

Glorifying God
Luke 2:8-20
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I came across a report out of Ludington, Michigan describing how a church just unveiled its new Sleep Number seating for congregants, becoming the first church in the nation to offer personalized, adjustable sleep options for members. Here's part of the article...

While many churches force you to try to get comfortable on a hard pew or chair, this church wants to revolutionize the way you sleep during a service. Attendees entering the building will be handed their own wireless remote.

“Finally, you can adjust your pew to the optimal level of resistance and incline for conking out during the pastor’s message,” said a deacon as he demonstrated his favorite Sleep Number in the back row.

“Oh yeah, right there—that’s perfect,” he muttered as he drifted off to sleep.

Ushers will also make a circuit around the room passing out blindfolds and earplugs, in case the sermon is too distracting.

Several people tagged me in this post. I'm not quite sure what to make of that. Before you put in your request for one of these seats in our renovated sanctuary, I should tell you this is satire from the Babylon Bee. I know that's disappointing to some of you.

Some of us are so comfortable with the Christmas account it makes us a bit sleepy. Because our culture has sentimentalized this season, it's easy to skim along on a superficial level, stressing about all the things to do, while neglecting the Nativity. It reminds me of the little girl who misquoted John 3:16: “*For God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten Son.*”

Has Christmas become too predictable, too familiar, too forgotten? Have you heard the Christmas narrative so much it no longer astonishes you? Actually, this can be a dangerous time of the year for us. Our annual celebration of Christmas can immunize us to its reality. We hear just enough about the events to inoculate us against the real thing, so we never really catch true Christmas fever.

I find it extremely interesting God chose to send the birth announcement about His Son in the middle of the night to some shepherds. They might have been sleepy but they were not asleep.

Throughout Israel's, shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this job, followed by Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David. God calls Himself a shepherd and we're compared to sheep, which is anything but a compliment. By the time we come to the first century, shepherding has lost its luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of lepers. The Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations from the rabbis, says this: "*No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.*"

In order to understand how unusual it was to have the angels make an appearance to these simple shepherds, let's learn a bit about them:

- **Considered ceremonially unclean.** Because of the nature of their work they were unable to attend any religious services.
- **Isolated and forgotten.** Because their flocks needed to move around to find new grass and fresh water, they never stayed in one place for long.
- **Treated with contempt and mistrust.** They were often suspected of stealing from others. Their testimony was never allowed in court because they were so unreliable.
- **Known to be brash and bold.** Living out in the fields away from society made them unappealing to most people. Most had foul mouths and were accustomed to fighting.

God entrusted the greatest message ever sent from heaven to a bunch of smelly shepherds. Actually, that isn't so unusual, is it? God has always worked wonders for the little, the least and the lost. If you were to read through Luke's entire narrative you would see he emphasizes how Jesus came for the marginalized, the poor, the forgotten and the outcasts.

Last week we established this truth: *God moves us through a specific process so we can make spiritual progress.* We unpacked the specific process Mary went through which led her to make spiritual progress – we looked at the *facts* of her life, the *fear* in her heart, the *fascination* in her mind, the *faith* of her will and the *focus* of her words.

The shepherds also went through a process. I see five steps they took.

1. Worked faithfully. The first thing we see about these shepherds is they were attentive to their jobs. Listen to Luke 2:8: ***“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.”*** They were so committed to their career they never left their jobs. They not only worked the third shift, they pulled the first and second as well. This was a 24/7 deal for them.

The shepherds didn't have any sleep-number seating, since they were ***“keeping watch.”*** This literally means, *“watching watches.”* In doing a word study of the phrase ***“keeping watch,”*** I came across this background information.

Near Bethlehem, on the road to Jerusalem, was a tower known as Migdal Eder, or “the watch-tower of the flock.” This was where shepherds watched the flocks destined for sacrifice in the temple. It was a settled conviction among the Jews that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem, and equally that he was to be revealed from Migdal Eder.

