

The Shepherds: Hope and Joy

Luke 2:8-20

Rev. Brian Bill

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Are you aware there are a lot of misconceptions surrounding the nativity? Most of our mental images about Christmas come from medieval art and Christmas cards. Be prepared for some push back as I dismantle some myths. For instance...

1. There's no evidence Mary rode on a donkey to Bethlehem. Luke 2:3-4 only says Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem, not how they got there.
2. The innkeeper is not mentioned in the Bible. Luke 2:7 simply says, "***there was no place for them in the inn.***"
3. Related to that, there's no record of the innkeeper saying, "*There's no room in the inn.*"
4. The Bible doesn't say Jesus was born immediately after they arrived. Luke 2:6: "***And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth.***"
5. We don't know the exact day of Jesus' birth. It's more likely He was born in the spring or fall, though it's totally fine we recognize His birth on December 25.
6. Luke 2:7 doesn't mention the ox and lamb keeping time as the little drummer boy drummed on his drum.
7. Luke 2:7 says Jesus was "***laid in a manger,***" not a wooden crib. A manger was a stone feeding trough, so maybe there were animals present, but the Bible doesn't say.
8. Even though one of our beloved carols declares, "*no crying He makes,*" it's likely baby Jesus did cry since He later wept when Lazarus died (John 11:35). In addition, Hebrews 2:17 says, "***Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.***"
9. The Bible doesn't say the angels "***sang.***" Luke 2:13 indicates the angels were "***praising God and saying...***"
10. Luke 2:7 doesn't say the angels were present at His birth, though it's likely they were.
11. Matthew 2:11 never says there were three wisemen but mentions three gifts which were given. Sorry, the Bible doesn't say they came on camels either.
12. Speaking of the wisemen, they did not arrive the night of Jesus' birth, but up to two years later. Now that messes up our manger scenes, doesn't it?

Matthew 2:11 indicates they went “*into the house*” and saw the “*child,*” which is the word for toddler.

13. Contrary to most manger scenes, the Bible doesn't state there was a star over the place where Jesus was born. Matthew 2:2, 9-10 indicates the star caused the wisemen to head out on a journey and when they got closer, the star guided them to the *house* where Jesus was.

We're continuing in our series called, “The Cast of Christmas.” So far, we've pondered how Old Testament prophecy has been fulfilled through the birth of Jesus. Last week, Pastor Ed did a super job explaining the role of angels in the Christmas narrative. For our three Christmas Eve services, we'll focus on Jesus, the main character of Christmas.

Let's come back to the shepherds. Most of us don't give them a second thought. But today, let's give them a second thought. The serene Christmas card image of sweet shepherds singing songs by the campfire is a bit exaggerated. We've sentimentalized the shepherds who were known to be ostracized, shiftless, and dishonest. They were more likely to be cussing than singing carols.

Throughout Israel's history, shepherding was a noble profession. Abel was the first to have this occupation, 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 had lost its luster. There were few jobs more demanding or degrading than a shepherd. 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: “*No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.*”

These simple shepherds were...

- **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. Because they were so unreliable, their testimony was never allowed in court.

- **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.

Don't miss this. God entrusted the greatest message ever to a bunch of salty shepherds. 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 how Jesus came for the marginalized, the poor, the forgotten and the outcasts.

As we study the shepherds today, here's what I want us to learn: *God moves us through a specific process so we can make spiritual progress.*

Luke 2 gives us God's version of a birth announcement. One pastor says, "Nowhere else in the birth narrative does God directly proclaim to anyone that Jesus was born." Listen to verses 8-12 as if for the first time. Allow yourself to be filled with awe, expectation, and wonder.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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."

I see five steps the shepherds took.

1. Attentive. 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.*" Not only did they work the third shift, but they also pulled the first and second as well. This was a 24/7 deal for them.

The phrase "**keeping watch**" literally means, "*watching watches.*" Here's the backstory.

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? 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.***" The Shepherd is also a sheep. John the Baptist declared in John 1:29, He is the "***Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world!***"

Don't miss this. God came to those who were attentive to the jobs they were given to do. They weren't sleepy slackers who were not willing to work. 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. Companies are struggling to find employees. As an example, Beth and I were doing some Christmas shopping at a store in South Park this week and we were both offered jobs on the spot!

Are you working hard? Can others depend on you? Are you keeping watch where you work? 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.***"

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.

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2. Awed. While they were attentive to their responsibilities, 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 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 the angel had been sent as payback for their raunchy jokes, bad language, and sticky fingers. Maybe they were worried their sins were catching up with them and they were about to be vaporized. Whatever the case, they were in awe, and it would take a lot for these tough guys to be terrified. 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 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.”***

This week, I spent some time contemplating the miracle and mystery of the incarnation so I would grow in awe. Here are some phrases I wrote down...

The Infinite became an infant
The Sovereign as sacrifice
The I AM became incarnate
The Deity in diapers
The Immortal took on mortality
The Ancient of Days became the infant of days
The Word came to our world
The Maker of man became man
The God who is Lord is the lamb of God

Do you marvel at the Messiah? Has it been a while since you've been awed by Immanuel?

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3. Accepted. After the attentive shepherds were filled with awe, they accepted 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 like Matt Papa’s insight: *“Christianity’s first call is not ‘Behave!’ but ‘Behold!’ 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 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 includes our neighbors and the nations. 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.** He is “The anointed one” or “Messiah” in Hebrew.
- **Lord.** This title is the Hebrew word Adonai referring to “Master or Owner.” It speaks of His total possession and my absolute submission.

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 had two parts...

