

"FACES AT THE MANGER (#2): THE SHEPHERDS"

(Luke 2:8-20)

© 2024 Rev. Dr. Brian E. Germano

**[PROPS NEEDED: CUMC Advent/Christmas publicity cards]**

[Cornerstone U.M.C.; 12-8-24]

--I--

1. Read CEB Text: Luke 2:8-20 and Pray.
2. The faces that surrounded the manger of Jesus on that first Christmas night were not there by accident. In fact, I believe God had a specific purpose and plan for each of them gathered there.

A--So as we continue our Advent series "Faces At The Manger, our focus today turns to the **SHEPHERDS** who we read about in today's scripture from Luke 2, and what their story & experience can teach us about life & about our relationship with God

B--Now, the scripture actually doesn't tell us exactly *who* these shepherds were -- just that they were (Verse 8) "*...living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night.*" <sup>1</sup>

C--But what it *does* tell us is what they *did*. Starting with Verse 9, we have a description of at least three things these shepherds did -- lessons for us to learn today, as well. <sup>2</sup>

--II--

3. According to Verses 9-14, the first thing the shepherds *did* that first Christmas Eve is... **they LISTENED.**

A--Now, this may hardly sound like a major achievement.

1--I mean, if an angelic choir appeared out of nowhere and spoke to us we'd pay attention too, right? ...Or would we?

2--Who knows? Perhaps the angels had already tried to tell of Jesus' birth to the innkeeper, the town soldiers, and the merchants, but they were all too busy or too preoccupied by other things to listen.

3--And perhaps as a last resort, they came upon this group of shepherds who were far enough removed from the hustle and bustle of what we call "reality" that they were actually able and willing to listen.

4--And we in today's world are not much different: whether we have views that are more conservative or liberal, or are on the political or theological left or right, we seem to do a lot more talking than listening -- we tend to be much more willing to give OUR opinion than to listen respectfully to those of others.

5--So maybe the ability to actually *listen* is a lot harder to do than what it seems.

B--And remember, too, that a biblical angel is nothing more than a bearer of God's message -- and as such, these come to us all the time.

1--But do you and I take the time to listen to and hear them?

2--In all of today's Christmas preparations, often there is so much noise and busyness -- the canned Christmas music, the commercialism gone amuck -- that we can't really *hear* what God wants to say to us.

3--I don't know about you, but I often get caught up in this as well -- so busy doing even good "church" things --like making visits to homebound members, preparing sermons, attending Sunday School parties, and so on -- that I fail to take time to actually listen to God speak to me.

4--It's not that these things aren't important or good -- they are! But they're never more important than actually *listening* to God!

5--One author put it this way, "*Unless we are prepared to drop, for a moment, our busy work of preparation [&] celebration, we will never hear the angels' song*"<sup>3</sup>

C--You see, when you and I take time to get out of the hustle and bustle (at least mentally) -- to stop just long enough to truly *listen* to God, it may just be that we (like the Shepherds) will hear the angels singing (Verse 14) "*Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.*"

4. The second thing the Shepherds did is that **they INVITED their friends and WENT to the manger.**

A--Verse 15: "*When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, 'Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened...'*" -- in other words, they invited their friends to come with them to experience the miracle of Christmas.

B--Today, we've chosen to symbolize this particular lesson through today's Advent candle: the SHARING candle, reminding us of the importance of sharing our faith with others -- of inviting them to experience Jesus through *our* faith story.

1--Notice that after the shepherds heard the angels, they *didn't* do what many of us do when we experience something out of the ordinary: try first to "figure it out".

2--They didn't take a vote, or form a committee to investigate what just happened and then report back for discussion at the next regular meeting of the "Shepherd's Council."

C--No. The original Greek wording of this verse carries with it an impulsive sense of urgency about the decision to go to Bethlehem.

1--Eugene Peterson's The Message translates Verse 15 this way, "*The shepherders talked it over, [saying] 'Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us.'*"

2--You know, there IS a time for contemplation, consideration, and going through proper channels -- times when we need to step back and study, consider, and discuss things before plowing ahead.

3--But there are *also* times when -- in the midst of things momentous and profound -- we just need to *ACT*.<sup>4</sup>

5. The shepherds listened, you see. But then they *acted* by sharing their faith and inviting their friends to go with them to experience this miraculous thing.

A--Author Croft Penz emphasizes this point this way, "*If [we], like the shepherds, have heard and seen, then, [also] like the shepherds, [we must] go and tell.*"<sup>5</sup>

B--So, who have *you* invited to experience the miracle of Christmas with you this year?

