

At the Manger: 4. Shepherds, Who Come and See
Luke 2:8-20
December 19, 2021
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Some of you may know that Jerry and I got a puppy earlier this summer. Jack was 8 weeks old when we brought him home. Have you ever had an 8-week-old puppy? In some ways, I think puppies are more challenging than children. As a little pup, Jack required constant supervision. He chewed on everything and if we didn't catch the "special look in his eyes", he freely and happily relieved himself on our kitchen floor. He slept a lot until we put him in his kennel so that we could get some sleep, he would cry and howl for hours. He's now 7 months and sleeps through the night.

This past Monday, I turned my attention to sheep in preparation for this week's message. On Monday, Messiah Church member, Bob Fields came in the office and just happened to mention that he used to raise sheep. So, Bob and I had a conversation, and I learned a lot about sheep. I learned that sheep are gentle and meek and if a good shepherd provides for their every need, they will never complain. They are content, docile animals with not an aggressive bone in their bodies. And when they are cold or in danger, they huddle together to provide protection and warmth for one another. This got me to thinking. Perhaps a lamb would have been a better choice for a pet than a puppy.

This morning, we continue our series on the cast of characters found At the Manger for Jesus' birth. We began three weeks ago by considering the role of the prophets and how hundreds of years before Jesus' birth their voices prepared the way for what God would do. Their voices still call us to hope - to "wish big". Then we heard that Joseph, who was chosen by God to be the earthly father of Jesus, was a carpenter, not even a master carpenter and yet, he stepped outside his comfort zone in order to respond to God's call. Last week, we learned that Mary was a nobody from a town so small that it didn't even deserve to have its name on a map and yet Mary was a real person who lived the gritty reality of God's plan. Today we'll hear how God chose the night shift shepherds, the lowest on the socioeconomic ladder in the first century, to be the first ones to hear the news of birth of the Christ Child. Hopefully this series is helping us discover the reality of who these persons were and how they still bring a message for our lives today. So let's turn our attention to the shepherds and their sheep.

In Luke's gospel we learn that on the same day Jesus is born in Bethlehem, there are shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem who are doing their job, watching over their flocks. Shepherds were not a very popular group of people. They were considered social misfits, thieves, and religious outcasts. They were considered unclean, shepherding is a dirty job, and so they were not able to participate in temple worship. They spent every waking moment taking care of sheep. Their job was dangerous at times but was mostly boring and tedious. While we do not know how exactly how many shepherds there were, but we do know that there was more than one.

Luke also tells us that it was night when the shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields. Usually, a shepherd would bring the sheep into a pen at night for protection but, in this region there are many caves that the shepherds might have used to pen their sheep at night. By containing the sheep, it was possible for one shepherd to watch over the flock. But there is one season when there would be multiple shepherds in the field keeping watch over their sheep, and that was during the lambing season, when ewes give birth to lambs. Sheep need help giving birth, because many of the lambs are born breech and will die unless a shepherd is

present to help. And since the lambing can be at any hour, many night shift shepherds, the lowest ranked amongst shepherds, would need to be present. It's also interesting to note that lambing season coincides with the Passover when a Jewish family would sacrifice a lamb. Lambs were a year old when sacrificed and since Bethlehem is not far from Jerusalem, some believe that this was a special flock from which the sacrificial lambs would come and so it required attention 24/7. Even in the hills around Bethlehem, it can get into the 40s at night. The shepherds were likely cold and weary from being awake caring for the sheep responding to the ones who were giving birth. When suddenly, from over the hillside there comes a great light, an angel - a messenger from God with an announcement.

That night in the stable as Mary held her newborn son, she pondered what the angel had told her just 9 months ago. She knew in her heart who the baby was, and when this unpopular group of misfits arrived, it was confirmed. This was the Messiah, the Savior of the world. Emmanuel, God with us. The scripture then tells us that the shepherds left the site where Jesus was, and returned to the fields, telling everyone what they had seen and heard. And everyone who heard it was amazed. So, when God's messenger said he came to bring good news to all people, he demonstrated it by starting at the bottom.

Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth at a time when the church members were arguing about who was the most significant and most important. Here's what Paul said, *Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are.* (1 Corinthians 1:26-28)

When God shows up, all the little seemingly insignificant events of life are transformed from mundane occurrences to holy moments that change the world. And God has been doing this throughout time. King David, the youngest child of the family, and once a shepherd boy himself, was chosen by God to change the world. Martin Luther was once just the insignificant son of a German copper smelter, and after a dramatic religious experience could have spent the rest of his life as an insignificant monk, but God used him to spark the Protestant Reformation.

