

Sermon “From Angels to Shepherds to Angels”

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SCRIPTURE Luke 2: 1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “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 Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” And 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 favors!”

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said 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.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

SERMON “From Angels to Shepherds to Angels”

Tonight we again hear the story that most of us, have heard since childhood. It’s the story of a family, angels, shepherds and of course, a birthday. Jesus’ birthday. Our Lord’s birthday. We recall and celebrate Jesus’ birth in a little Judean town, Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph had traveled there to take part in a census – something demanded by the occupying Roman government. And we hear that upon arriving in Bethlehem, there’s no vacancy at the inn –

perhaps the only inn in that little town. And we hear that Mary ends up giving birth and the baby, Jesus, is placed in a manger – a feeding trough.

On the outskirts of Bethlehem, shepherds are tending their sheep. Now shepherds were not known for their desire to be with people. After all, they spent most of their lives with sheep. Day in and day out, rain and shine, you would find them roaming the country side with their sheep, away from people. Today we might consider them introverts and in Jesus' day, society considered them lowly.

Anyway, darkness settles over Bethlehem and its hillsides. And we hear that something extraordinary happens. Angels appear to the shepherds. The angels proclaim the birth of the Messiah, the Lord. A whole bunch of angels announce this with great pomp and joy. An extraordinary birth, was proclaimed to shepherds – not to royalty, not to rich men, not to learned men, but to very common, simple, ordinary men.

Fearful at first, the shepherds are intrigued. Who wouldn't be fearful? Who wouldn't wonder just what, or who the angels are talking about? But the angels tell the shepherds not to be afraid. Angels say that a lot. The angel told Mary not to be afraid, and Joseph too. And the angels' words calmed the shepherds.

So they leave their flocks to head into town to check out the angel's story, to look for the one whom the angels called Messiah and Lord.

The shepherds find the infant, Jesus, with his two tired but happy and glowing parents. Actually they were probably exhausted. Mary and Joseph had just traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem and Mary had given birth. That's no easy feat. But those exhausted, loving parents allow those unshaven men with grungy clothes that smelled like sheep to look upon their son. Did they get to touch the baby's forehead or his cheek? Did they get to hold the infant Jesus – the Messiah and Lord? I wonder.

The shepherds are in awe. They have seen something miraculous. To be with that couple and that baby, shortly after he was born, must have been amazing for these men. I'm sure they had seen lambs be born, maybe even helped deliver lambs while tending their sheep. But to see a newborn little boy, that can be quite an experience, even without that baby being the Messiah.

I imagine those shepherds glowed. I imagine that because once I was invited to a hospital room to visit a couple and their newborn son. It was actually the same afternoon that he was born. I was allowed to see the mother and father and the beautiful sleeping baby boy. I was able to pray with them and bless them, bless that family. It was wonderful! I left their hospital room

glowing. The nurse saw me and asked if I was the grandma because I looked so happy. I told her no, I was the pastor. And I felt so blessed that before I left the hospital I texted my mentor – the pastor of the church where I had been a student – to tell him that I had just visited a young family in the hospital, that they had invited me to come to see them hours after the baby was born and I had been allowed to bless this couple and their newborn son. I felt so blessed! I was so excited that I had to share that news! So those shepherds, I imagine they felt blessed!

Now, when Mary learned she was pregnant and had visited Elizabeth, she had said God would lift the lowly. Little did Mary know it would start with lowly shepherds visiting her son, Jesus, at his birth. Any way we hear that the shepherds returned – maybe to Bethlehem or maybe to some other town. But Luke tells us that they returned and shared the good news of Jesus' birth. I believe something happened to those shepherds when they saw Jesus. The shepherds are changed. I imagine their whole experience felt surreal! It must have been something amazing because the shepherds became the ones to share the good news of Jesus' birth.

Now I don't know that they fully understood that Jesus was Lord – what that meant. I think that might take a bit longer than a few moments to process. But, they knew that they could not keep this miracle to themselves. They had to proclaim what they had experienced.

It's ironic. Shepherds are considered the lowly in scripture. Yet, Moses was tending his father in law's flocks when he saw the burning bush and was given his instructions by God. And David was a shepherd boy before he became a great leader, King David, Jesus' ancestor. And Jesus, even though we use names like -Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, called himself the good shepherd. The lowly can become great in God's hands.

With God, the ordinary becomes extraordinary. A shepherd can become a leader, a king, and even an angel. Did you know that the word angel means "messenger from God"? Those shepherds responded to the angels, to God's messengers. They accepted the messengers' invitation to seek Jesus. And that visit to Jesus, seeing that baby, affected the shepherds so deeply that they were transformed. We hear that *"When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them... The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them."* The shepherd became God's messengers – angels - proclaiming the birth of our Lord, sharing their amazement, glorifying and praising God.

We have heard this story, Christmas after Christmas. We set up our nativity scenes each year to prepare for Christmas. We include shepherds. We even sing about angels and shepherds. But do we think of the shepherds as the lowly introverts who become like angels, God's messengers? Do we see them as transformed?

Maybe we have not seen angels ourselves, but we do celebrate the birth of Jesus, our Savior, our God. We do celebrate that amazing miracle. And we recall the shepherds' visit. What if we ask ourselves, this Christmas, if we might be like shepherds who are transformed by Jesus' birth? Might we become like angels? What if we ask ourselves if we will return from this service or from our Christmas celebrations, glorifying and praising God? In the days and weeks to come, how will we share the message of Jesus, our God born as a vulnerable infant in a manger – for us.

For to you, and you, and you, and you “is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, * the Lord.”

Merry Christmas!