

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks

Luke 2:8-20

David Sunday

December 24, 2012

We sing a lot about angels at Christmastime and rightly so because the Apostle Peter tells us that these *“good news of great joy that will be for all the people”* (Luke 2:10) are *“things into which the angels long to look”* (1 Peter 1:12).

In his fantasy, The Visited Planet, J.B. Phillips describes the angels' amazement at the Incarnation of God the Son. A senior angel shows a very young angel the splendors of the universe. At last they come to one particular galaxy of 500 billion stars:

“As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis-ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen. ‘I want you to watch that one particularly.’ said the senior angel pointing with his finger. ‘Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,’ said the little angel. ‘What’s special about that one?’

“The little angel listened in stunned disbelief as the senior angel told him that this small, insignificant and not overly clean planet was the renowned Visited Planet.

“Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince...went down in person to this fifth-rate ball? Why should he do a thing like that?’... The little angel’s face wrinkled in disgust. ‘Do you mean to tell me,’ he said, ‘that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?’

“I do, and I don’t think that he would like you to call them creeping, crawling creatures in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, he loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them and to lift them up to become like Him.’ The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond his comprehension.”

Luke tells us that on the night of our Savior’s birth, it was the angels who were privileged to make the first proclamation of God’s visitation to our fallen planet. We read in

Luke 2:13, *"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.'"*

It was not just a few angels who filled the skies above the fields of Bethlehem that night; it was a multitude of the heavenly host. It was the whole vast army of heaven. I doubt an angel was missing from this event. The skies above Bethlehem were radiant with the splendor of God's glory bright. Heaven's army came down to our fallen, rebel planet with a surprising message from God. Not a declaration of war, but an offer of amnesty—peace on earth.

I want us to notice three things about the angelic Christmas mission tonight:

- To whom they were sent to preach
- The specific content of the message they preached
- The responses of those who heard

The Recipients of the Message

First, notice that the angels were sent to proclaim this message to *"shepherds who were out in their fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night"* (Luke 2:8).

This is significant because shepherds were not in the respectable class of society—they were low down on the ladder. Shepherds were the outcasts of Israel. They were treated as unclean; regarded as liars and thieves. Their testimony was inadmissible in a court of law. They were despised, competing with the lepers for the lowest-class of men in Israel. But these shepherds were the men God chose to be the first to hear the good news of Jesus' birth. Working-class sinners, desperately in need of grace.

That's good news for us. We fear that Jesus is only a Savior for good people, for religious people, for the respectable people of the world. But the Christmas story tells us that Jesus is a Savior Who brings *"good news of great joy that will be for all the people"* (Luke 2:10)—for the unclean, outcasts and those who have failed. If you are convinced of your need for Him, Jesus is committed to being a Savior for you. He does not run from our smelliness. He runs to us. He comes down into our muck and mire. He embraces us just as we are.

Don't think you can hide your sin from Jesus. Don't imagine that you need to do so. Don't try to mask the stench of your sin by spraying on the cheap fragrance of your own

good works. Come to Jesus just as you are—He can handle your sin. It is precisely for this reason He came into the world: to save us from our sins.

The Content of the Message

Secondly, notice the message the angels proclaimed to these shepherds. They proclaimed Jesus is *“a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:11).

The Shepherds would have known about saviors. This was a common word back then, kind of like how we use the word “Godsend.” If you pull over and help someone fix a flat tire alongside a busy highway, they might say, “Oh, you were a Godsend to me.” That’s how a lot of people view Jesus. You know, someone to help you out in a pinch. “What a Godsend.”

But literally that is true of Jesus! *“When the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under (in slavery to) the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Galatians 4:4-5). He was sent by God to be our Savior. And if that is true—if God sent Him to us—you must understand that He alone can save us for *“there is no other Name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved”* (Acts 4:12). He is the Savior—the Only Savior.

The angel reinforces this by adding two other titles: Christ and Lord. This is the only place in the New Testament where you’ll find these three titles combined in one verse: Savior, Christ and Lord. Jesus our Savior is the Christ, the anointed King, the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Scriptures. And He is the Lord, the one true God of the universe, the One Who claimed in Isaiah, *“Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the LORD, and besides me there is no savior”* (Isaiah 43:10-11).

