

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve + December 24, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
Pastor Tim Pauls
Shepherds in the Spotlight

The Word of the Lord from Luke 2:10-11: "And the angel said to them, 'Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.'" This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Dear shepherds,

It's a funny thing, I think.

Of the four gospels, Luke has the longest account of Jesus' birth by far. It's twenty verses long: that's thirteen verses longer than Matthew, nineteen verses longer than John and ... twenty verses longer than Mark. Just about everything we know about Christmas comes from the Gospel of Luke, and here's the funny part: look who gets all the love. When I was growing up, nobody wanted to be a shepherd during the Christmas program, but thirteen of those verses have you at center stage in the spotlight – thirteen out of twenty! Joseph gets Mary to Bethlehem, and he's done. Mary gives birth, swaddles the Baby and parks Him in a manger. Jesus Himself is born, swaddled and ... parked. The rest of the time, it's shepherds and angels. Mostly shepherds.

There you are, out in the field near Bethlehem, keeping watch over your flock by night. Back in the Old Testament, it was an honored profession; but the years have not been kind and no one thinks much of shepherds these days. Apparently, you're pretty low in the pecking order too, because you've pulled the night shift – and, not only that, but you're the ones who have to work on Christmas (!).

Then the angel of the Lord appears – appears to you, and the glory of the Lord shines all around you. It's a terrifying sight, and then the angel speaks. Speaks *to you* and says, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

Whatever anybody else thinks of you shepherds, the angel speaks to give you good news. Good news of great joy for all, but given to you. The Savior is born, and born nearby. And lest there be any doubt, the angel says that the Savior is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the One chosen and anointed by God Himself to save the world from sin. People have been waiting for this news ever since Adam and Eve broke the universe and started it dying. But now the Christ has come, and who does the angel tell first? You! Before kings and nobles and priests and athletes and celebrities, you know that the Christ is born.

But that's not even the stunner, because the angel says something else: the Savior is Christ, the Lord. The Lord! He's God! That little baby in Bethlehem is frail flesh and blood, and He needs to nurse at His mother's breast if He is going to survive the week; and yet, He is still providing daily bread to all of creation. He's still figuring out that His fingers belong to Him; but it is in His creative hands that this world holds together.

Somehow, that frail little flesh-and-blood baby is fully God Himself.

That can't be the easiest thing to believe: in fact, even Christians today are prone to celebrate Christmas without confronting the mystery of the Incarnation. It's a mindbender, but it *is* an angel telling you, and the glory of the Lord still shines around you as if He Himself is visibly nearby; and, as it turns out, He is!

The Lord is near, and the angel tells you where to find Him: but don't look for more glory. Don't look for a golden cradle guarded by four cherubim with flaming swords. Don't even look for an infant that glows in the dark. No, says the angel, "this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Don't look for glory, but humility; not wealth, but poverty; not strength, but fragility: the Lord you seek is swaddled up and lying in an animal's food dish.

How about that: lots of folks would say that it's really tough to look lowlier and humbler than a shepherd; and the Lord says, "Oh, yeah? Watch this," and He shows that He comes to serve you too.

And then the multitude of angels arrives and they sing, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased." This birth brings glory to God on high. This glory brings peace and God's favor to His people. And the angels tell you!

So no wonder you go with haste: the Lord has made this thing known to you and told you where He can be found. And ... *you're off!* You leave your flocks behind for now. You find Mary and Joseph and, sure enough, the baby lying in a manger. Then you – you shepherds! – set the standard for evangelism that few attain: you make known what the Lord has made known. You repeat what He told you through the angels. It sounds like you can't stop talking about it – and you're not talking about the show that the angels put on. You're telling about the Child, the Christ, the Lord. You speak and the Holy Spirit does His thing: people hear and people wonder. Even Mary treasures these things and ponders them in her heart.

Then, as suddenly as it began, the story of Christmas in Luke is over. You return to your flocks. You return glorifying and praising God for all you've seen and heard, because you have been told. In the morning, nearly everyone will wake up unaware that anything is different.

But you know: Christ the Savior is born.