Isn't it intriguing the “Lamb of God” was born in the area set aside for sheep to be sacrificed? My mind goes to Hebrews 10:10: ***“We have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.”*** Also I find it fascinating that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, the city of King David, fulfilling a 700-year-old prophecy from Micah 5:2: ***“But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.”***

The King in the Cradle is the sacrificial substitute for our sins. Jesus is the Good Shepherd according to John 10:11: ***“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.”*** John the Baptist declared in John 1:29, He is the ***“Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!”*** Even at His birth, Jesus is seen as *Sovereign and Sacrifice.*

Don't miss this. God came to those who were attentive to the jobs they were given to do. They weren't sleepy slackers. According to a CareerBuilder's survey of over 2,000 hiring managers and HR professionals, the top two qualities companies look for in employees are the ability to work hard and dependability.

Are you working hard? Can others depend on you? Are you keeping watch where you work? Listen. Whatever God has called you to do, be attentive to it and do it with excellence. Colossians 3:23-24: ***“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.”***

Friend, no matter what kind of job you have, you are not insignificant to Immanuel. He will meet you right where you are as you work faithfully at what He's called you to do. You don't have to clean yourself up on your own or act like someone you're not. If you smell like a shepherd, let Jesus wash you up. If your sins are wiping you out, allow Jesus to put you back together.

2. Wondered fearfully. While they were working faithfully at the responsibilities they were given, the shepherds were suddenly awed by an angelic announcement in Luke 2:9: ***“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.”*** God meets us where we are but then He brings us to our knees.

God's Shekinah glory lights up the sky and they shake in their sandals. The word ***“appeared”*** can refer to a sudden assault. This narrative is designed to impress upon us the sudden and unexpected arrival of Adonai's angel on this silent night. For the first time in centuries, the glory of God has returned to earth! The cry expressed in Isaiah 64:1 is being answered: ***“Oh that you would rend the heavens and come down!”***

Maybe the shepherds were terrified because they didn't know if this was an angel of judgment or not. Perhaps they were worried their sins were catching up with them and they were about to be vaporized. I wonder if Judges 13:22 was in their minds: ***“We shall surely die, for we have seen God.”***

To be ***“sore afraid”*** (as quoted in the KJV by Linus in Charlie Brown's Christmas) or ***“greatly afraid”*** literally means, ***“to fear with great fear.”*** Whenever we come face-to-face with God's holiness, how can we not but fall apart because of our sinfulness? Peter had a similar response in Luke 5:8 when he said to Jesus: ***“Get away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man.”***

I wonder, when's the last time you wondered fearfully? Do you marvel at the Messiah? Has it been awhile since you hit your knees before Him?

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3. Welcomed favorably. After the faithful shepherds were filled with fear, they favorably welcomed the message of good news of great joy in Luke 2:10: ***“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.’”***

Isn't it interesting how fear is the normal human reaction to angelic encounters?

- Zechariah – ***“And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him.”*** (Luke 1:12)
- Mary – ***“But she was greatly troubled at the saying...”*** (Luke 1:29)
- Joseph – ***“Joseph, son of David do not fear...”*** (Matthew 1:20)

The word ***“behold”*** means, *“Look now!”* I've been reflecting on the insight of Matt Papa: *“Christianity's first call is not 'Behave!' but 'Behold!'”* Here's what I wrote down: *“Christianity is not simply moralism. Once we behold, we will believe...and then we'll behave.”*

The angel tells them to chill out because he is bringing good news of ***“great joy.”*** The Greek word here is *“mega”* which means exceedingly, large, loud and mighty. It's a superlative of greatest degree. Wycliffe translates it this way: *“I evangelize to you a great joy.”* In Luke, joy is often linked to salvation. We received a Christmas card several years ago that captures the sense of this scene: *“May your steps jingle with delight and anticipation this time of year!”*

We must remember this message ***“will be for all people.”*** That's why we get to know our neighbors and seek ways to share Christ at work and why we reach out to refugees and give gifts to Operation Christmas Child and support over 80 missionaries. Our Christmas Eve services are designed with your friends and family members in mind who don't yet know Christ.

