

The Shepherds Story

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[0 : 00] If you have your Bibles, look with me to Luke chapter 2. Today we end this series called First Christmas, obviously getting its name from the first Christmas that was ever experienced.

We've looked at Mary's story and looked at Joseph's story, and this morning we come to look at the story of the shepherds. And so if you have your Bible looking to Luke chapter 2, let's begin our reading this morning in verse 4.

For Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family line of David, to be registered along with Mary, who was engaged to him and was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. Then she gave birth to her firstborn son, and she wrapped him snugly in cloth and laid him in a feeding trough because there was no room for them in the inn.

Well, that's the heart of the Christmas story. Jesus is born. He's laid in a manger in a feeding trough. He's wrapped in cloth. There at his side are Mary and Joseph in this little stable.

[1 : 13] But that's not the end of the Christmas story by any means. I want you to look at the rest of the story, beginning in verse 8. In the same regions, shepherds were staying out in the fields and keeping watch at night over their flock.

Not too far from this scene in the stable in Bethlehem, there's a field there on the outskirts of Bethlehem where these shepherds were watching their sheep at night.

Now, if you think about it, that's when shepherds did the bulk of their work at night because that's when the sheep they were tending were most vulnerable.

In the darkness, a predator could come. In the darkness, a thief could come and steal the owner's sheep. And so that's when they were most alert and doing the hardest part of their job.

I'm fearful that a lot of times we have a romantic view of those shepherds. We know that David went on to be a king and he started as a shepherd. And so we think that that position of being a shepherd was a very high and lofty place for one to hold.

[2 : 26] But the truth is, exactly the opposite was typically true. Being a shepherd was an entry-level job. It was one that often was held by those with very little education, very few skills.

They were considered by many to be gossips and a little bit on the superstitious side. They weren't folk that folk highly respected. In that day and time, folk thought, if you can't do anything else, you can kind of be a shepherd, right?

So it wasn't a job that folk looked to and said, man, this is a really, really significant, important job. It served an important function. Those sheep were necessary for sacrifice at the temple and the synagogues.

So it served an important function. But the role itself of being a shepherd was kind of a lowly role.

So get this picture. If Bethlehem were pickings, somewhere right outside the city limits, there's a big field and someone has gathered with these sheep.

There are probably a number of shepherds. They're gathered around a fire in the night trying to warn themselves, every once and again looking up to make sure on the horizon that there were no predators, there were no thieves about to come and take away their sheep.

[3 : 44] And they're just standing there warming themselves perhaps by a fire. Look at the very next verse. Things rapidly change. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them.

And you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out this next line. They were terrified. Now, I asked a couple weeks ago when we were talking about Mary and then later with Joseph, how many of you have ever seen angels?

And so far, no one has come up to me. No one has raised a hand and said, I've ever seen an angel. We have sometimes wondered maybe we've encountered an angel unaware, as the scripture talks about.

But I've not met anyone yet who said, I've had a one-on-one face-to-face conversation with an angel. And that's what these shepherds are about to have. This angel of the Lord, who most scholars suspect because of conversations that we read about in Luke chapter 1, where an angel comes and that angel is labeled the angel of the Lord.

His name is Gabriel when he speaks to Mary. And then earlier with Zechariah, he encounters an angel as he's in the temple working on his shift as a priest.

[4 : 58] That angel is also Gabriel. Many believe that this angel probably by name is the angel Gabriel. And he appears suddenly before these shepherds. Can you imagine?

They're standing around. They're just making small talk. They're warming themselves. They're looking out on the field. And all of a sudden, right there before them, in the night sky, is an angel. And he begins to speak to them. And not only that, but the glory of the Lord shines all about them. Now, we read that phrase, and we've seen it rehearsed in Christmas plays with little children. But have you ever thought about what that meant? The glory of the Lord shone round about them. We read about the glory of the Lord back in the book of Exodus.

