

12/17 – “The Journey of the Shepherds”

Luke 2:8-16

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

Special Music: “Gloria/Angels We Have Heard on High”

Casting Crowns

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6wsLm6cZ1E>



A CHILD IS BORN

**Of all the people in all the world,
Of all the prophet's dreams unfurled
Of all the wisest men and kings,
Of all the cantors with songs to sing,
The angel chose the shepherd boys,
To hear the words, "A child is born."**

**Of all the soldiers facing war,
Of all the priests who souls are scarred,
Of all the women great with child,
Of all the people who live reviled,
The angel chose the shepherd boys,
To hear the words, "A child is born."**

**For unto us a child is born,
Petaled rose with sharpened thorn,
To save the spirits of every soul,
And make the divided nations whole,
To live and die a sacrificial lamb,
And fulfill through death God's perfect plan.**

**Yes, unto us a child is given,
On this night our passions driven
To sing with angels in the sky,
Voices raised to amplify
The coming of our precious Lord,
Fulfilling the promise in the word.**

**Let the skies cleave open wide,
Angels sing and shepherds cry.
Come see the child in Bethlehem,
Who comes to save and not condemn.
Joy to one and joy to all
As Messiah is born in a cattle stall.**

**Humble spirit, humble birth,
Humble start to change the earth,
Humble night with stars and moon,
Humble souls once again attuned.
The angel chose the shepherd boys,
To hear the words, "A child is born."**

When I was Growing up, I used to attend the Fort Worth Stock Show (formally the Southwestern Exposition and Livestock Show) every year. Students were given free admission on certain days. The Will Rogers Coliseum and the Will Rogers Auditorium were on the grounds. There were rodeos and music presentations. It was pretty much a mandatory thing to attend. While not as big as the State Fair of Texas, it was still a huge event. And unlike the State Fair, it really did focus on livestock and rodeo. There were parades, auctions, and even a midway. The cattle barns were used for the presentation of all kinds of livestock, from cattle to chickens to pigs to horses, and even to exotics like llamas and ostriches. It was a farmer's and rancher's paradise. And it was a spectacle for the children (as well as the adults) who enjoyed seeing real cowboys with real skills, as well as exploring all the animals.

But I want to talk for a minute about those cattle barns. As much as the Fat Stock Show personnel did to keep the doors open and the fans running, when you entered one of those buildings filled with animals, it was like hitting an olfactory wall. I know that the farmers and ranchers were used to it, but those of us who didn't spend all of our time chasing or milking cows, clipping goats and sheep, or collecting eggs, it was difficult for us to breathe. And it stunk. If you put that many animals in a closed space, it's going to stink. It doesn't matter how hard you try to keep things clean. And the stench hung on our clothes and in our hair. We all had to take baths or showers when we got home to get the smell off our bodies.

Don't get me wrong. I love animals. But there are times when the smell of animals is just beyond something we want to deal with. Have you ever been in a house that has a dozen cats, or a home where someone has multiple dogs and never washes them? It doesn't make those animals less friendly, but the atmosphere can make you somewhat anxious to leave. As a kid, I owned several Border Collies and they just loved to roll around in cow manure out on the farm in east Texas. We would have to throw them in the pond and wash them off before we could put them in the car to come home. Animals are like that. Hygiene is just not that important to them.

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

At the time of Jesus' birth, shepherds were not despised, but to some extent they were ostracized from the rest of society. Not in the way Lepers were. What kept them apart from society was not a contagious disease. The problem was they spent their days and nights with sheep. And sheep are dirty. And they stink. And shepherds had a tendency to smell like the sheep that they shepherded.

Being a shepherd was a job that most people wouldn't take on if they could avoid it. It was a hard, dirty, smelly job spending all their time in the midst of the animals that they watched. They had to fight off wolves, bears, and occasionally a lion, which was extremely dangerous. They had to make sure that they found good pastures and water for the sheep. They had to take care of them if they got sick. They had to make sure that the sheep stayed safe and didn't wander away

from the herd. They had to know the number of sheep in their flock so that they would know if one was missing. And at night, they lay down with their flocks to rest. They literally lived with the sheep. But a very important job was to make sure that their flocks stayed far outside the city limits so that the smell didn't upset the townspeople.

It was a lonely job, and it did not pay well. As a matter of fact, it was one of those jobs that most people wouldn't take even if they were hungry. You had to really want to be a shepherd when you agreed to do the job. Knowing all this, we have to ask, "Why did the Angel choose to announce the birth of the Messiah to the shepherds when it would have been so much more convenient to just tell the townspeople?"

9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

So, when that angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds, they were way out in the countryside, far from town. It wasn't like they were patiently waiting on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The villagers would not have been happy if they were. It was going to be quite a hike back into town for them.

While the shepherds were out resting under stars, suddenly an angel appears and the glory of the Lord shines and lights up the night. Of course, it was terrifying. Most people never saw an angel, and suddenly, here was one, right in their midst, no warning. The sudden light must have blinded them until they got used to it. If we had been there, what would we have thought?

But even more poignant than the physical presence of this angel that awakened them out of their sleep, was the spiritual encounter that blazed through their minds and souls. I beg to ask, have you ever had this kind of encounter? I don't mean an angel suddenly appearing to you or the sky lighting up like a thousand comets. No, I mean a spiritual encounter with God that was so awesome, was so magnificent, was so life changing that the moment left you speechless? A moment that is a defining moment to your faith. Something that validates your profession of faith in a way that some would say leaves scar, a brand on your heart so intense that you will never be able to put it away in your past? Nor would you want to.