Verse 11 contains the heart of the birth announcement: ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”*** Notice the three words used to describe this baby born in Bethlehem:

- **Savior.** He came to save us from our sins. The name Jesus means the one who saves.
- **Christ.** This is “The anointed one” or “Messiah” in Hebrew.
- **Lord.** This title is the Hebrew word Adonai and refers to “Master or Owner.” It speaks of His total possession and my absolute submission. As we learned last week from the model of Mary, we must demonstrate *submissive servanthood and unconditional obedience.*

The shepherds are told what to look for in verse 12: ***“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”***

God thought it necessary to give them a sign because of the extraordinary nature of the message they had just received.

This sign actually has two parts...

- **Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.** Strips of cloth were wrapped around newborns to hold their arms and legs still so they could sleep. Max Lucado refers to the baby as “Deity in diapers.” Interestingly, the body of Jesus would one day be wrapped in strips of cloth for His burial. He entered the world bound and He will exit it bound. Revelation 19:13 says when He returns He’ll be wearing a robe dipped in blood. Let’s admire the cradle but be quick to move to the cross and get ready for His return when He’s wearing a crown!
- **Lying in a manger.** While it was common to see babies swaddled in cloths it would have been very unusual to find a newborn in a manger. After a heavenly explosion of God’s glory, a wrapped-up baby in a feeding trough would definitely get their attention.

Suddenly a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God in a thunderous chorus as they cry out in verse 14, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*** The coming of Jesus is when heaven kisses earth as the glory of God extends grace to those out of place.

Our earth is sure in need of peace, isn’t it? According to a new USA Today poll, *“Americans agree that the nation is divided. Beyond that, they don’t agree on much.”* After reading this I came across a quote from Tim Keller: *“Christians should be fanning out into the world being peacemakers, agents of reconciliation among the races and classes, among the members of families, and between neighbor and neighbor.”*

Job 38:7 tells us angels praised God at creation and now they are praising Him for the creation of the incarnation. In Luke 15:7 the angels also burst into praise when a sinner becomes a new creation: ***“Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”***

We know the shepherds welcome the message favorably because in verse 15 we read, ***“Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.”***

Have you favorably welcomed the message and allowed the word of God to work in you? God's good news is a gift that must be received if you want it to be activated in your life. It's one thing to say you accept it; it's another to actually act on it. Knowing must lead to growing.

God moves us through a specific process so we can make spiritual progress.

After working faithfully, the shepherds wondered fearfully and then they welcomed favorably. The next step in their process was they witnessed frequently.

4. Witnessed frequently. The shepherds went to see so they could witness what had taken place. Look at Luke 2:16: ***“And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.”*** The idea behind ***“haste”*** is ***“come on, hurry up, let's go!”*** This is the first Christmas rush! This is pretty amazing because normally shepherds were slow and patient men to keep from scaring the sheep.

The Bible is clear that faith must lead to action, or as James 2:17 says: ***“So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead.”*** They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to mobilize and then they moved.

- **They went and witnessed.** The first thing they did was bounce to Bethlehem so they could see the baby with their own eyes. The word ***“found”*** means, ***“to find after a thorough search.”*** A baby born in a smelly stable would not have been a problem to men who were used to the scent of sheep.

Check out these ironies. First, unclean shepherds came to a stable to see the Holy of Holies lying on a bed of hay. Second, shepherds leave their sheep behind to visit the Lamb of God. Third, a millennium earlier, David kept watch over his father's sheep in this same pasture and now these shepherds see the Son of David born in the City of David. Fourth, the shepherds are captivated by the Creator born as a creature. All this makes me think of 1 Timothy 3:16: ***“Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh.”***

- **They left as witnesses.** Look at verse 17: ***“And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.”*** The phrase, ***“made known”*** means to ***“make known in such a way that people can understand.”*** We're here today because they couldn't keep

quiet! They didn't hang around the manger because they knew they were now managers of the message.

Verse 18 describes how the people responded, "***And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.***" To "***wonder***" means, "*to be amazed and astonished*" and is used 12 times in Luke to show people's response to Jesus. Are you astonishingly amazed when you consider what Christ has done?