If you have your Bibles, turn there with me to Exodus chapter 33. Just hold your place here in Luke chapter 2. And go back with me to Exodus chapter 33.

[5 : 56] And while you're turning, let me set the stage for what you're about to read. Moses has led the children of Israel out of Egypt. They come to Sinai. They sin against God.

And you remember what God said? He turned to Moses and said, Moses, you take them on. You lead them on. I'll go with you. But I'm not going. Because if I go with them, I'm fearful I will one day destroy them.

Moses has a conversation with God where he talks very frankly to God. He says, God, I didn't ask for this assignment. You've called me. I'm not going to go anywhere unless you go with us.

And then he asked a very bold thing that I suspect many of you have maybe, if you haven't asked it out loud, you've thought it. You've been praying it some time or other. And you thought to yourself, I wish I could see God.

Have you ever thought that? I mean, it's kind of hard at times to pray to this invisible God that we've never seen with our eyes. And so maybe you've thought, I wish I could just see God.

[6 : 58] I wish I could just know he's really and truly there. And so Moses says, please, Lord, let me see your glory. Look at verse 18 of chapter 33. Then Moses said, please, let me see your glory.

Here's what God said. He said, I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim the name Yahweh before you. I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion.

But he answered him, you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live. The Lord said, here's a place near me. You are to stand on the rock, and when my glory passes by, I will put you in the crevice of the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by.

Then I will take my hand away, and you will see my back, but my face will not be seen. So here's what happens. God says, Moses, you can't see my face.

If you do, you'll die. But I'm going to take you, and I'm going to place you because I want you to know me. I'm going to place you in this rock, in the crevice of the rock, and I'm going to cover you with my hand.

[8 : 08] That's hard for us to even get our heads around even that part, right? And God says, I'm going to pass by, and when I'm passed by you, I will remove my hand, and you'll see my back.

And the scripture says, the glory of the Lord shone all about Moses. Now, we know from this experience reading Luke or reading Exodus 33, Moses was never the same after that.

He went out with a confidence because he had seen the glory of God. He had never had heretofore. I'm going to tell you, when these shepherds saw the glory of the Lord, can you imagine what that's like?

It's pitch black at night. They're standing here perhaps by a fire warming themselves. Suddenly, this angel appears, and the glory of the Lord shines about them.

I'm telling you, they were absolutely awestruck. Now, how bright was that light? Well, consider this. Our sun is 93 million miles away. Scientists and doctors warn us, never look at the sun directly

because if you do, it can do irreparable damage to your eyes, right?

[9 : 18] Can you imagine how bright the glory of the Lord must be if he's the creator of the sun? How much greater his glory would be than even the bright shining sun that we see in our skyline each and every day.

And so, we're not surprised when we come to the conclusion of verse 9, and they were terrified. They were terrified.

Remember that song that was made popular a number of years ago, I Can Only Imagine? And the writer of the song is imagining what it would be to be like in the presence of the Lord. And he has some suggestions.

He said, I'll sing or I'll dance or I'll do this or the other. Let me tell you something. I do have the answer to that. When you see the glory of the Lord, I promise you, you will absolutely be terrified beyond your wildest imagination.

I can't imagine anybody not doing what John does in Revelation 1 when he fell face down when he saw the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[10 : 20] And so, these shepherds encounter the glory of the Lord. It must have been a breathtaking sight. Look, if you will, at verse 10. But the angel said to them, Don't be afraid.

For look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. And then we'll read that next part in just a moment. So, he says, Don't be afraid.

How many of you think you would have instantly said, Well, okay, I'm good at this. No. Their heart's racing. Their blood pressure is through the roof.

They can't believe what they're seeing. In fact, probably some of them are wondering, Am I dreaming? Is this an illusion? Is this a mirage? Do I really see this angel as he's speaking to me? And he says to them, Don't be afraid. I'll promise you they were afraid. In fact, they probably imagined, We've done it now.

