of the earth. ⁵And this man shall be our peace (ASV, 1901).

So, shepherds tending their flocks destined for sacrificial services, experienced the angelic announcement where the Messiah was to enter the world. These shepherds were working in the city where King David was from, that is, *Beth-lehem Ephrathah* (I Samuel 17:12). The Messiah entered the world to be the lamb that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). Jesus was born in the exact place where the sacrificial lambs were prepared for the Temple sacrifices to be our sacrifice for the sins of this world. These events are not simply coincidences, they were planned by Him before the foundation of the world!

The lowly shepherds received the first announcement of His birth. It was not given to the princes and chief priests, King Herod or any other person of worldly status at Jerusalem. In keeping with the character of His ministry, He first went to weak, average, and illiterate men. God chose and called them, as He did His prophets to whom He revealed His secrets (Amos 3:7). He hides His secrets from the wise and prudent, and gives them to the humble and lowly in spirit (Isaiah 57:15).

Jesus' ministry would be characterized as going to the lowly of status to bring the good news of salvation. He was born in the midst of the sacrificial lambs because He would become one. He was from an uneducated, working-class family. He was trained as a tradesman, and started His ministry with twelve fishermen from the northern region of Israel, which was considered an "unsophisticated" area. He owned nothing, and never had a career or business. Yet He managed to provide the world with the only way for sinful mankind to connect with God, and enter paradise upon death. He, like those among whom He was born, became a shepherd of men.

THE GOOD SHEPHERD

Jesus declared Himself to be the Good Shepherd:

John 10:11-15; 27

¹¹ I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. ¹² But he that is a hireling, and not the shepherd, whose own the sheep are not, seeth the wolf coming, and leaveth the sheep, and fleeth: and the wolf catcheth them, and scattereth the sheep. ¹³ The hireling fleeth, because he is a hireling, and careth not for the sheep. ¹⁴ I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep, and am known of mine. ¹⁵ As the Father knoweth me, even so know I the Father: and I lay down my life for the sheep.

²⁷My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me (KJV):

It is not happenstance that Jesus declared Himself "*the good shepherd*". The shepherd is a person who took complete care of a flock of sheep. He had to locate grass and water for the sheep, and protect them from predators (Amos 3:12). He had to search out those that strayed from the flock

(Ezekiel 34:8; Matthew 18:12), lead the flock out of the sheepfold each day, and to return them safely at the end of the day (John 10:2–4).

In both Testaments, the model of the shepherd and his sheep is seen as a metaphor of important leadership. The imagery of the shepherd and the flock is richly developed in Psalm 23, Ezekiel 34, and John 10. In the Old Testament, God is the Shepherd of Israel (Genesis 49:24; Psalm 23:1; 80:1; Is 40:11). God also has prophesied that His appointed servant, David the Prince, will be the lead shepherd in the Messianic Kingdom over the Jews (Ezekiel 34:11–16, 23–24). In the New Testament, it is Jesus who is the Good Shepherd who willingly gives His life for the sheep (Matthew 18:10–14; Mark 6:34; John 10; Hebrews 13:20).

Those who keep sheep know that the flock is entirely dependent upon the management capabilities of the shepherd. If the shepherd is hired just to watch over the sheep, the likelihood of the sheep knowing him and following him is uncertain. If the master is true, caring and genuinely devoted to the sheep, they will know it and follow him. Jesus is the owner of our lives. He bought us with a high price (I Corinthians 6:20). This concept is epitomized just as David said in Psalm 23 “*The Lord is my Shepherd -- I shall not want.*” King David, was a shepherd when he composed Psalm 23, and this Psalm looks at life from the standpoint of a sheep when he wrote, “*He [the Good Shepherd] leadeth me beside the still waters.*” In other words, He alone knows where the still, quiet, deep, clean, pure water is to be found that alone can satisfy His sheep, and keep them fit and strong. In our Jesus only can we find repose and joy as He leads us by “*the still waters*”, or peace. We must totally surrender our lives over to Him. Why? Because He is the Shepherd to whom no trouble is too great as He cares for His flock. He is available twenty-four hours a day to see that we are properly provided for in every detail. Above all, He is very jealous of His name, which He called Himself “The Good Shepherd.”

