

A 6 yr. old S.S. class was asked to re-enact the story of the birth of Jesus, only the teacher wanted them to stage it themselves based on their own made-up script... which of course was quite imaginative. There were (3) Marys, (2) Josephs, (6) shepherds, (2) wisemen, and a boy who wanted to be a cow. And of course, no Christmas story would be complete w/out a doctor on hand to deliver the baby Jesus. Curious to see where the story was heading, the teacher consented, when the little doctor went to the manger, picked up the baby Jesus and carefully wrapped him in a blanket. Then w/ a big smile on his face, he turned to the Marys and Josephs and said, “Congratulations, **it’s a God!**”

I just love sweet little Christmas stories like this, but the truth is this boy had a better grasp of the incarnation/advent of Jesus than many people much older. The true story of Christmas is that God stepped out of heaven and into flesh to become the Savior of the world for you/me and for all humanity – God W/ us, to die FOR us, that He might to live IN us!

We’re (3) weeks into a (4) series on the cast of Christmas looking at the *who’s who* of the Christmas story to see what God might teach us about following Him. So far we’ve looked at two of the primary persons in the story – Mary/Joseph. Today I want to turn our attention to the shepherds.

As we begin to look at this amazing story, I need to burst your Christmas bubble a bit – not to sour Christmas, but to clarify the history of Christmas. As most of you know, we aren't certain about the time of the year when Jesus was born, but it's safe to infer from this text that His birth He wasn't on Dec. 25th. This is a date the Roman Catholic Church set centuries ago, and for all the wrong reasons.

When Constantine legalized Christianity in the 4th century, there was already (2) competing pagan celebrations called the *Feast of Saturnalia* and *Sol Invictus* that took place a few days after the winter solstice to celebrate the fact that once again light had conquered darkness. When the Roman Empire became “*Christian*,” they adopted many of these pagan practices in an attempt to *Christianize* them, but in actuality they only *paganized* Christianity – anyhow, the result is we now celebrate “Christ’s mass” on Dec. 25th.

So when did the advent of Christ really take place? The best clue for this date is found in the **Luke 2** narrative. The fact the shepherds were in the fields at night w/ their flocks indicates a warmer time of year as they only grazed their sheep in the evenings during the hotter months to get relief from the heat of the high desert climate – meaning sometime b/w May to September, but certainly not in December. *Now this shouldn't give too much consternation b/c the issue isn't the date of the Savior's birth, but the fact that the Savior has come.*

There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared w/ the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. Luke 2:8-15

Whenever I read this text, I can’t help but ask – *why the shepherds?* What’s the message God wants us to hear?

I The Good News is for **EVERYONE**

The first thing to note is this idea of *good news*. What is the good news the angels delivered? **The Messiah has come!**

The good news is that – *God so loved the world, He gave His one and only Son, that whoever would believe in Him would not perish but would have eternal life.*

The good news is that – *Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be save.* Acts 4:12

Now imagine you're God and you want to announce the most incredible, joyous news which will literally change the course of history – *the birth of the Savior*. The One whose life will be sacrificed to give life for all who believe. The One for whom Israel has been anticipating to be their Messiah. Now finally, He's come! Who do you announce it to? Who do you tell? Who do you invite to come and see?

I find it interesting that on the night Jesus was born the 1st group of people to learn about this *good news* was a few shepherds out tending their sheep by night.

It wasn't the political leaders of the world? It wasn't the religious leaders of the day? It wasn't the theologians, or scholars, or even the military leaders of the time – it was a small group of sheep herders. It was the shepherds – who would've been the last people anyone would've expected God to speak to first b/c of their status in life.

Jesus didn't invite the high/mighty of society but the least and lowly. A group of common ordinary men who weren't the social/religious elite but the outcast/blue-collar, the minimum-wage workers of society.

Did you know according to the Jewish law (Talmud), these men were considered unclean like the heathen and weren't allowed in the Temple courts to worship? They were to be set aside b/c their line of work prevented them from participating in the feasts/holy days that made up the Jewish calendar. Which is interesting when you consider their job was to watch the sheep who fed, clothed, and made sacrifices for the people.