I remember feeling left out, lost, and alienated in August of 1990 when Jerry took a job with the University of Texas Longhorn Marching Band and we moved our family to Austin, Texas. We were so excited for this new job, but it was a big job with lots of responsibilities and it required Jerry to be gone from home a lot and that meant I was often home alone with a 4-year-old and a newborn. For this California girl, Texas felt like a foreign country. I knew no one in this strange Texas culture and I felt so alone. But an older woman from our church, Ms. Helen, recognized this and took us in under her wing. Ms. Helen was all of 5'2" tall and weighed no more than 100 lbs. soaking wet. She had the big Texas hair, big jewelry, and bright red lipstick. She was a force not to be reckoned with, but she had a heart as big as the state of Texas and saw that she could help. She called us her "Little Family" and would call often to check in with me, babysit our kids, invite us to dinner with other young couples from our church and, on more than one occasion, would leave a surprise bag of groceries on our front porch. She made us feel cared for and loved at a time when we desperately needed it.

Even today, God continues to seek out people who society considers insignificant. We might even think we are insignificant compared to the celebrities, leaders, and politicians that the media talk about all the time. And to be honest, we might not be very important as far as the world is concerned, but we are so important to God that he invites us to the manger where we

can find our significance in Jesus Christ. And, to remind us that He is here, still calling us, still offering us significance, still desiring to turn our mundane into His majestic.

This Friday night, The Church will offer something that cannot be found anywhere else. It cannot be purchased at a store or wrapped and put under the tree. In fact, it's not even for sale. The true story of Christmas, the story of God's love, is the greatest gift ever given and has the power to save lives. Maybe you need a bit of good news right now or perhaps you know someone who needs a bit of good news. Maybe they feel like they're on the outside, ignored, forgotten, rejected. Invite them to worship with you on Christmas Eve, either in person or online, to experience the power and the glory of God's love as we celebrate the Light that came into the world on that first Christmas and that powerful moment when candlelight pushes back the darkness to fill our world with light. We have a story to tell so let's follow the footsteps of the shepherds by glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen.

Let us pray: Thank you God, that you humble the proud and give grace to the humble. Help us humble ourselves before you and consider others before ourselves. We accept your light, your love, your mercy and your grace. Help us to hear the "good news of great joy" that you have come to us in Jesus Christ. Then make us your messengers, glorifying and praising you for all we have seen and heard and taking your light in to the world. Amen.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 19, 2021

Weekly Prayer: Almighty God, remind us that we are people who need your help and your guidance. Remind us that the greatest source of help you've given us is the saving grace of a baby born in a stable. Remind us that we become stronger when we humble ourselves and ask for your help. Perhaps most of all, Lord, may your love be made complete in us so that we may be your light to a hurting world. Amen.

Monday, December 20

Scripture: Psalm 23:1-6

The LORD is my shepherd.

I lack nothing.

He lets me rest in grassy meadows;

he leads me to restful waters;

he keeps me alive.

He guides me in proper paths

for the sake of his good name.

Even when I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no danger because you are with me.

Your rod and your staff—

they protect me.

You set a table for me

right in front of my enemies.

You bathe my head in oil;

my cup is so full it spills over!

Yes, goodness and faithful love

will pursue me all the days of my life,

and I will live in the LORD's house

as long as I live.

Observation: David became Israel's greatest king, but he knew a shepherd's job description from his own experience (see 1 Samuel 16:11). In this Psalm, David portrayed God as his shepherd. He found in God the perfect expression of the qualities he himself had exercised as caregiver to his flock of sheep.

Application: News of Jesus' birth was first sent to shepherds, seen as low-class members of society. These humble men could not bring Jesus the rich material gifts that the magi brought later. What did God, the Great Shepherd, provide for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus through the shepherds at the manger? What people has God used to give you similar gifts?

Prayer: Lord God, as the hurry of the Christmas season gives way to the quiet of Christmas Eve, I pray that the peace you came to give us will settle over my heart. Be born again in me, Lord. Amen.

Tuesday, December 21

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Observation: Peter McCann wrote the song "The Star" about Jesus' birth: "Just another homeless family/ hoping for a stranger's charity/Just one night in one safe place to stay/ Underneath a star so far away/She carried everything they had, and more/The little one the world was waiting for ... They couldn't find a room for him back then/But he found a place in the hearts of men/The hope that all the world would come to know/Born beneath that star so long ago."

Application: Jesus, the King of kings, was born homeless to a young couple whose income placed them on the lowest rung of society. Spiritually, we are all poor and homeless without God. How does claiming the joyous news of Jesus open your heart—first, to praise God, and second, to love and show deeper compassion for all the people Jesus came to set free?