1--Is there a friend, a neighbor, a family member, a workmate, a schoolmate, or someone else who's not active in another church that you could invite to our church over the next few weeks... to our Christmas musical in two weeks? ...to our Community Service of Hope and Healing on Dec. 19? ...or to one of our two candlelight Christmas Eve services?

2--Maybe it's as simple as taking the Advent-Christmas church publicity card you were given today with your bulletin and sharing it with family and friends to invite them to our holiday events and services, OR sharing our online worship services on social media with others.

3--However we do it, the Shepherds teach us to say to others (in so many words) "*Let's get to church as fast as we can to see for ourselves what God is doing!*"?

6. But there's also a final thing the Shepherds did. **They RETURNED as changed people.**

A--Verse 20 says that "*The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.*"

1--As simple as that sounds, consider the alternatives they *could* have done:

(a) They could have left their sheep and formed a monastery to pray and watch over the holy child as he grew up.

(b) They could have created a shrine, made sure the sacred stable was adorned & preserved by a new faithful order of "Messianic Shepherds"<sup>6</sup>

2--But instead, they returned to their flocks to continue their regular routines:

- (a) the new pastures to be sought out;
- (b) the wool to be sheared, taken to market and sold;
- (c) the lambs to be looked after & provided for; the injuries tended to; etc.

B--But notice that they *didn't* return as the same people. No. They "*returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen...*"

1--In other words, their lives were forever changed by Christmas.

2--To be sure... Yes, they returned to the harsh reality of a shepherd's life.

3--But they returned with a new *outlook* on that reality.

C--And so it can be for us. Christmas doesn't change our *outward* circumstance or situation -- but it CAN change our *inner outlook* and *perspective* on those things!

1--After all, Christmas is not a fleeting, annual encounter with God that somehow magically wipes away all the afflictions and problems of life.

2--No. Hurt and pain, sickness and grief, heartache & loneliness don't take a break just because it's the holidays!

3--But what these shepherds teach us is that if you and I will look *beyond* the holly wreaths and tinsel, past the ornate trees and fine decorations to a cold, damp stable & (like the Shepherds) catch just a glimpse of the real Emmanuel...

4--...*Then* we'll have something that'll last beyond the holidays, beyond the taking down and storing of Christmas decorations.

D--Like the Shepherds, we can return "home" from Christmas "*glorifying and praising God,*" knowing that because of what we have "*heard and seen*" at Christmas, we have hope that can overcome the harsh realities of our own lives.

--III--

7. So again... based solely on the biblical account, we don't know much about WHO the shepherds were. But we know what they DID: ...They...

A--(#1) They *listened*; (#2) They *invited* their friends & *went*; & (#3) they *returned* changed.

B--How will you share your experience of Christmas with others this season, and how will you invite them to experience it with you?

8. [PRAYER]

**ENDNOTES:**

<sup>1</sup> From this meager sentence in Verse 8, Biblical scholars and others have speculated for years about exactly who these people were and what they represented. Some take it at face value and say they represent the common, ordinary people of life like you and me -- the ones who Jesus related to so well later in his life. Others say they were social or religious outcasts of some sort. I mean, they *were* after all tending their flocks "*by night*" -- a time when any respectable shepherd would have already had their sheep safely tucked in the fold for the evening. If so, maybe the shepherds represent the very sinners/outcasts that Jesus came to save. Still others propose that these were holy shepherds, chosen to watch over the select flocks of the Jerusalem temple -- the sheep that would eventually be sacrificed on the High Altar. If so, then these shepherds link Jesus (who himself became the "lamb of God") with the old covenant of Israel. These are all interesting theories, but merely fanciful speculation at best.

<sup>2</sup> The major points in this message were inspired by those found in "*The Shepherds and the Angel Song*" of J. Barrie Shepherd's book Faces At the Manger (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), pp. 36-47.

<sup>3</sup> J. Barrie Shepherd, Faces At the Manger (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 1992), p. 39.

<sup>4</sup> J. Barrie Shepherd says that to fail to act in such times (i.e., to use procedures and "proper channels" as an excuse for *not* acting) is simply what he calls "*a betrayal, an act of craven cowardice.*" (Shepherd, Faces At the Manger, p. 42).

<sup>5</sup> Croft M. Pentz, The Complete Book of Zingers (Wheaton: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1990).

<sup>6</sup> The fact that they *didn't* do this is one reason why the actual birth place of Jesus is still disputed among scholars even today.