When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were out in the fields watching over the sheep. Much like the people whose jobs keep them from regularly attending church b/c of the demands of culture.

Not only that, but shepherds were social outcasts – considered dirty/untrustworthy. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pastures for their flocks, they were looked on w/ suspicion. Kind of the way people might look at gypsies or the homeless today. They were often accused of being thieves – and if something came up missing – blame the shepherds.

Why did God send His angels to announce the Savior's birth to shepherds, to invite them only to come/see the child?

I think it was for one simple reason... God wanted to show that His love doesn't discriminate on the basis of status, wealth, or social influence. God doesn't value kings/priests more than any blue-collar worker. He doesn't think more of priests/pastors than people in the pews or in the streets. He doesn't give preferential treatment to one person over another – He's an equal opportunity Savior. He died for the lost and the found – the good and the bad – for the Muslim, Hindu, and atheist as much as He died for the Christian. His love/grace is available to all on the same basis – by faith alone in Jesus.

II The Good News Requires a FAITH Response

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened the Lord has told us about."

A 2nd item of note in their story is found in their *response*. After hearing the message and regaining their composure, they packed up and headed for Bethlehem – and their response altered the course of their lives and eternities.

They could've DOUBTED it. They could've have questioned if they really had experienced a heavenly host? They could've questioned if God moves in such a way or if he even existed.

Some people believe the Gospel message is too farfetched.

They could've **DEBATED** it. They could've analyzed what they should do and argued over whether they could afford to leave the sheep? They could've questioned the veracity of the moment and the relevance of the means.

Some people just want to argue about the veracity of Jesus

They could've **DEFERRED** it. They could've said – we can go to Bethlehem tomorrow... this can wait until later after we've finished what we're doing.

Some people think they can live their life and then at the last moment believe and sneak into God's favor.

They could've **DENIED** it. They could've said, "This isn't for me! This message is just too unbelievable."

Some people just flat out reject it b/c they have a better way.

But the shepherds chose a better way – they **believed**. They trusted the message and pursued the truth. Their faith was revealed in their words – *Let us go and see this thing...*

It's not enough to hear about Jesus or to look into the manger and say, "Oh how nice." The advent of God into flesh to rescue His creation from condemnation and eternal separation isn't to give us warm fuzzies – but to change our eternity from lost to found and from condemned to emancipated.

If Jesus were born in Bethlehem a 1,000x but not w/in you – you'd spend an eternity separated from the God who loves you and desires relationship w/ you.

So no matter how sentimental we get at Christmas, if the Christ-child who was born that holy night has not been born into your heart, then you've missed the point of His coming.

The sole reason God entered time/space in the person of Jesus was to rescue you from the stain/pain of sin so that you could have a true, unblemished relationship w/ Him.

The Son of man came to seek and save the lost. Luke 19:10

III The Good News must be SHARED w/ Others

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

What do you do w/ good news? You share it! You want others to know your excitement – you can't help but tell.

I know I do! When one of my children have something great occur in their lives. I want to tell other people. When we get a new job, when we accomplish a life goal, when our children graduate or get married – we share it.

Spiritually speaking – is this not one of the reasons we God asks us to be baptized after salvation – to share w/ other the good news that we've accepted the Good News!

B/c their lives we transformed by this baby in a manger – God in the flesh – God w/ us – they had to go and tell everyone of the hope they had found. They had to let everyone know the long-awaited Messiah had come.

This is the reality of anyone who has experienced a genuine encounter w/ the Savior. This is what occurs when the Savior who was born in a manger is born into your life – YOU HAVE TO GO AND TELL! You have to share it!

You'd share w/ everyone! W/ family/friends. W/ your neighbor's/colleagues. W/ anyone/everyone you'd meet! Why? *B/c the Good News is the greatest news anyone can ever hear or receive.* It's the most necessary news in all eternity – and the only news that can alter a person's eternity.

This is an old concept/analogy – but it is still applicable. If you had a cure for cancer and could save millions of lives, would you keep it to yourself – NO! If a person was in a burning house and you could save them – would you help or stand by to watch them die? Of course, you'd help.

As w/ the shepherds, anyone who's experienced the good news – cannot help but to share it w/ others.