[11 : 25] I mean, for God to show up like that, they probably, I would think, would have thought, Judgment must be about to fall on us. But the angel tries to allay their fears. He tries to bring down their heart rate.

Tries to lower their blood pressure. Don't be afraid because I bring you good news. Don't you like to get good news? I mean, that's yes and no.

Don't you like to get good news? I love getting good news. Don't you? And it's just a wonderful thing. And I'll tell you why. For 40-something years as a pastor, most of the time when I got news, it wasn't good news.

It was bad news. I don't mean that people were always in the office complaining about something. Not that kind of bad news. I'm talking about where folks would call your office and say, can I come by and see you, Pastor?

Something's happened in my life. And I just got to tell you, most of the time it wasn't good. Very few people ever got a raise and said, can I come by and tell you about my raise? Can I tell you that I just got promoted and I just want to come share that with you?

[12 : 30] Or, you know, we're expecting a baby and I just want you to be the first. Those kind of things just don't happen. Most of the time when folks call your office and they're on an appointment, they're coming because they've been hit with some bad news.

Somebody in their family is sick and dying. Or somebody in their family has developed some feared disease. Or somebody has Alzheimer's in their family.

Or somebody has been involved in an accident. Or somebody has lost a job. Or a child has gotten involved with drugs. Or they're seeing the wrong person and the parent's fearful.

They're going to marry that person. It's so oftentimes bad news that we get in life. And so I can just see the counts of these shepherds kind of change as the angel says, hey, I've got good news for you.

Look back at that verse again, if you will. But the angel said to them, don't be afraid for look, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

[13 : 33] I just got to tell you though, when somebody looks at me and they say, I've got good news. Boy, I have good news for you and you only. Today, it's your lucky day.

You know how I react to that most times because I'm a little bit skeptical? I want to put my hand on my wallet. Because I think, okay, you've got good news for me, do you? It's going to be good news for you if I'm buying what you're selling.

But it's not necessarily going to be good news for me, right? We're a little bit standoffish. We're a little bit skeptical of folks who just say, boy, do I have the deal for you. I've got great, great news for you.

And I'm wondering if that's maybe what those shepherds thought. But then he goes on to say something else. It will be for all the people. And then he tells them why in verse 11.

Look at verse 11. Today, a Savior who is Messiah, the Lord, was born for you in the city of David. Now look up and I want you to listen and think about something you may have never thought about. [14:35] Maybe you have, but maybe you've never thought about in this perspective. To you and I, this side of the cross, if an angel appeared to us today, just a few days before Christmas and said, hey, I just want to come and confirm what happened many years ago.

I've got good news for you. A Savior has been born and he rehearsed that same message he gave to those shepherds. It would be good news for all of us because we know the whole story. But to those shepherds, when they were thinking about a Messiah coming, they weren't thinking about a Messiah the way you and I think about a Messiah.

We think about one sin to save us from our sins. But when they thought about a Messiah, they thought about a political military leader who would come and oust the Romans.

The Greeks had first taken control of Judah and later the Romans had overthrown the Greeks and they had been an occupied country for a couple hundred years.

And so in a way it's good news if the Romans are cast out and the Hebrew people take control of their own country again. But remember what I said about those shepherds?

[15:44] They're not big shots in the community. They're not bankers or doctors or lawyers or folks of means in the community. They're the lowly ones in the community.

And I've got news for you and you probably have difficulty unless that's the category of life you find yourself. If a political body changes from one government to another, to the little guy, it just don't make a whole lot of difference.

You understand that? I'm going to be paying my taxes just a matter of if I pay my taxes to the Romans or if I pay my tax to the Hebrew people. But life for me may be grand for you, may mean new opportunities for you, but for me, a little guy, not such a big deal.

Unless, unless this Messiah was going to be something different than they had ever anticipated in the past. And that's exactly the case here in verse 11 and verse 12.