The Bible doesn’t just give Jesus a significant place in history, it puts Jesus at the center of history, in the highest, preeminent place. He is the one true God and He is the only way to Heaven. And the wonder of wonders that fills the angels with amazement is that even though He is the only Person Who ever got to plan the circumstances of His own birth, He planned to come into our world not in majestic splendor, but in great weakness, humility and poverty: *“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:12).

The angels are filled with astonishment that He Who is the highest should become the lowest; that the Infinite should become finite; that the Ancient of Days should become

an infant. They were amazed that He should be born in a stable and laid in a manger—a feeding trough for animals. This causes all the angels of heaven to come down and fill the skies with a fanfare of adoration, crying out "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased*" (Luke 2:14).

Take note what comes first: "*Glory to God in the highest*" comes before "*peace on earth.*" I think this order is very important.

Last week I was crossing the Fox River at the Wilson Street Bridge in Batavia and was pleased to see a big sign over one of the other bridges that read *Peace on Earth*. It's much rarer to see signs out in public that read *Glory to God in the Highest*. Let me know if you ever see that posted on one of our public buildings. We are eager to see peace on earth; but we'd like to achieve it without having to give glory to God. Until we realize that the only way to peace is through the path that God has graciously provided in Jesus Christ, until we bow down before Jesus Who lived the perfect life we have failed to live and Who died the death that we deserve to die on the Cross to save us from our sins—we will never know peace on earth. We'll never know peace in our own hearts. The Bible says, "*Therefore, having been justified by faith* (having been declared righteous by God through trusting in Jesus), *we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ*" (Romans 5:1). Jesus is the only way to peace.

So God is showing favor to all people right now by offering an amnesty of peace to everyone who will turn from sin and trust in the one and only Savior God has sent into the world, our Lord Jesus Christ. What will your response be?

The Response to the Message

Notice **first**, the shepherds acted upon what they had heard. Luke 2:15 says, "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.'" They didn't stay in their fields marveling at what the angels had told them; they went and saw for themselves.

Likewise, you have heard the message of Christmas but have you ever done anything to see for yourself whether or not it is true? Have these words taken root in your heart?

Second, they did not delay in responding. The Bible says, *“And they went with haste”* (Luke 2:16) to find the baby Jesus. No debates; no delays. They went immediately.

Some people do a lot of talking about spiritual things but they never go looking for Jesus themselves. You've heard it said, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions"—and every Christmas there are people who think, “Once the holidays are over, I'm going to find out more about Jesus. I'm going to go to church or get involved in a Bible study.” But their interest in Jesus quickly fades because their faith has no roots—just like the Christmas trees that look so pretty in our houses right now but will be out for the garbage collectors in a week or two. That's the way many people's interest in Jesus is.

Will you follow the shepherd's example and respond to Jesus immediately, without delay, even tonight? Could there be a better time to begin a relationship with Jesus Christ than on the eve of His birth—to have Him be born in you tonight by responding by faith to the gift God has given. You can experience that new birth tonight.

Third, notice that the shepherds fled to Bethlehem and they *“found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger”* (Luke 2:16). This took some searching. They had to look for Jesus and they searched until they found Him. Likewise, God invites us to seek Him in His Word. He assures us, *“When you search for me, you will find me; if you seek me with all your heart”* (Jeremiah 29:13). Jesus Himself said, *“Seek, and you will find”* (Matthew 7:7).

Fourth, once they found Jesus, the first thing they did was tell others about Him: *“And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child”* (Luke 2:17).

A true test of whether or not the Christmas message has sunk into your heart is whether or not you keep it to yourself. It is true for all who have truly found the Savior that we **must** tell others what we have seen and heard about Him. We cannot keep it to ourselves. You know that you get the meaning of Christmas when you cannot keep quiet about it.

Finally, their encounter with Jesus filled their lives afresh with worship. Their daily lives would never be the same after that night with those angels and at that manger, beholding that Child. They returned to their work in the fields with a new resolve, in all they said and did, to bring glory to God: *“And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them”* (Luke 2:20).

Likewise may we follow the shepherds' example. Not only on this holy evening but every day of our lives, may we glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen in the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. As it has been told us in the gospel, may we tell others.

Before there will ever be "*peace on earth*" in this world of turmoil, what must come first? "*Glory to God in the highest.*" May He receive glory from us, not just tonight but every day of this coming new year and forever and ever. Amen.

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All Scriptures quoted directly from the English Standard Version unless otherwise noted.

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