Prayer: Be near me, Lord Jesus, I ask thee to stay close by me forever, and love me, I pray; bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and fit us for heaven to live with thee there.

Wednesday, December 22

Scripture: Luke 2:8-14

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, "Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

Observation: In Luke 1:26-38, an angel brought the unexpected news to an unsuspecting Mary that she would bear a son—God's Son—and name him Jesus. In Luke 2:8-14, an angel of the Lord again shared unexpected news with unsuspecting recipients – the shepherds. In both cases, the outcome was the same. It was GOOD news – wonderful, joyous news for all people.

Application: In verse 10 Luke wrote, "The angel said, 'Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people.'" The awesome news the angels shared with the shepherds was that Jesus, the "Savior" for all people who is "Christ the Lord," was born in Bethlehem (verse 11). In what ways has Jesus been "good, wonderful, and joyous" news in your life? How might you share that news with someone else you care about?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the good news of your birth, for me, and for all people. As I awaken each day, help me to live into a spirit of gratitude for your great providence! Amen.

Thursday, December 23

Scripture: Luke 2:15-20

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

Observation: We're used to the shepherds in manger scenes, Christmas pageants and paintings. In Jesus' day, shepherds were not usually honored, or even noticed. They were obscure (like Mary and Joseph). Most priests shunned them because, caring for flocks, they couldn't observe the rituals "holiness" required. In another of God's great reversals, Jesus would grow up to identify with shepherds and teach: "I am the good shepherd" (John 10:11).

Application: Verse 20 tells us that after the shepherds had seen such wondrous things they went back to the commonplace. That's true for us each year at Christmas as we celebrate these events. Where will we be when the excitement and fun are over? How do these events change the lives we lead back at our jobs, our homes, our schools?" How will you answer?

Prayer: O Lord, often our Christmases are followed by the returning of unwanted or ill-fitting gifts. But I don't ever want to return your gift of yourself. As I live into a relationship with you, help me to celebrate your coming as "the Christ child" each day. Amen.

Friday, December 24

Scripture: Micah 5:1-4

Now muster your troops, Daughter Troop!

They have laid siege against us;
with a rod they will strike the cheek of the judge of Israel.

As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on my behalf will come out from you.
His origin is from remote times, from ancient days.

Therefore, he will give them up
until the time when she who is in labor gives birth.
The rest of his kin will return to the people of Israel.
He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
They will dwell secure,
because he will surely become great throughout the earth;

Observation: The scribes in Matthew 2:3-6 used today's reading to tell King Herod and the magi where to seek the Messiah. The prophet Micah wrote about a king who would come from Bethlehem, "shepherd his flock" well, and make his people secure. In Micah's day, the Assyrian Empire loomed over Israel, and the people feared both their own wicked kings and Assyrian rule.

Application: Verse 4 said, "He will stand and shepherd his flock *in the strength of the LORD.*" What makes it especially important for leaders to rely on God's power rather than their own? In what ways do you have the opportunity to shepherd, guide, or support others in your life? How can you draw your strength from God each day as you do this?

Prayer: Let me never forget, Gracious and Loving God, what you have done for me and for this world by sending your Son. You are present and available. Help me to seek you first and allow the power of your presence to guide and uplift me today and each day. Amen.

Saturday, December 25

Scripture: Isaiah 40:9-11

Go up on a high mountain,
messenger Zion!
Raise your voice and shout,
messenger Jerusalem!
Raise it; don't be afraid;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"
Here is the LORD God,
coming with strength,
with a triumphant arm,
bringing his reward with him
and his payment before him.
Like a shepherd, God will tend the flock;
he will gather lambs in his arms
and lift them onto his lap.
He will gently guide the nursing ewes.

Observation: Throughout history, humans typically associate triumph with toughness, with superior strength that demolishes whatever stands in its way. Isaiah's prophetic poem, however, struck a different note. In the poem, the strong, triumphant God bringing salvation does so as a caring shepherd, carrying lambs in his arms and gently guiding ewes who are nursing.

Application: The ancient world, like ours, created statues, paintings, speeches, and songs honoring the imposingly "strong." Yet James 4:6 quoted Proverbs 3:34: "God opposes the

proud, but gives grace to the humble.” Isaiah saw God himself as a caring shepherd. In what ways do pride and humility struggle in you? How is God helping you with that struggle?

Prayer: That you would come as a baby, reminds me that your way is gentle and humble. Thank you, that you show the greatest of such strength. Lord, help me to honor your birth by allowing your qualities to live within me. Amen.

Merry Christmas to one and all from your Messiah church family!