

Experiencing Christmas

The Story of the Shepherds – Luke 2

Last week we began a Christmas series I'm calling ensemble. The reason for that is that the Christmas story is made up of several smaller stories. It's an ensemble cast of unlikely characters, each with their own story to tell. Each one of their stories on their own is unremarkable. There's nothing special about these people. Nothing that should demand our attention 2,000 years later, except this: When God brings their stories together with the story of Jesus, it changes everything. When this ensemble cast of characters experiences Jesus, unremarkable, ordinary people suddenly become part of the most incredible story.

Each one of these stories is dramatically changed when they experience Jesus. Whether it's the wise men, or the shepherds, or Joseph and Mary, the story of Jesus takes each one of their stories in directions they never could have imagined.

The reason we need to hear their stories is this: when you truly experience Christmas, when really find Jesus, he will rewrite your story too. He's the ultimate plot twist that will change everything about your life.

Last week we began with the story of the wise men, these star gazers from Babylon. With nothing more than a dusty bit of prophecy, likely had passed down from the prophet Daniel some 600 years before, they traveled hundreds of miles to worship Jesus. Their story tells us you are never too far away to find Jesus.

This morning's story begins right in Judea. Just outside of Bethlehem, in fact. But it also begins on the opposite end of the social pecking order. Whereas wise men were people of wealth and status, 1st Century shepherds never had hope of climbing higher than the bottom rung or two of the social ladder. At best, they were social non-entities that you would pass on the street without a second glance. At worst, people would look down their nose and cross to the other side of the street.

The most remarkable thing about the shepherds is that they are in this story at all, and yet they the very first people in history to celebrate Christmas, and they got to do it in real time.

To help you understand just how shocking and jolting their role in this story is, imagine this: imagine that Jesus is being born in our own day, and you are on Jesus' PR team. You work for the advertising agency that's been hired to market this whole birth-of-a-Savior deal. You're being paid millions of dollars to make sure Jesus' birth gets noticed. This is a big deal. The promised Messiah. The birth of a Savior. The Son God becomes flesh. It's good news of great joy for all people. You want to get the word out.

Today, we'd put up giant billboards in Time's square, buy commercial time on the Super Bowl, and put ads on the most popular Youtubers posts. We'd want maximum eyeballs on this deal.

When it came to the big event, we'd invite the movers and the shakers. We'd want to make sure the high rollers would be there. We'd want key influential people from the press.

In Jesus' day, who would that be? The high priest. He's the religious leader for the whole nation. The chief priests and the scribes. They're the religious scholars. Then there's the Sanhedrin. They were the Supreme Court. There's the Pharisees who have a lot of influence with the people. Not to mention Roman officials and government leaders.

But that's not who God goes to. He doesn't work like Madison Avenue. No he goes to a bunch of nobody shepherds. Vs. 8 says, *"And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over the flock by night."*

It's not the king. It's not the priests. It's shepherds at the top of God's guest list. A bunch of blue collar, minimum wage workers. It's the middle of night. It's the graveyard shift, and no one else even has a clue what's going on. Check out what happens.

9 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. 10 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. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

We don't know their names. We have no record of them beyond what Luke records here. We never hear from them again. In the eyes of the world, they are nobodies, and yet it is to these shepherds that God announces the most incredible news.

We would never have done it this way. Why did God do it this way? Why is this story in the Bible? What we're going to see this morning is that the way the shepherds experienced Christmas is the way we should experience Christmas. What they did with the good news of Christmas is what we should do with the good news of Christmas.

You will never really enjoy the season of Christmas until you experience the reason for Christmas. So what did the shepherds do, and what should we do:

I. Expect God's Presence

It starts off as just another boring night in the life of a minimum wage worker. Then there's this sudden explosion of light. It says, the glory of the Lord shone around them. The same word for shone is used in Acts 9 of Paul when Jesus appeared to him, and there was a flash of light that knocked him to the ground. This isn't like turning on a flashlight or flicking on a light switch. This is the sudden flash of police lights in your rearview as your cruising down 44. It's that multiplied a million times over.

It says they were filled with a great fear. Literally, they feared a great fear. This is a natural reaction. Anyone who sees an angel in the Bible, their immediate, gut instinct is to be very

afraid. If you or I came face to face with an angel, we'd be flat on the ground too. Their reaction is normal, but it's not necessary.

Vs. 10 says, *"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.'"*

There are plenty of times in the Bible where it says if you do refuse God, if you do reject God, if you do ridicule God, then you ought to fear God. You ought to fear his judgment. But the angel tells them, "Hey guys, you don't need to be afraid. You don't need to fear."

That tells us something about these shepherds and what kind of men they were. Evidently, they were devout men. They had a deep love for God. They didn't have to fear the angel, because they loved the God the angel was talking about.

Did you notice the angel didn't tell them to go find the child? He didn't issue a command. The angel didn't need to tell them to go, because he knew they were the type of people who would go.

Look at vs. 15.

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."

In our Bibles where they let's go see this "thing" that has happened. In the Greek it is literally *message* or *word*. They're not just going to see a thing or event. They are going to see the message. The word. What's that mean? The angel has just told them that what has been prophesied and promised for thousands of years has just happened. They were taught this promise by their parents ever since they were little boys. Their parents were taught by their parents, and their parents by their parents. That was the word, the message going back dozens, even hundreds of generations.

The shepherds were expecting God to show up. They didn't know when, and they didn't know how, but they expected God to show up. A part of that message or word that had been passed down came from the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 7:14, the prophet writes, *"Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."*

Do you know what Immanuel means? It means God with us. God right here, right now, present with us. They were expecting the presence of God. In Matthew 1, when the angel appears to Joseph to tell him that Mary is pregnant, he quotes this prophecy.

Jesus means God's with us too. It means we can expect the presence of God. Do you expect God to show up? God doesn't just show up on Christmas day. He shows up every day. We should get up every day expecting God to show up. It's hard to do. I know it. I fight it too. But do you get out of bed every morning expecting the presence God. Do you expect him to show

up no matter how menial or mundane the task is that day? Do you expect him to guide you, to protect you, to teach you, to grow, to test you, to love you? Our feet should hit the floor and we can say, "I don't know what will happen today. I don't know who will show up, but I expect God to show up."

That's what it means to go through life expecting God to show up. The second thing the shepherds did and we can do too is...

II. Trust God's Protection

So, the angel makes the announcement. He is joined by a myriad of angels. Imagine the most glorious, intense light show you've ever imagined. For me was at a concert last year. (Show picture) Ten's of thousands of people all wearing LED lightup wristbands. Lasers and robotic remote spotlights everywhere. Check this out.

I don't think that lightshow has anything on the lightshow the shepherds saw that night. But then it's over. The angels are gone. The sky goes dark. Everything goes back to normal, but for these shepherds, nothing will ever be normal again. Their lives are forever changed. Look at verse 16, "*And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.*"

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Sometimes, the powerful part of a passage is what's written between the lines. The first thing these shepherds do is drop everything to go and find Jesus. Have you ever wondered about the sheep? What happened to the sheep? What did they do with the sheep? They couldn't take all the sheep with them into Bethlehem. That wouldn't be allowed. I know our nativity sets all have a sheep or two, but we're not talking a couple of sheep here. We're talking dozens and dozens, maybe even hundreds of sheep.

Now, I assume they left them in a sheep pen, but it still the middle of the nights. There are thieves. There are predators. They left the sheep unprotected and unguarded. You need to realize what a big deal that is. Leaving their sheep in the middle of the night could get them fired. They could lose their jobs. It could get them thrown in jail. If something were to happen to those sheep, it was their necks on the line.

So, why did they feel comfortable leaving the sheep? Because they trusted God to take care of them.

They understood that God was not going to tell them this good news of great joy, only to leave them hanging out in the fields with the sheep. The only explanation is that they could leave those sheep under God's care. If God can send the Savior of the world, don't you think he can take care of a bunch of sheep? If God can send his Son in the flesh, don't you think God can take care of your source of income?

A God that can guide shepherds to a manger and guard their sheep can also guide and guard us as we go through life.

That's the great lesson about these shepherds. The reason these guys took off is because at that moment they realized finding Jesus is a lot more important than keeping sheep. Finding Jesus is a lot more important than making money. Finding Jesus is a lot more important than climbing that corporate ladder. Finding Jesus is a lot more important than getting that degree. Finding Jesus is a lot more important than what car you drive or what house you live in. There is nothing in life more important than finding Jesus.

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When those shepherds left those sheep, they were saying, "I have one number one priority in life, and I'm not going to let anything stand in the way of finding Jesus." They understood while they were keeping watch over their sheep that God was keeping watch over them.

One of the basic principles taught in the Bible is that ultimately God owns everything. Deut. 10:14 says, *"To the Lord your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and ever everything in it."* Everything in the universe belongs to him. In the New Testament, the Apostle Paul asks some in the Corinthian church who were becoming arrogant, *"What do you have that you did not receive?"*

We may protest and say, "But I worked hard. I studied hard. I earned everything I have." Scripture does not discount a good work ethic and the rewards it brings, but it recognizes that our talents, our abilities, our intelligence, our mental capacity to learn new skills, and our very lives are all ultimately a gift from his hand.

Listen to this. This is important, and it can revolutionize how you see all of life, especially money and possessions. We possess. God owns. Our stuff is his stuff. We're just using it temporarily.