Look with me again to the scripture. Today a Savior who is Messiah, the Lord, was born for you in the city of David. And the Messiah this angel was talking about was not a political soldier type who was going to overthrow the Romans.

[16:59] He was rather a spiritual Savior. And look at what verse 12 says. This will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped snugly in cloth and lying in a manger.

Now the angel gives him a means of affirming everything he said. Because I got to tell you, these shepherds, they had to be skeptical. I mean, are we dreaming this?

Is this real? Is this really happening? Is this message true? The Messiah has come and he's been born. And so they're wondering about all these things. And the angel suddenly says, this will be a sign for you.

And he tells them exactly how to confirm everything he said. Now I'm not an FBI agent. And I'm not a tracker.

But I'm going to tell you, Bethlehem is a little bitty town. I've been to Bethlehem. It's a bedroom community of Jerusalem. And Ralph, without being a tracker, without knowing how to find folk necessarily the way the FBI do, I could have found that baby.

[18:05] Because they've just given me a road map. They say you go to this little town over here. You're not far from it at all. And you find a stable. And there in the stable you'll find a lady who's given birth to a baby.

And they even tell you how the baby's clothed. They've wrapped him in cloth. He's not going to be in a onesie. He's not in one of those cute little outfits that women dress their babies in to bring them home from the hospital.

He won't have on pink or blue or any of that. But you'll know it. He'll be wrapped in cloth and he's lying in a feeding trough. Now, this baby's just been born a few minutes probably ago.

Who takes a newborn baby and puts them in a dirty feeding trough? But that's where you're going to find this baby. And so what he's doing is he's giving them a road map.

He's telling them, if you want to affirm what I'm telling you to make sure what I'm telling you is true, here's how you do it. Here's the sign I'm giving you. Look back at 13. This is where the story really changes.

[19 : 09] Suddenly, there was a multitude of the heavenly hosts with the angel, praising God and saying glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to people he favors.

So here's the shepherd. Get this picture. And you're warming yourself by the fire, and poof, out of nowhere, unexpectedly, unannounced, here's an angel.

And suddenly, the darkness turns to brilliant light. And the angel says to you, don't be afraid. I've got good news for you. Today in the city of Bethlehem, not far from here, there's a Savior been born.

Here's how you're going to find him. You'll go find a stable. Look in the barn. There in a feeding trough is going to be this little baby. And just about that time, there is now not one angel or two angels or ten angels, but a multitude of angels.

You're these four or five shepherds sitting here by the fire. And there is a multitude of an army of angels. They're to your left and they're to the right, and they're behind you and they're in front of you.

[20 : 22] They're everywhere, and they're all praising God. It's saying, glory to God in the eyes. In other words, may God receive the glory that he rightfully deserves.

The world has never done that. Given God his due, paid him the respect and the tribute he rightfully deserves. But these angels, that's exactly what they're doing.

They're declaring the glory of God in God. Here's the glory that you rightfully do deserve. Have you ever thought about he's the creator of everything? We have ever seen.

All humanity needs to praise the Lord. And the created order needs to praise the Lord. And even the rock should cry out in praise to the Lord.

And so these angels, they began praising God. Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to people he favors. Now this peace that these angels declare is coming to these shepherds and to all humanity.

[21 : 26] It's not the kind of peace they've enjoyed in the past. They've enjoyed a peace. Those of you who've had Western civilization in college, you know this. They talk about Pax Romana. That's Roman peace.

It was the peace the Romans afforded many nations. And so a lot of people liked to be occupied by the Romans because it meant they could travel unharmed. They were protected in their businesses.

But that protection and that peace came at a price. They were heavily taxed by the Romans. And those soldiers would sometimes abuse their power. But that's not the kind of peace that the angels are declaring that these shepherds and others are one day going to know.

The kind of peace they're talking about is a peace that is not brought to us by soldiers who take away our enemies. But rather a peace that comes to us when we come into right relationship with God.

