

Sermon preached at Woodbury Community Church, Woodbury, MN on Sunday,
December 25, 2011, by Rev. Brian D. Schulenburg

LUKE 2:12-20

20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

WHEN HOPE WAS BORN #5
WHAT ANGELS AND SHEPHERDS TEACH US ABOUT HOPE

Merry Christmas! What an honor it is today for us to be in church. Today we take a few moments out of what for most of us will be a day filled with family, gift giving, shared meals, and lots of fun, to focus on the true meaning of Christmas – Immanuel; God with us!

How do you feel about the evening newscast?

Some of you are indifferent to it. You can't remember the last time you even watched the evening news. Others of you can't fall asleep until you've watched the news all the way to the very end. I like the news. But, I must admit – I'm a much bigger fan of good news than I am bad news.

We can probably all recall with incredible detail where we were, how we felt, what was happening around us when we received certain bits of good news. We remember where we were when we found out we were expecting our first child. We remember what it felt like to receive the acceptance letter to the college that we hoped to attend. We remember what it was like to be a part of the winning team or what it was like to walk down the aisle and say, "I do."

And, when those things happened, did you keep the news to yourself? Of course not! You told someone; because, good news is meant to be shared! At Christmastime, 2,000 years ago, on a hillside outside of Bethlehem, some shepherds received some of the best news the world has ever received.

This morning we'll take a look at some of the greatest news that the world ever received. The event occurred over 2,000 years ago on a hillside outside of Bethlehem.

It was an unusual group of people to receive good news. Shepherds were a despised group of people. They were nomads, but didn't travel great distances. Bethlehem was probably their home base, although they would have moved from hill to hill along the countryside, looking for fresh grass for their sheep to graze on.

Do you think your job is boring? Shepherds jobs were extremely predictable. A shepherd didn't work one shift and then take the next two off. Shepherds worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week. They lived amongst the flock, away from society, and this made them social outcasts.

Being a shepherd wasn't always viewed with disdain in Israel. In Old Testament times, some of Israel's greatest heroes had served as shepherds. Men like Abel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds, some of them managing large flocks of sheep. David, the shepherd who became the king, watched his family's herd of sheep, because he was the youngest of the boys in his household. Tending to the family's flock of sheep was considered a job that a young boy or girl could handle. That is not to say that there wasn't danger involved with the occupation, for a reading of the Old Testament will tell you about David's encounters with a bear and a lion as he protected his father's flock.

By the time the New Testament writings begin, shepherds were considered the lowest class of people. Like lepers, shepherds were relegated to the outskirts of the town. They were not welcome to worship with the rest of Israel because they were considered unclean. Not only were they considered ceremonially unclean, they were also considered filthy. It was not uncommon for shepherds to go days without bathing. So despised were they that the Talmud had a law which said, "No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds."¹ The reason? Because, shepherds were considered thieves. They had a reputation for being thieves. There are countless stories about fights that would break out between shepherds because they stole each other's animals. A good shepherd knew exactly what all of his sheep looked like, and he didn't take too kindly to his sheep being stolen.

Shepherds slept with the flock. It was common for a group of shepherds to sleep in the same field. The sheep would share the same grazing land. There was usually an entrance to the area where the sheep were. One shepherd would sleep at the entrance. Others would sleep amongst the flock and along the perimeter of the grazing area. This was how they kept the flock safe. And, this is what was happening on that night so long ago.

Look at Luke 2:8.

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

It was just another night, tending to their flocks in the hills outside of Bethlehem. Perhaps they talked about King David; after all, these hills may have been the very same hills where David tended to his sheep. The shepherds may have even been talking about Messiah. The promise of Messiah would have been especially sweet to a group of societal outcasts. "When Messiah came, everything would be different," was the viewpoint of many of those living in Israel at the time. It's still the viewpoint of Orthodox Jews. It could have been that the shepherds were not talking at all. They may have just been sleepy, attending to the flock that always needed tending to. Sheep are stupid animals and they can easily find themselves in trouble. And then, out of nowhere, it happened. Look at verse nine.

¹ Brian Bill, "The Shepherds' Joy About Jesus," a sermon preached at Pontiac Bible Church on December 17, 2006, p. 1.

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 of great joy that will be for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ 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,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

It must have been a terrifying, mysterious, wonderful sight. I'm sure they were stunned. Things like this don't happen – ever! I can say with confidence today, that not one of the shepherds expected to find themselves in the company of Heaven's warriors. Not one of those shepherds expected to be greeted by one angel, let alone a host of angels! I've been surprised in my life and terrified when things have jumped out at me in the dark. These guys had to be petrified. You know that you would have been too!