I love what Jesus says to Thomas in John 20:29:

“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Being present in the miracle makes it easier to believe. Jesus knows that. He understands that desire in human nature to want validation before commitment. He understood where Thomas is coming from, even if is a little bit annoying.

“Unless I see the nail marks in his hands and put my finger where the nails were, and put my hand into his side, I will not believe.”

So many people are right there with Thomas. “Unless you can prove to me that Jesus is the Son of God, I will not believe.” “Unless I see the miracle for myself, I refuse to believe.” “Unless Jesus comes and stands in my presence, I will not believe.”

“Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

Of course, the shepherd had their moment of standing in the miracle. And it was beyond awesome. How could you not respond when you are standing inside that miracle? And yet, we who have only the story, are expected embrace the miracle, embrace the light, embrace the angel, embrace the manger, embrace the Christ child, even though we weren't there. The shepherds encounter the experience of the angels and then the journey to the manger to see the Christ Child to affirm what had been told them. Thomas was able to touch the holes in Jesus' hands and side to verify that it really was him. What are WE supposed to do? Most of us will never encounter the miracles of validation that the shepherds and Thomas had.

“blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

We have something that Thomas did not have. We have been given the gift of the Holy Spirit to teach, love, and guide us, making our relationship with our Creator a much more real experience.

Rather than an angel calling to us, and telling us to go to Bethlehem, we have the Holy Spirit to send us on that same journey. As dirty, filthy, sinners that we are, we are welcome at the stable. We are welcome at the manger. We are welcome at the table. We are welcome at the throne of God. We are welcome in the presence of our Creator.

Now, back to those shepherds:

10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people.

11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”

At this point, the shepherds have been left with a choice. This angel that tells them not to be afraid, that everything is going to be okay, that this is a wonderful event – not a bad one, this angel is excited to tell them this news. Maybe that is not a good enough word. The angel is exuberant. The angel cannot contain himself. He can't help but share the information that he has. The angel is trying to convey to the shepherds how important and glorious this moment is. He is trying to convey into words something that can only be experienced first-hand. He is so excited that he brought his backup band with him, a holy chorus of angels, to put an exclamation point on this newscast. This moment of delivering the message to the shepherds will live throughout the ages. This is way beyond a kodak moment.

Think of a moment in your life that you remember because of its awesomeness. That perfect sunrise or sunset. That moment that you fell in love. That moment when a star-scape overwhelmed you and the heavens appeared endless in their glory. That moment when you stood on a mountaintop and failed to be able to catch your breath because of the magnificence of the view spread out before you. This moment that the shepherds had with the angel was beyond that. It was a moment so magnificent that not only would they remember it for the rest of their lives, but we would be able to live vicariously through them to experience that moment ourselves as we hear the story.

So, what was the nature of the choice that they had to make? It wasn't a difficult choice for them but for us, living so far from the moment, the decision is often more difficult. There were and still are only two options for both them and us.

1) We can say, "That was awesome! It was spectacular! I will always remember this moment. But now it is time to settle back down and go back to sleep with the sheep. The party's over and it's time to call it a day. Next time I see someone, I'm going to tell them about this. They won't believe that this happened to me, a lowly shepherd out in the country sleeping with his sheep. Thank you, God for sharing this moment with me."

Or...

2) We can say, "That was awesome! It was spectacular! I will always remember this moment. But according to the angel, this was only the warmup. It pales in comparison with what I will find in Bethlehem. I have to see this for myself. I don't care if it is a long walk, and the people there probably don't want me around because I smell so bad. But I need to see this for myself, this moment in time, this pivoting point in history where the prophesied Messiah came to live among men as a man himself."

Why do people shortchange themselves? Why do we shortchange ourselves?

What are you talking about, preacher? It's really pretty simple. We have a tendency to get so caught up in the preparations, the warmup events, the seasonal atmosphere and the preponderance of secular distractions that we are too tired, depressed, despondent, overworked, stressed, and what I like to think of as Christmas carnage, that we are unable to do anything but think about calling it a night and laying back down and going to sleep with the sheep. Too wiped out to embrace the actual reason for the season. Too distraught to hone in on the actual event that will change our lives.

It doesn't mean that we don't find joy in the event. It's just that the preparations often overshadow the event itself. While family, friends, and gatherings are so important to us and this

time of year is great for embracing these things, Jesus often takes a back seat to all the frivolity. Friends, Jesus is not an excuse for all the presents, gatherings, and sharing. He is the reason. And it should weigh heavy on our souls when we set Jesus aside at this time of the year. It's like we have a Christmas party, and everyone is happy, singing, dancing and the host asks everyone to slow down and be quieter because the baby Jesus is asleep in the next room.

I don't want anyone to misunderstand what I am saying. I think it is wonderful that we can celebrate with family and friends. We just need to remember why we are celebrating. We can celebrate with friends and family any time during the year. We set aside Christmas day to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ.

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

The shepherds understood that as wonderful as this event with the angel had been for them, an event that was burned into their minds and hearts, the focus was actually on the manger in Bethlehem. They refused to let the celebration distract them from the worship they felt they needed to express.

I would like for us to ponder that this week. As difficult as it is, we need try to tune out all the distractions around us, knowing that our time with Jesus is far more important. As we think about giving gifts and opening gifts, as we decorate our houses and take time to go look at Christmas lights, as we make preparations to visit with our families, as we enjoy time with our friends at Christmas parties and taking in the events of the season, let's keep our thoughts Christ centered and remember that it isn't about the spectacle, it's about God's gift to us, himself in the guise of a child, that needs to take center stage in our merriment. We celebrate the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ and everything else is meant to shine a light on the manger in Bethlehem.

God bless you all,

AMEN

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