- **Baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.** There are a couple interesting theories behind the sign of swaddling cloths. Here’s the first. In the harsh countryside of the Middle East, sometimes people would die when they were on long trips. To be prepared for this possibility, travelers would take a long, thin, gauze-like cloth and wrap it several times around their waist under their clothing. When an individual died, friends or family would

remove the “swaddling cloth” and wrap them from head to toe. In this theory (which we can’t prove), the baby Jesus was wrapped in Joseph’s death cloth. The sign for the shepherds was a baby prepared for death. Interestingly, the body of Jesus would one day be wrapped in strips of cloth for His burial. He entered the world bound and He exited it bound.

The second possibility behind this sign comes from the shepherding culture. According to Jimmy DeYoung, who quotes Alfred Edersheim, an expert on Jewish life, the primary task of these particular shepherds was to raise male lambs without blemish for temple sacrifices. When a firstborn male lamb was born, the shepherd would catch the kid, wrap it in swaddling cloths and place it in a manger until the mother came over and introduced herself to her baby. These strips of cloth were from old priestly garments used as wicks to light the Menorah in the temple and re-used to wrap sacrificial lambs at birth. One commentator writes, *“When the shepherds looked at Jesus wrapped in old priestly garments, they saw their Savior, [the Great High Priest], who is both the Lamb of God and the Light of the World!”*

- **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 feeding trough.

Suddenly a whole regiment of rejoicing warrior angels fills the sky, praising God in a thunderous chorus in verse 14, ***“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!”*** The glory of God extends grace to those out of place and peace to those who have no peace.

We know the shepherds welcomed 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 for it to be activated in your life. It’s one thing to say you accept it; it’s another to act on it. Knowing must lead to going.

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After *being attentive*, the shepherds were in *awe* and then they *accepted*. The next step in their process was they *acted*.

4. Acted. The shepherds didn't just accept and enjoy the message they received, they acted on it. They 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 amazing because normally shepherds were slow and patient in their movements so they wouldn't startle the sheep.

The Bible is clear, acceptance 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. Let's notice what these "first responders" did.

- **They went and saw.** 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 an animal's feeding trough would not have been a problem to men who were used to the scent of sheep. One author writes, "*The Lamb of God would first be held and handled and touched by those who knew how to appreciate and care for a lamb. And yet, more than anybody else, these shepherds knew the ultimate fate of each lamb for which they cared...this is God declaring to His people that Jesus, both the Good Shepherd and the Lamb of God, was coming to make true peace between God and man.*"

Check out these ironies. First, unclean shepherds come to a manger to see the Holy of Holies lying in it. Second, the shepherds left their flocks behind to visit the sinless Lamb of God. Normally, they were careful to not leave their flocks because their very livelihood depended on protecting their sheep. 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 and shared.** 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.*" Notice the message they shared had nothing to do with the amazing angels or the magnificence of Mary. There's no indication they worshipped her or venerated Joseph. They came to see the *Savior* and now they headed out to herald the good news about *Him*. They were all about

sharing the news **“concerning this child.”** We’re here today because they couldn’t keep quiet! They didn’t hang around the manger because as the world’s first missionaries, 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 the Gospel of Luke to show people’s response to Jesus. Are you astonishingly amazed when you consider what Christ has done?

If you are not saved yet, you need to come and see the Savior. If you are saved, it’s time to go and share the Savior with others. It’s not enough 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. Adored. 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 and worshipped fervently. Their extraordinary experience did 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 didn’t just wonder about what they saw, they worshiped Him. In one sense, they’re taking the place of the angels as they now glorify and praise God.

One clear evidence of conversion is a commitment to 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 gather with His people to 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.

Listen to these words from a poem called, “Bethlehem’s Best” by Donald Cantrell.

*In yonder ages the Word was proclaimed
That a baby would be born, Jesus would be His name*

*Years passed by and the world stood waiting
Something had to occur that left no debating.*

*Out of the blue, on an awesome starry night
Some shepherds had a visitor that left them affright
When time came, God ignored all of the rest
And sent His angel to Bethlehem's Best.*

*As the heavenly host praised loudly with one voice,
The shepherds were inspired and were eager to rejoice.
Into the night they fled with no regard to danger
To the city of David, for the babe in the manger.*

*Into the city so boldly they each walked
The angelic proclamation was the center of their talk.
The events of this night was shared from east to west
All because of the visit by Bethlehem's Best.*

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.

- **Be attentive to what God has called you to do**
- **Be awed by God's message to you**
- **Accept the gift of good news**
- **Act on what you know to be true**
- **Adore Immanuel always**

Let's make sure we get the facts straight about the Christmas narrative. And once we do, let's believe and receive the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world. Christmas is real history, but it must become *your* story.

Listen to Luke 2:11 one more time: ***“Today*** [right now; a specific time in history] ***in the town of David*** [fulfilling a 700-year-old prophecy from Micah 5:2] ***a Savior*** [the One who saves from sin] ***has been born*** [the incarnation where the infinite became an infant] ***to you;*** [emphatic; personally for you] ***He is Christ*** [the long-

awaited Anointed One; the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament] **the Lord** [YHWH, Jehovah, the Great I Am, Sovereign, Master and Leader].”

Jesus was born to the whole world, but He was also born to you...and for you, in your place, as your substitute.

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 this right now by praying this prayer.

“Lord Jesus, 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, Yeshua, who is Savior, Christ and Lord, I ask this. Amen.”

Jesus came for all people, for the faithful and the unfaithful.

Closing Song: “O Come, All You Unfaithful”