

## The Shepherds' Encounter

Luke 2:8-20

Christmas Eve 2023

<sup>8</sup>And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

<sup>15</sup>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." <sup>16</sup>And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup>And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup>And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

- Luke 2:8-20, ESV

We all remember how it went in the Nativity Plays when we were kids. The best kids got to be Mary and Joseph. The angel was a cool part, too. The Wise Men also had speaking lines. And then there were the shepherds. No one known how many shepherds there were. One shepherd had one line: "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." The rest of the shepherds just had to stand there and walk as a group. That's where you put the kids who couldn't sing or act too well. Shepherds make good background extras. I don't remember, but I'm pretty sure I was always a shepherd.

Today, we like to emphasize how dirty and untrusted shepherds were. They were weird guys who slept outside with their sheep and no one seemed to trust them very much. We usually talk about them as an example of how God reaches out to the lowly and unexpected, the outcast and the downtrodden. And that's true enough, for sure.

But why did the angels come and announce the birth of Jesus first to shepherds? Sometimes the most obvious answer is the clearest and best: The angels announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds because Jesus came to be our Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God.

One of the clearest Old Testament prophecies of the coming of Jesus into the world is Isaiah 53, a prophecy given some 700 years before Jesus was born. Isaiah 53:6 says:

*All we like sheep have gone astray;  
we have turned—every one—to his own way;  
and the Lord has laid on him  
the iniquity of us all.*

Sheep that have gone astray need a shepherd. And the one on whom iniquity is laid is the Lamb of God, the substitute sacrifice.

We need a Good Shepherd because we are so prone to wander away and get ourselves into trouble. In Ezekiel 34, God prophesied that He Himself would be the Shepherd to seek our His sheep but also that He would send David to shepherd the flock of God:

*<sup>11</sup> “For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup> As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them . . . I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.*

*. . . ,<sup>22</sup> I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will judge between sheep and sheep. <sup>23</sup> And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. <sup>24</sup> And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them. I am the LORD; I have spoken. – Ezekiel 34:11-12, 14-16, 22-24, ESV*

On the surface of it, these prophecies seem impossible. How could God be the shepherd and David also be the shepherd. And how could the shepherd also be the One on whom the Lord lays the iniquity of His people?

To fulfill all of the prophecies, the Promised One would need to be God Himself in the flesh but also the Son of David. He would also need to be the shepherd to feed and protect the sheep as well as the sacrifice to cover their sins.

This seems so impossible that God's people had begin to theorize that God would send multiple different Messiahs and, of course, they dismissed the absurd notion that any of them would be God Himself in human flesh.

Whenever we try to reduce God down to size and make Him and His ways understandable by our little minds, we end up distorting God and His ways horribly in a ridiculous cartoonish manner.

We can try to understand God and reduce Him to our comprehension level, or we can take Him at His word and believe who He says He is and what He has done and promised to do.

The angels confront the shepherds in the fields on the first Christmas night to show them and us how great the ways of God are, that they are we might all believe, receive Jesus, and rejoice in Him.

It was Linus Van Pelt, playing a shepherd in the nativity play, who made these words so famous for so many of us growing up. As Charlie Brown cried out in exasperation, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Linus replies simply, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about," and then he recites our text for tonight -

*<sup>8</sup>And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. <sup>10</sup>And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. <sup>11</sup>For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."*

Whenever people in the Bible have a real encounter with God or angels, instead of just the figments of their own imagination, they are almost always overwhelmed with fear. God simply blows our minds. When the glory of the Lord shines, people are filled with great fear. He is far beyond our comprehension or imagination.

The unnamed angel brings the shepherds and simple and powerful message, good news of great joy for all the people. God had sent the world a Savior, Christ the Lord. We already know the Savior's name is Jesus, which means salvation. He came to save us from our sins, from our deadly wandering away from God, from our self-imposed exile from God and slavery to sin. He came to set the prisoners free and bring the wandering rebels home.

The sign to the shepherds is that the baby would be wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger, something these shepherds probably did when a spotless lamb was born who could be sold to the Temple for use at Passover. Certainly, Jesus had come to be our Passover Lamb, to have our sins laid on Him, to bear the just judgment we deserve for our rebellion. That's how He would save us.

*<sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*<sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

- vv. 13-14

Once the good news of great joy was announced, the heavens erupted in a chorus of praise, a dazzling display of heavenly glory and worship apparently seen only by these shepherds out in this field. The angels' praise proclaims the two things that drive the very heartbeat of God – glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to His own, those with whom He is pleased. God does everything He does for the glory of His name and for the eternal good of His people. In sending Jesus, God reveals His hearts in a way that resounds to His praise forever and that makes peace for His people forever.

So, the shepherds do what anyone should do in their situation. The angels had not ordered them to go to Bethlehem and search for the child. They had simply told the shepherds the good news of great joy of His birth. But . . .

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The shepherds not only went, but they went with great haste. The best way to respond to God's word is quickly and eagerly. Sometimes we can hear God's word and delay our response with a thousand lame excuses, but that just shows that we don't really believe God. If God has spoken, we should respond with haste, with eager expectation.

They come quickly to Mary and Joseph, and they see this little baby lying in a manger, just as the angels had told them. They didn't keep the good news to themselves. They told everyone who would listen all that the angels had told them. "*All who heard it wondered*" – Did you ever wonder who this "all" is? We usually picture the scene as just being Joseph and Mary. Well, Joseph and Mary were probably staying with some part of Joseph's family, who had probably come to see the baby after the birth.

So, they responded quickly to the message and they told it to everyone. One last thing: "*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they*

*had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*” When they went back to their lives, they were changed. They were excitedly, joyfully glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

Have you heard the good news of the Savior’s coming? Do you know that His coming is the best news of real, eternal joy you could ever hear? Do you know that He came to be your Shepherd and your sacrifice, to seek you out, to pay for your sins, and to bring you home? Will you go to Him with great haste? Will you receive Him with great joy? Will you tell others about Him? Will you rejoice and glorify God for the amazing gift of His only Son?