The Greek word for angel is angelos. It literally means messenger. The angel of the Lord had very good news to share with the shepherds. He was bringing what was up to that time, the greatest message ever given to mankind. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord."

I picture the angel saying that with such excitement, such wonder, such awe and such power! The Lord had come. The angel knew Christ. Jesus was the One the angel worshipped. The Son of God had come to earth! The shepherds had no idea how wonderful this news was. Jesus, Whom angels serve and worship had come to Bethlehem, in the helpless form of an infant, to become the Savior and the servant of the world. He, whom angels worship, was coming to serve despised shepherds. He was coming to offer salvation. He was coming to give his life for shepherds who no one gave any regard to! He was coming for you and He was coming for me! Christ the Lord had arrived and with him came hope for the entire world!

There was a tradition in first century Israel. When a boy was born, the local musicians would gather at the home of the child to greet him with music. It was normally a simple choir and a few instruments. But, Jesus wasn't born in Nazareth. He was far from his hometown. And, he wasn't born in a home. He was born in a stable. How awesome that the very choir that sang Him praise in heaven, sang of his birth to a group of shepherds on Bethlehem's hills!

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."

Now, you'll recall that shepherds were not welcome to participate in the strict religious life of the orthodox Jew. Their job, as far as those who were orthodox were concerned, was to provide the sheep for sacrificial offerings. They were not to attend ceremonies, and they were not welcome in town. "So, why us?" the shepherds may have thought. But, they didn't doubt that God had truly revealed something special to them. They left at once to see this thing that had happened, that the Lord had told them about.

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

It was just like the angels said it would be. There, in a manger, in Bethlehem, lay a baby, His teenager mother, and His young father. A manger! It was such a humble beginning. It was such a pitiful place. It was a place . . . a place . . . a place for outcasts; a place shepherds.

If any of the shepherds had an education he may have remembered the words of Isaiah 53:3, a prophetic passage that spoke of Messiah. It says, "3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not." From the very beginning of His days on earth, Jesus knew what it meant to be an outcast. The God who was, and is, and always will be worthy of worship, was present in Bethlehem's stable; and only a few outcasts knew!

The shepherd's response to all that they had seen was to glorify and praise God. They wanted to spread the word about Jesus, but very few hearts were stirred. These were, after all, common shepherds.

Some biblical scholars speculate that these shepherds were no ordinary shepherds. Jerusalem's temple was located just miles away from Bethlehem. Every morning and every evening an unblemished lamb was offered as an atoning sacrifice on the altar at the temple. Historians tell us that a constant supply of lambs was needed to meet the demand for these sacrifices. The temple authorities had their own private supply of lambs. They were kept in fields near Bethlehem. It is possible that these shepherds were in charge of that very supply of lambs, which caused William Barclay to write, "It is a lovely thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."²

So, what about us? It should bring us great comfort to know that Jesus came for the entire world. He did not come just for the elite, the wealthy, the educated, or the

² William Barclay, "The Daily Bible Study Series: The Gospel of Luke, Revised Edition" (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Saint Andrew Press, 1975), p. 23.

sophisticated. No, Jesus came for the poor, the downtrodden, the outcast, the sinner, the failure, the hypocrite. He came for you and He came for me.

It's often the people who have so little in this world's eyes that are the first to respond to Jesus. The shepherds were truly poor. But, it went beyond being poor. They were despised. Their countrymen wanted nothing to do with them. Had it not been for the need of sacrificial lambs, the religious elite would have just ignored the shepherds. The religion of their nation offered them nothing but pain.

Aren't you glad Jesus didn't come here to bring empty religion and ritual? He came to bring life, and to bring it abundantly! May you experience the wonder of the manger this Christmas morning! May the predictability of the story be replaced with worship!

Do you know what you and I can learn from the shepherds? It's the same thing that they learned from the angels on that hilltop. Good news is worth sharing! Jesus' birth was followed by a perfect life, and He became the perfect sacrifice, satisfying the wrath of God on our behalf for our sins at Calvary. Let others know about the hope that Christ has given you.

Christmas isn't your birthday. It's Jesus' birthday! So, bring Him a gift this year. Tell Him that you'll share about Him through your life, your actions, and your words in 2012.

The shepherds and angels both knew that the only response that is appropriate when in the presence of Jesus is worship. He is here with us today. As I close, I wonder if you'd join me in singing the chorus of "Oh Come, All Ye Faithful?"

Oh, come, let us adore him,
Oh, come, let us adore him,
Oh, come, let us adore him,
Christ the Lord.