And with that, it's back to the sheep.

About those sheep ... We know something about the flocks under your care. In fact, we know that, according to the laws of the land, it's against the law to keep flocks of sheep in Judea – sheep belong in other pastures, not messing up the local fields like geese at a church in Idaho. These sheep would be contraband sheep and you would be outlaw shepherds, except for one provision. In certain places around Judea, like the area where you are, the law permits the keeping of sheep and cattle, but only for a specific purpose. See, just up the road from Bethlehem is Jerusalem, and in Jerusalem is the temple – and the temple is in need of plenty of sheep. At a bare minimum, they need two a day: one for sacrifice in the morning, and one when evening is nigh. Oh, you're not just any shepherds: you're the keepers of sacrificial lambs. Maybe you take turns driving them from Bethlehem to Jerusalem. Maybe you watch the sacrifices and wonder. Maybe you see those lambs from birth until their blood is shed.

Some scholars have even suggested that, since those lambs must be without blemish, you shepherds take special care when they are born. I'd like to see better sourcing, but they do propose that you swaddle newborn lambs in cloth so that they can't move until they've gotten over their "hello world – I'm a lamb!" stage. Once they settle down and stop kicking, they're un-swaddled and dwell among the flock until it's time to go to the temple.

So maybe that's why you shepherds have the stage at Christmas. It would appear that, even when the Lord tells us about His birth, He doesn't want the cross far from our minds, yes? He has

certainly sent His angels to the lowly likes of you to demonstrate that the Christ is born for all people. But He has also put you in the spotlight to tie the whole picture together, to say that all of history and all the Old Testament and all those sacrifices have led up to this moment.

Unto you is born this day in the city of David ... the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

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As a shepherd of the people of God's pasture, then, on Christmas Eve I will speak of you shepherds; and I will tell them what the angels said to you.

"Do not be afraid." There's plenty to cause fear in this world. There's always the lurking threat of unexpected trouble, even violence; there's always the fear of loss, of affliction and trouble ... or the fear that present loss, affliction and trouble will only get worse and never go away. You may be all alone and afraid that it will never change. You might be afraid that this world is God-forsaken. Of course, the shepherds were afraid of God and His glory, and you might be too: if old sins goad you, if you are weighed down with guilt and shame, rightly or not, you might be afraid of the Lord, fearful of facing Him, worried that He is out to get you. For any of these reasons, for all of these reasons, I say to you, "Do not be afraid." It's not just an empty assurance, a mantra to lower your blood pressure a point or two before the anxiety returns. I say it with good reason: all of these things can do you no lasting harm. They might harass you for a while, but not eternally. Why?

Because "unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Yup, unto *you*, whoever you might be. Whatever your heritage, He is the Savior of the nations. Whatever your sins, He is born to redeem you. Whatever your infirmities, He is born to deliver. Whatever your fears, He declares He is greater than them all. Why? Because your Savior is Christ, the Lord. God Himself is in diapers and lying in the manger, in the flesh for you. The Lord incarnate says, "Do not fear and be of good courage, for I am borne to bear all your sins, all your guilt, all your shame and all your infirmities to the cross. So I have; and so I have destroyed their power by My death ... and now I am risen from the dead. I will raise you from the dead too, and all that brings fear will be no more."

Do not be afraid, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord ... the Lamb of God.

This shall be a sign for you: you will find the Christ, the Word made flesh, present in His holy Word and delivered into your ears. And this shall be another sign for you: you will find the Christ swaddled in water and present in the font. And another, for you will find Him wrapped in bread and wine and lying on the altar.

No wonder you repent of your sins, those sins that would keep you lost in darkness. No wonder you sing the song of angels all year round: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom He is pleased!" God is pleased with you, because Christ is born for you! And has died for you! And is risen again for you forever!

So go! Go often to where He is to be found. Make haste, and treasure these things in your heart. Then go back to your own flock or whatever calling you have, and make known this great thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to you. Make it known to others, with glad tidings of great joy, for the words of angels to shepherds are as much for you as for them: unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

A blessed Christmas to you all!

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen