

December 24, 2020
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“To Certain Poor Shepherds”

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”

“The first Noel the angel did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay”

The shepherds have a beloved place in our Christmas story. No nativity scene would be complete without the shepherds, and every Christmas pageant includes shepherds in its cast. But for the people who first heard Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, the presence of shepherds at the manger would have been surprising, if not disturbing, because shepherding was a despised occupation in first-century Palestine. Although the reference to shepherds in the Christmas Gospel evokes a positive, pastoral image for the modern reader and underscores Jesus’ association with the line of David (“*He chose his servant David, and took him from the sheepfolds; from tending the nursing ewes he brought him to be the shepherd of his people Jacob, of Israel, his inheritance.*” – Psalm 78:70), in the first century shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who grazed their flock on others’ lands. “*While current culture views shepherds as quaint and hardworking, the ancient near east would have seen them as outcasts.*” (Kyle Schlefelbein-Guerrero).

Yet it is to these lowly, despised shepherds that the good news of the birth of the Saviour is announced. Whereas in Matthew the Magi follow the star to Bethlehem sometime after the birth of Jesus, in Luke it is the shepherds who are “*living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night*” (2:8) to whom a sign of the birth is given. The presence of the shepherds in this Gospel serves two purposes: developing the connection of the birth of Jesus with David and Bethlehem, and graphically picturing Jesus as the one sent to the lowly and outcast. “*It is to lowly shepherds that the birth is announced.*” (Alan Culpepper).

The shepherds appear in the Christmas story as there are watching over their flock in the dark fields outside of Bethlehem, which was the lot of shepherds in that time. It was their responsibility to watch over the sheep in their charge, lead them to fertile grazing fields, and protect them from predators who were a constant threat. It meant being away from home, sleeping in uncomfortable conditions, and having no access

to any of the comforts that people in the city enjoyed. As they sat in those darkened fields, some of the shepherds may have wondered how their lives ended up like this, working in an occupation that was looked down upon by everyone in “respectable” society.

But the shepherds’ “silent night” is suddenly disrupted when “*an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them*” (2:9). Angels also play a key role in the story of the birth of the Messiah, serving as messengers to proclaim the good news surrounding the nativity of our Lord:

- “... an angel of the Lord appeared to [Joseph] in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’” – Matthew 1:20-22.
- “But the angel said to him, ‘Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.’” – Luke 1:13-14.
- “The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.’” – Luke 1:30-31.

The shepherds’ terrified reaction is typical of an angelic appearance, which is far different from the comforting, reassuring presence of angels in popular culture (including such Christmas favourites as “It’s a Wonderful Life” and “The Bishop’s Wife”) is immediately met by the reassuring words “do not be afraid” that accompany every incursion of these heavenly beings. The angel’s word of reassurance to the shepherds is accompanied by the first announcement of the birth of the child of Mary and his identification:

- “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” – 2:10-11.

The shepherds are then instructed on how they will be able to find this child: “*This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*” (2:11), implying that the shepherds are to be witnesses to the angelic pronouncement to those who are gathered around the child. It is to them – not kings, not the wealthy, not to those who have prominent places in society – that the angel

chooses to announce the birth of the Messiah and to commission these “certain poor shepherds” to share the good news that is proclaimed when “*suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*” (2:13-14).

As suddenly as they appeared, the angels are suddenly gone, leaving the shepherds in the place where they were but utterly transformed. They know that they have no choice but to leave this place of darkness and isolation; they say to one another, “*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*” (2:15). They respond faithfully as have others who have heard the call of the Lord and responded obediently, including Abraham, Moses, and Mary.

- “The shepherds do not question what they saw and heard, and go to Bethlehem to experience what they were told. The ‘with-ness’ proclaimed to them leads them to witness to God’s full revelation in the birth of Jesus.” – Schlegelbein-Guerrero.

When the shepherds enter the city of Bethlehem and find “*Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger*” (2:16), they become witnesses to what the angels had told them: “*they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*” (2:17-18). As Mary becomes the first disciple of her child by hearing God’s Word and responding obediently to God’s call, the shepherds become the first witnesses to the Christmas Gospel and the good news that the birth of Mary’s child is “*good news of great joy for all the people.*”

- “... there are the shepherds, the main characters of the birth scene, who come and find the angelic sign verified: the infant Messiah lies in the manger. As I have explained above, they symbolize an Israel who at last recognizes its Lord; and they glorify and praise God for all they have seen and heard.” – Raymond Brown.

Luke introduces a second group of hearers who have also gathered with Mary and Joseph around the manger; the Evangelist reports that they are “amazed” at what the shepherds report about this child. Astonishment is a standard reaction in this Gospel (“*[Zechariah] asked for a writing tablet and wrote, ‘His name is John.’ And all of them were amazed.*” – 1:63), but it does not necessarily lead to faith. “*These hearers in the infancy narrative are like those in the parable of the seed who ‘hear the word, receive it with joy, but have not root’ (Luke 8:13).*” (Brown).

The scene ends with the shepherds returning to their flocks; but while they had preciously seen themselves as outcasts and as despised persons, now they return in the knowledge that they are chosen and precious in the sight of God, blessed as the ones who first hear the good news of the Saviour's birth and privileged to be the first to witness to this good news: *"the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them"* (2:20). They are the first of generations who gather at Christmas to hear this good news that, along with these *"shepherds, in the fields abiding, watching o'er your flocks by night, God with us is now residing, yonder shines the infant light."* (ELW Hymn 275).

- "The shepherds, just like the angel and Elizabeth before them, reveal to Mary what God has promised. They leave changed by what they had witnessed, and thus become witnesses to others. The 'with-ness' that God has revealed pushes the shepherds to proclaim this 'with-ness' to all they encounter. Their actions of 'glorifying and praising God' mirror the glory and praise that had been proclaimed to them by the angels." – Schlefelbein-Guerrero.

The darkness and isolation which enshrouded the shepherds on that first Christmas night is the reality for many who are struggling with this most difficult and unusual of Christmas nights. For many, Christmas has always been a difficult time, especially when one is mourning the death of a loved one or struggling with depression or anxiety at a time when everyone else seems to be merry and joyful. As the COVID-19 pandemic continues to affect every aspect of our lives (and has resulted in another lockdown in Ontario that will prevent us from gathering for worship and with our families), all of us are dealing with the reality of being isolated from those we love at this time when being together has been as natural as breathing. We may find ourselves as lost and lonely as those "certain poor shepherds" who had no hope of light in the darkness in which they abided in the fields outside of Bethlehem. But the good news the angels unexpectedly brought to them is the good news that comes to us here and now, the glorious message that is good news for all people: *"to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord."*

- "The little word 'you' should make us joyful. For to whom does the angel speak? To wood or stones? No. He speaks to human beings, and not just to one or two, but to all the people ... Thus we should receive him joyfully, as here the angels say, 'To you is born a Saviour.' Is it not a great and marvelous thing that an angel should come from heaven with such good news? Is it not a wonder that afterwards so many thousands of angels are filled with overwhelming joy, which makes them desire that we should also be glad, and

should receive such grace with thankful hearts? And therefore we should write this little word (with flaming letters) in our hearts: ‘To you!’ and should joyfully welcome the birth of this Saviour.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas Day 1544.

The good news that first “*came upon the midnight clear*” is good news that the angels still proclaim “*o’er all the weary world,*” calling us in the darkness of this age to “*look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing!*” (ELW Hymn 282). The presence of the shepherds in our nativity scenes and in the Christmas story is our place, for the message of Christmas is good news for *all* people: to you – to us – Christ the Saviour is born!

Amen.