Notice the message they shared had nothing to do with adoring the amazing angels. Also, there's no reference to Mary's magnificence or of them worshipping her. My guess is Joseph was barely noticed. They came to see the *Savior* and now they head out to herald the good news about *Him*.

If you are not saved yet, you need to come and see the Savior. If you are saved, it's time to leave and share the Savior with others. In what ways is God calling you to witness frequently? It's not enough just to say you have faith, or to feel good about something; there comes a time after seeing, that we must be involved in sharing.

God moves us through a specific process so we can make spiritual progress. I see one more step in the process God took the shepherds through...

5. Worshipped fondly. The shepherds went back to their same jobs but they weren't the same on the inside. They returned to where they started and worked faithfully but now they are worshipping fondly. Their extraordinary experience does not make them withdraw from the work God gave them to do.

We see this in Luke 2:20: "***And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.***" They don't just wonder about what they saw, they worship Him whom they saw. In one sense, they're taking the place of the angels as they now glorify and praise God. Interestingly, the word "***praise***" is often associated with singing so it's quite possible the shepherds break into song as they recount what they just experienced.

A clear evidence of conversion is always adoration. Unfortunately many of us *worship our work, work at our play and play at our worship.* When a person is genuinely saved he or she will seek to bring glory to God and praise Him for who He is and what He has done. This Christmas allow yourself to adore Immanuel as you glorify and praise Him for all you have seen and heard. You can return to the same place after Christmas...but not as the same person.

The shepherds were changed forever by what they saw and we can be as well if we follow their example. *God moves us through a specific process so we can make spiritual progress.*

We can profit from the process they went through.

- **Work faithfully**
- **Wonder fearfully**
- **Welcome favorably**
- **Witness frequently**
- **Worship fondly**

While we don't have plans to have sleep number seating in our renovated sanctuary, I wonder if some of us are spiritually asleep? Perhaps God has used this sermon as a spiritual wake-up call. God longs to rouse us from lethargy so we are wide-awake to His plans and purposes.

I found four verses of Scripture that call us out of sleep. Let's draw some principles from them.

1. **Wake up and stand up.** Isaiah 51:17: *“Wake yourself, wake yourself, stand up, O Jerusalem, you who have drunk from the hand of the LORD the cup of his wrath, who have drunk to the dregs the bowl, the cup of staggering.”*
2. **It's time to rise and shine.** Ephesians 5:14: *“Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.”*
3. **Stay awake and aware.** 1 Thessalonians 5:6: *“So then, let us not sleep, as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober.”* We're more into comfort than counting the cost. We'd rather coast than commit.
4. **Stop sleeping and be saved.** Romans 13:11: *“Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.”*

Christmas is real history but it must become *your* story. Luke loved to celebrate that Jesus came to save sleepy sinners. Luke 19:10: *“For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost.”*

Listen to Luke 2:11 one more time: “*For unto you* [personal] *is born this day* [respond today, right now] *in the city of David a Savior*, [one who forgives sin] *who is Christ* [the anointed one] *the Lord*. [Master and leader]”

I close with three questions:

- Is He “Savior” to you?
- Is He “Christ” to you?
- Is He “Lord” to you?

I love what Corrie Ten Boom once said: “*If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.*” It’s time to make sure Jesus is born in you. You can do that right now by praying this prayer:

“Lord Jesus, I admit I’ve been asleep spiritually. Thank You for waking me up. I don’t understand how you can love me when I don’t measure up. I confess I am a sinner and I repent by turning from the way I’ve been living. I need You to be my Savior. Please save me from my sins and from myself. You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. I desire to live under Your lordship for the rest of my life. Thank You for not only being born but for dying in my place and rising again so I can be born again. I now receive the gift of salvation and forgiveness by asking You to come into my life. Make me into the person You want me to be by enabling me to bring glory to You and good to others. Help me to work faithfully, to wonder fearfully, to welcome favorably, to witness frequently, and worship You fondly. In the name of Immanuel, the babe in Bethlehem, I ask this. Amen.”

Closing Song: Joy to the World