“Cast” is an old English shepherd’s term for a sheep that has turned over on its back, and cannot get up again by itself. A “cast” sheep is a very pathetic sight. Lying on its back, its feet in the air, it flays away frantically struggling to stand up without success. Sometimes it will bleat a little for help, but generally it lies there lashing about in frightened frustration. It just cannot right itself. The predators know that the “cast” sheep are easy prey. The sheep can die in a short time if they have wandered away from the flock. This is part of the drama depicted for us in the parable of the ninety and nine sheep with one astray related to us in Luke 15:3-7. A stray sheep becomes the caring shepherd’s deep concern, as is his agonizing search, his longing to find the missing one, his delight in restoring it not, only by righting it to its feet, but also restoring it to himself and the flock as well. One of the great revelations of comfort we are given in the Bible is of Christ Himself as our Shepherd. He gives us the ability to restore our peace when we are “cast” sheep that are anxious and upset, and we must depend on Him:

Philippians 4:6–7

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (ESV).

Sheep are creatures of habit and will follow the same trails until they soil their own ground with waste, and corrupt it with disease and parasites. The best safeguard that a shepherd has in handling his flock is to keep them moving, or leave them grazing on the same ground for too long. The shepherd must keep the sheep moving through the paths he has selected for them. This is what David had in mind when he spoke of being led in “*paths of righteousness*”. Following a precise plan of operation is the secret for healthy flocks and healthy lands. We need to keep moving through life, and not stay in the same ruts of discomfort too long. God has a plan for us, and wants us to grow in sanctification throughout our lives. We are not to stand still and not grow. He wants us to continually become more Christ like. Although situations change, and some not for the better, we must trust Him, respond through prayer, and let Him lead us into better pastures and paths.

The shepherd knows from past experience that predators like coyotes, bears, wolves or cougars can hide, and from their vantage point, prey on the flock. The ever-present predators are kept from the sheep by the shepherd. The land can also be threatening with rock slides, mud or snow avalanches, and a dozen other natural disasters that would destroy or injure his sheep. But in spite of these hazards, the shepherds also know that it is still best to guide his flock to the high country. He spares himself no pain, trouble, or time to keep an eye out for any danger that might develop. Our Shepherd Jesus knows all of this when He leads us through the valleys with Himself. He knows where we can find strength, sustenance, and gentle grazing despite every threat of disaster around us. He warns us of false teachers and other pitfalls (Matthew 7:15; 24:4–5). He lets us know what the future is in the long chronology of world events.

John 16:33

³³These things I have spoken unto you, that in me ye might have peace. In the world ye shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world (KJV).

The shepherd customarily only carries a “rod” and “staff”. The “rod” is an extension of the owner's own right arm, and is an instrument of protection both for himself and his sheep when they are in danger. It is used both as a defense and a deterrent against anything that would attack. It also stands as a symbol of his strength, his power, his authority. Interestingly, the word “rod” is also a slang term for hand-guns carried by cowboys, and other western range men, and this term is exactly how David used it in Psalm 23. His other tool, the “staff”, is of special comfort to the shepherd himself. During the long nightly watches over his sheep, he leans on it for support and strength. It becomes to him a great comfort and help in his responsibilities. The “staff” is also used for guiding sheep.

When we find ourselves in a difficult situation God protects us. We pray to Him and He reveals the remedy of our situation to us. Many of our situations are brought on by our own stubborn, self-willed assertions that we think are unsolvable. However, by His tender care He draws near to us in prayer and supplication to relieve us of our pain, agony and discomfort. My Shepherd is alert to every approaching disaster that threatens His people. He has been through the storms of suffering before. He bore our sorrows, and is acquainted with our grief. And now no matter what storms of life that we face, His very life and strength and vitality are given to us. He wants nothing but the genuine best for us, not what the world says is best, but what He knows is best for us.

If we allow God to control our lives and leave the management to Him “*goodness and mercy shall follow us.*” King David realized that only by doing what God wants us to do in our lives can we see the fruit of all that He has for us. It is His “*goodness and mercy*” which enables us to receive the most blessings He has for us when we admit that we cannot live without Him, or handle situations alone.

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