

The Story of the Shepherds

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

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Morning Service**

I was there that night. That fateful night so long ago. That night when the heavens broke open and we heard and saw the most amazing things, as first one angel spoke to us about the birth of the Messiah, and then an army of angels appeared out of nowhere, singing a song of praise, and then we saw... Well, maybe I had better slow down and start over from the beginning.

I was out in the fields that night, along with a few other shepherds, watching over the sheep. It was a typical evening. Nothing to indicate the dramatic events about to unfold. It was a quiet still night, though a bit on the cool side. We had just done our regular check of the sheep, and some were beginning to settle down for the night—usually only one shepherd stayed awake, while the others slept. Nothing exciting really happens, just long, boring nights.

When all of a sudden an angel of the Lord appeared to us. The darkness of the night was broken by the brightness of this heavenly being. Those who were standing fell down onto the ground. We all covered our faces and shrank back in fear. I thought Nathan was going to have a heart attack, the way he reacted. After all, this was an angel of the Lord.

I don't know how you picture an angel, but angels are powerful spiritual beings that come from the presence of Almighty God. They reflect his power, majesty, and holiness. No wonder we were terrified. We all thought we were dead men.

It's not surprising that the first words the angel said to us: Do not be afraid. But hearing a voice from heaven isn't the most calming event. But at least, it wasn't a lightning bolt, as I expected. Then as we gathered together, to help support each other, we heard the angel add: I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

Those were more reassuring words. I didn't think that after bringing good news, we were going to be killed. If it was a word of judgment, well... But it wasn't. It was good news of great joy. As the angel spoke about joy, his face lit up even more. You could tell, the angel was just bursting at the seams to tell us this. You know how that is; if you've got great news, you can't help but spill the beans. And I could tell the angel was just warming up.

You know, later on, when I had time to reflect on that night, I wondered: Why us? Why tell this news to us shepherds? Now don't believe all the gossip about us shepherds, we're not a bunch of rednecks. Ours is an honorable profession. After all, King David was a shepherd.

But still, we were just common folk. We're not powerful people. We're not part of the political or religious elite of Jerusalem. The angel passed them by and came to us common folk—to those struggling to make ends meet. I think that says a lot about God and his ways in the world. He doesn't use typical means to accomplish his goals. That became evident when we saw the baby... oh, I getting ahead of myself again.

Where was I? Oh yes, the announcement of great joy. With boldness and with great pride, the angel declared: Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Today. It's already happened!

In the town of David. I knew, of course, that meant Bethlehem. It's where I'm from. Just a little hamlet, not too far from the big city, Jerusalem. I wonder whose house the baby was born in?

A savior has been born to you. A Savior. Someone to save this broken world from its state of misery. Someone to rescue us from our sin. Someone to make all things right in a world, where there are so many wrongs. For me. The angel made this announcement very personal. It was for me. Not just for the religious and political elites, but also for me. And if it's for me, then this Savior is for everyone.

But I was shocked by the titles given the Savior: Christ the Lord. That he would be the long-expected Christ or Messiah was incredible in itself, but that he would also be called Lord—a title we only use of Almighty God—well that challenged my basic beliefs. That this baby, wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger—not a house, but a stable—that this baby would be called Christ the Lord—well, that was a claim I would never have accepted in a million years.

Except that this announcement came from an angel, whose presence stared me in the face. Except that this one angel was soon joined by an army of angels. The barrier between heaven and earth broke open, as a huge

angelic choir emerged out of nowhere, singing the praises of God. And what a song it was:

Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.

I'm sure we'll soon be singing that song in our own times of worship. You know, I don't even think that the angelic choir sang for us, or that they emerged in order to convince us of the truth of what the first angel had said. I got the feeling that the angels of heaven were so overjoyed in what was happening—of God becoming man—that they just burst forth in praise to God.

And so, while this angelic choir may not have been for our benefit, it certainly convinced us of the truth of the angel's announcement. Our Savior must have been born that day. And even though he was to be found in a manger, I will believe that indeed he is Christ the Lord. Despite being wrapped in cloths, rather than being wrapped in the glory of heaven; despite have a bed in a manger rather than a royal palace, I will believe he is the long-expected Messiah. I will believe that he is the Lord—Yahweh—in the flesh.

Oh, I'm getting ahead of myself again. The angelic choir left as quickly as it appeared. After a few minutes in which we were completely unable to speak—as we completely overwhelmed by the experience—I finally managed to get enough strength to say to the others: "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." Everyone agreed. And we quickly headed to Bethlehem. Even old Eli moved faster than I had ever seen before.

In our hurried departure, we completely forget about the sheep. We didn't leave anyone to watch over them. Our thoughts were totally elsewhere. And it's not as if we quickly returned back to them. But that's okay. Finding the baby was far more important.

Thankfully it didn't take long to find Mary, Joseph and the baby. As I said, Bethlehem is a small hamlet. And if you know anything about small village life, you'll know how news spreads quickly, especially about a baby being born in a manger. And so we found the baby.

He was—well, such an ordinary baby. No halo around his head. Not glowing with the glory of the Lord as the angels did. Nothing to indicate that this would be the Savior of the world. Nothing to prove that he was Christ the Lord. I'll confess, maybe I doubted for a second. But then I remembered the angel and the choir. Then we began to swap stories. We told Mary and Joseph what happened in the field and they told us their encounter with

angels. Together, these stories reinforced the point. This was no ordinary baby.

After, we all took turns holding the baby. What a wonder that was. What a privilege that was. It still brings tears to my eyes. To hold the Savior of the World. To hold my Savior. I can't express what it meant. And I couldn't figure out how he would be my Savior. At least not then. But I just knew he was my Savior. And I held him dearly.

Eventually, we had to put the baby back in the manger and we had to leave Mary and Joseph. We could tell this was a very tiring experience for them. Physically, emotionally, spiritually. So oft we went—not back to the fields, but throughout the village. And as we met people, we told them what we saw and heard in the fields, and what we encountered in the stable. Everyone who heard us was amazed. Soon the whole village was abuzz. Some thought we had too much to drink. Others that we just plenty crazy. A few thought we were playing a practical joke. Yet most were amazed.

What about you? What do you think of my story? You don't think we were drunk, do you? Or that we were just hallucinating? Or that I am making it up? I mean, if it was just me, that'll be one thing. But there was Nathan, Eli, little Joey, and a few others you could talk to.

You gotta believe. It'll change your life around. It did mine. Eventually we did have to go back to the fields and gather back the sheep. But as we did, we just sang of praises to God. I'm sure that caused a few heads to turn. As I said at the beginning, shepherds are not rednecks, but we're not known to sing religious hymns just walking in the fields. But there we were singing: Gloria in excelsis Deo. (347)