Several years ago, our family had the opportunity to spend a week in the Rocky Mountains for free in a cabin owned by someone else. It was a nice cabin. It was a beautiful view. We had a great time. It was a wonderful week filled with lifelong memories, but at the end of the week that cabin went back to the owner. It wasn't ours.

If God own it, and we merely possess it, you know what that means? We can trust God with our possessions. We don't need to obsess over it. We don't need to stress out about it. God can take care of it, and he can take care of you.

Some of you have a hard time believing in Christmas. You know why? Because you are more worried about stuff? Just find Jesus. He'll take care of the stuff. Don't worry about the stuff. Don't let anything stand in the way of finding Jesus.

You know you've really experienced Christmas when you wake up you can say, "I really don't know what's going to happen today, and I'm not really going to worry about it, because I have your protection."

So, you really want to be like the shepherds, they trust in his protection.

III. Celebrate God's Provision

After these shepherds experienced the real deal Christmas; a real baby, a real God in real flesh, they celebrated. First, they celebrated with their witness. Look at verses 17-18

And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

They told others about what they had seen and heard. They told them that a Savior had been born. I picture them going through the streets of Bethlehem and telling everyone. "Hey, have you heard the good news? Did you hear what happened?" They're like George running through the street in the final scene of "It's a Wonderful Life."

"Merry Christmas, movie house. Merry Christmas, Emporium. Merry Christmas, you wonderful Building and Loan. Merry Christmas, Mr. Potter. The news was so good, they couldn't keep it in.

It says here that all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. Here's what amazing about this— Shepherds' testimony wasn't even admissible in court. They were so looked down upon as a class and considered so dishonest that their witness was unreliable. And yet God chooses shepherds to be his witness to greatest news of all time.

The news about Jesus is so good, how can we keep it in? When we truly experience Christmas and we truly find Jesus, we've gotta tell someone. We can't keep such good news to ourselves. The reason other people aren't amazed at our testimony, is that we're hardly amazed ourselves, and I have to wonder, have we really found Jesus? Or have we found something else?

Because when you really find Jesus, you want to celebrate. You want to tell others. How many of you are Chiefs fans. We'll ignore Terry, 'cause he's a Patriot's fan. If the Chiefs win the Super Bowl, won't you celebrate? We don't want to celebrate privately. We don't want to celebrate in isolation. We want to share our celebration with others. We celebrate by telling others. Won't you wear your colors proudly? Won't you post it all over Facebook. Won't you tell the good news to people at work, your neighbors, your family, maybe even strangers at Wal-Mart. Of Course, you would. When you celebrate, you witness. It's natural. It's what we do. We won. We just got married. It's a boy! It's a girl!

Secondly, the shepherds celebrated with their worship. Verse 20 says, "*And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*"

When you celebrate, you praise. That's what worship is. It is to declare the praises of someone or something.

Chiefs fans praise Patrick Mahomes. A just married man praises the beauty of his bride. "Isn't she beautiful. A nature lover praises the stunning sunset. The successful hunter praises the number of points on his trophy buck. The bargain shopper praises the unbelievable good deal they found.

And the shepherd's worship wasn't just a one-time thing. When it says they were glorifying and praising God, it is written in the present tense which means this was an ongoing act. It didn't happen only once. Their worship wasn't just a Sunday morning, of Christmas day sort of thing. It was every day.

(Jareth Play)

When we really find Jesus, we worship and we praise. Here's how you know you've really experienced Christmas— when you enjoy it every day of the year. Christmas is more than celebrating the birth of Jesus. It is celebrating the Jesus who was born. It's not enough to celebrate Jesus one time each year, because the fact that Jesus was born changes everything. It changed these shepherd's lives. It changed history. It changed me. It changes you.

Do you all remember the song, "Here I am to Worship"? Here I am to worship. Here I am to bow down. Here I am to say that you're my God. You're altogether lovely, altogether worthy, altogether wonderful to me."

Let me give you some context to that song. It was written by Tim Hughes. When Tim was just 18 years old, he agreed to spend one year of his life serving as the worship pastor of "Prince of Peace" church in Durbin, South Africa. It was the poorest place he'd ever seen. The building was just a ramshackle shack. There were no drums. There was no guitar. There wasn't even a piano. They had no lights, no projector, they didn't even have a basic PA system. He wondered how they were every going to worship.

A few minutes later the place was packed and filled with worship. Outside the building, there was still all the disease, poverty, despair, and crime there was before, but nothing could rob these Christians of the joy they have in Christ.

Here's what Tim Hughes said about what that experience taught him, "Worship isn't about music – It's about Jesus."

You better tell your kids and your grandkids. Christmas isn't about decorations, presents and toys. It isn't about trees, snowmen, or Santa. It isn't even about noble ideas like giving or family. It's about Jesus. When you understand that, you will experience Christmas the right way, every day.