That peace that allows us to be at peace with God and not at enmity with God. And you know right here in the room with this many people, I know as sure as I'm standing here, there's some of you this morning that you know what that's about.

[22 : 32] You know what it's about this morning to not be at peace with God. Some of you have difficulty with God this very moment while I stand here preaching to you. Some of you are angry with God or you're on the outs with God or you've sinned in your life.

Instead of coming clean with God and confessing that sin, you've allowed a barrier to be erected between you and God. And you pray and you feel as though your prayers don't get any higher than the sea. And what this angel is saying, what these angels are saying is this.

He has been born today that you could really end this cold war between you and God. He's come that you could have real lasting peace in a right relationship with God the Father.

Look, if you will, again at the Scripture. Verse 15, When the angels had left them, they returned to heaven. And the shepherds said to one another, Let's go straight to Bethlehem and see what has happened, which the Lord has made known, underscore that, has made known to us.

So here's what happens. They're standing there. I can see they look like a deer in headlights. Don't you think? They're just trying to take all this in. They're stupefied. Their minds just blown by

everything they've seen and heard.

[23 : 49] Suddenly, the light is gone. The angels have disappeared. It's just these lowly shepherds standing here. Now, what do you think they're thinking? You know what I think they'd be thinking? I think they're thinking, I wonder if he just saw what I saw.

Did you? Yeah, I did. I did. What do you make of that? Pretty soon, one of them says, You know what? Why are we standing here?

Let's go see for ourselves. And they drop what they're doing. They forget those sheep. And they're off lickety split to Bethlehem.

Now, when they get to Bethlehem, what are they going to find? Well, the Scripture tells us. Look again at the very next verse. After seeing them, excuse me, verse 16, they hurried off and found both Mary and Joseph and the baby who was lying in the feeding trough.

They get to Bethlehem. They go perhaps to one stable, maybe two stables. They open the door. It's dark inside. There's no movement. Shut the door. Go to the next stable.

[25 : 04] Finally, they come to this stable. They open the door. It's dark inside. Nothing moving. But somebody says, Looks like there's a faint light back there in that last stall.

So they walk in. And the closer they get to the light, the softer they walk, the more gingerly they walk until finally they're here at the opening of the stall. And they get to the edge of the stall and I can see one of them just kind of look around the edge.

And there it is by that torch. There's a young woman and her husband and a feeding trough and a brand-newborn baby wrapped in cloths.

Boy, can you imagine the excitement they found? Can you put yourself in their place and say, What would that have been like? I'm sure every one of them gathered around that baby, maybe reached down and touched that.

Can we touch your baby? Don't you imagine that's what they'd say? Somebody might have been bold enough to say, Could I hold your baby? They just marvel at this baby.

[26 : 14] They've never seen anything like this. But the big thing is this. This is an answer to prayer. This is an answer to what they have hoped for when those angels came and announced that all this would be the case.

Look, if you will, at verse 17 and 18. After seeing them, they reported the message they were told about this child. And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

You know what's amazing to me about that? These shepherds were guys who I guarantee you most folk didn't go to to get the latest news. They were considered gossips.

They were considered a little bit superstitious. They were in an entry-level job. Nobody turned to shepherds for their news. But this day, they were all ears.

Because when the shepherds came and began telling them about what they'd found in that stable and all that had happened with those angels, people believed them. You know why?

[27 : 16] Because they said it with an enthusiasm that they'd never seen before. Have you ever had somebody tell you something that was just absolutely so incredible that seemed it couldn't possibly be true?

But the way they said it and the way they looked and the conviction in their voice just said to you, boy, I don't get that.

But I believe they believed that with all their heart. I think that's how those people they went and told responded to those shepherds. They just, the look in their face, the sound of their voice, the excitement with which they told that, all who heard it, they thought, man, they saw that baby.

Today, the Messiah has been born. I want you to see this little short video. It's my favorite of all the videos we've shown. And then I want to say just a word and we're closed. It was a night like any other night except for that angel.

Ain't seen nothing like it before or since. Us shepherds, we don't get a lot of excitement out there on the pasture. But that angel, it was so bright, so beautiful.

[28 : 37] I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, Sam, you've been out in that pasture just a little bit too long. And you'd be correct. But that all changed when that angel came right up to us.

And the angel said, don't be afraid. I was like, too late. And then the angel said, no, I wrote it down. I need to get this right. Hold on. Okay.

The angel said, milk, bread, no, that's my grocery list. Then the angel said, I have good news of a great joy that should be for all the people for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior,

which is Christ the Lord.

And then the angel said, he's lying in a manger wrapped in cloth. Go find him. Okie dokie. So we're all sitting around and then one of the shepherds, the thing was Steve, he's like, hey, what are we doing?

Let's get out of here. Let's go to Bethlehem. So we hightailed it out of there and we found that beautiful baby. I'll tell you, I was a different man after that.

[29 : 49] God chose me. Nobody's ever chosen me for anything. I'll never forget what that angel said, though.

The angel said, I bring good news to all people. That means you too. Part of that video, and I can't tell you how many times I've seen that video.

Part of the video I like the most is when he looks in the camera and he says, God chose us. He chose me. And nobody's ever chosen me before. Does that move your heart the way it does mine? When I was a young pastor at Brushy Creek Baptist Church, my next door neighbor was a doctor, Lynn Hammond. He's recently retired. He had two little kids at the time.

Lindsey, his daughter was about five, I think, and his little boy was about three years old. We became fast friends. I mean, I can just tell you stories of me and Austin, especially when he was growing up.

[31 : 01] He would come to the house. I've always liked the outdoors, and so I took him the first time he went fishing. Took him hunting the first time he ever went hunting. Showed him how to clean the turkey. We just had a great time together.

Always been close. Asked me to do his wedding a couple years before I retired. Went up to a pretty place and did his wedding. And after I retired about two years, he calls me one day and he says, Pastor, this is Austin.

I got some good news for you. And it's something though you can't tell anybody. You just got to keep it to yourself. but I want you to be the first to know. And I said, what's that? And he says, me and my wife Jessica, we're going to have a baby.

He says, but I've told most of my family, all my family doesn't know yet, but you just got to keep that under your hat, will you? Well, I felt like me. It's great to be the first to know something, isn't it? Don't we all, I know you women like that, right?

Everybody likes to be the first to know something good. It gives you power. It's like, boy, I know something you don't know. I still want to tell you, and I can see those shepherds when they heard that good news, they confirmed it by seeing the baby.

[32 : 12] You know what they thought to themselves, I believe? And come to the banker of the first union, then come to the renowned surgeon here in Bethlehem, then come to the leading salesman for the real estate company, came to me.

He came and told me, a shepherd, who would have ever guessed? Who would have ever guessed? And it's not how we do it today, right? You get some big celebrity saying, my son has been born to the world.

But God in his infinite wisdom says, no, let's let those shepherds be the first to know. Let's let them go and tell the world that a Savior has been born. I close by telling you this, you've been chosen too.

When you came to faith in Christ, he chose you to be his child. And he chose you to be a messenger of this good news to go and tell the world. What bugs me a little bit about Christians, and it's true of me as well, we're the ones who harp all the time.

Jesus is the reason for the season. Keep Christ in Christmas. But how many people have you told this Christmas season about the fact that they have hope and they have peace and they have a Savior in the Lord Jesus Christ?

[33 : 37] So today, when you leave, leave in your mind just resolved. Before Christmas, I'm going to share with some folk out there who may not know Jesus that he's what this is all about and through him, they can have peace with God.

They can be at peace with God. Would you do that? Let's stand and Brian's going to lead us in a hymn. Amen. Albanian ENDY FELI?"