

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Jesus Is Visited By Shepherds

Luke 2:8-21

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Scripture

We are studying the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke in a sermon series I am calling, "To Seek and To Save the Lost."

Last week we examined the birth of Jesus. Today I want to look at what happened immediately following the birth of Jesus. Luke tells us that shepherds visited Jesus later on the same day of his birth.

Let's read about the shepherds' visit to Jesus in Luke 2:8-21:

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

**¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among those
with whom he is pleased!"**

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all

who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

²¹ And at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:8-20)

Introduction

In our culture many parents send out an announcement of the birth of their precious newborn child. Sometimes it is simply done via email, letter, or a phone call. Or, many choose to send out more elaborate email-grams or cards.

Pastor John MacArthur notes that “if the announcement of Jesus’ birth had been part of a humanly planned public relations campaign, it would have been handled very differently. The announcement would have targeted the powerful and influential in Israel: the high priest, the members of the Sanhedrin, the priests, Levites, scribes, Sadducees, and Pharisees. Instead God chose to reveal this glorious truth first of all to members of a lowly, despised group.”¹ God first announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds.

Today, I would like to look at the account of the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus in Luke 2:8-21.

Lesson

So, an analysis of the account of the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus will show us how to respond to Jesus. In Luke 2:8-21 we learn the following about the shepherds:

1. They Watched (2:8)

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *Luke 1-5*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2009), 152.

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 77.

2. They Wondered (2:9-14)
3. They Went (2:15-16)
4. They Witnessed (2:17-19)
5. They Worshiped (2:20-21)

I. They Watched (2:8)

First, we learn that the shepherds watched.

Luke said that **in the same region** where Jesus was born, which was Bethlehem, **there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night** (2:8).

These **shepherds** were simply going about their regular work. They watched the **flock** of sheep **by night**. It was probably a night just like every other night of the many thousands of nights that they watched the **flock**.

Although there was a time when **shepherds** enjoyed a good reputation, that was no longer the case. **Shepherds** were near the bottom of the social ladder. Because they lived and worked out in the fields, they were unable to keep the ceremonial law. Therefore, they were treated as unclean. They were regarded as liars and thieves, and so they were not allowed to testify in a court of law. The people despised **shepherds**. In fact, with the exception of lepers, **shepherds** were the lowest class of men living in that day.

So why did God first announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds? Commentator Phil Ryken says that various explanations have been offered.

Some say that the shepherds make a connection with King David, the royal ancestor of Jesus, who was also a shepherd.

Others note that there is a prophecy in Jeremiah that God would send the Savior when shepherds were watching their flocks in the region where Jesus was born. Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 33:13, "In the cities of the hill country, . . . the places

about Jerusalem, and in the cities of Judah, flocks shall again pass under the hands of the one who counts them, says the Lord.” And continuing in verses 15-16, “In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and . . . Judah will be saved.” By fulfilling this ancient prophecy, the shepherds prove that Jesus is the Savior.

But there is another reason why God first announced the birth of Jesus to shepherds. And the reason is that the gospel is for everyone, even those who might be considered lowest on the social ladder.²

You may be here today loaded with burdens or shame or guilt. You may feel that the world is against you. I want you to know that the gospel is for you! Just as God announced good news to the shepherds, he has good news for you today too! So, hang on as we continue examining the account of the shepherds visiting the baby Jesus.

II. They Wondered (2:9-14)

Second, we learn that the shepherds wondered.

They wondered at a number of startling events that night.

A. *At the Appearance of an Angel (2:9)*

First, the shepherds wondered at the appearance of an angel.

Luke said that **an angel of the Lord appeared to them** (2:9a). We don't know the name of this **angel** but many commentators believe that it was Gabriel, who had previously visited Zechariah and Mary.

Adding to the shock of the sudden appearance of **an angel, the glory of the Lord shone around them** with blazing brilliance (2:9b). Understandably, the shepherds **were filled**

² Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 77.

with great fear (2:9c). In the Bible, **fear** was the normal response whenever anyone encountered either **an angel** (cf. Daniel 8:15-18; 10:7-9, 16-17; Matthew 28:2-4; Luke 1:12, 26-30) or **the glory of the Lord** (cf. Isaiah 6:1-5; Ezekiel 1:28; 3:23; Matthew 17:5-6; Mark 4:41; 5:33; Acts 9:4; Revelation 1:17).

B. At the Statement of the Angel (2:10-12)

Second, the shepherds wondered at the statement of the angel.

The shepherds were so terrified by the sudden appearance of the angel and also by the glory of the Lord that the first thing that **the angel said to them** was, “**Fear not**” (2:10a). The shepherds had nothing to fear.

Then **the angel** told the shepherds why, “**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**” (2:10b-11).

Let me briefly unpack the statement of the angel.

The angel had come to bring **good news** to the shepherds. The Greek word for **good news** is the word from which we get “gospel.”³ And so the “gospel” is **good news**.

The message of the gospel brings **great joy** to all who believe it.

The angel also said that the good news is **for all the people**. At first it may seem that this applies to all people everywhere. However, that is not the meaning of this phrase. The angel did not say, “for all people,” but “**for all *the* people.**” The definite article (the) distinguishes these people from all the rest. So, to which people was the angel referring? Commentator Robert Stein says, “Luke envisioned the gospel as being for all

³ James Strong, vol. 1, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 33.

people, including the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-29; 18:10); but here, as in 3:21; 7:29; 8:47, the people of Israel were primarily in Luke's mind. The singular 'people' refers everywhere else in Luke to the people of Israel."⁴ The good news is not just for the Jews. It is indeed also for Gentiles. But the angel gave the good news to the Jews first. As Scripture says, the gospel is "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek" (Romans 1:16).

The good news is about the birth of a baby: "**For unto you is born this day**" (2:11a). What is surprising is that this child was born *to the shepherds*. The angel said, "**For unto you is born this day.**" Here is where the good news becomes personal. The angel was doing something more than telling the shepherds what happened. The angel also told them why it mattered. Normally, a baby is to born into a family. They are the ones who receive the gift of the child. But, in this case, the child was for the shepherds and for their salvation. Do you see that?

But the child is not just for the shepherds. Jesus is for everyone who receives him by faith. Jesus is for you too! The good news is for you because unto *you* is born a Savior.

Up until this point the angel did not say where this baby was born. So he identified the city of the baby's birth. He said that the baby was born "**in the city of David**" (2:11b), that is, in Bethlehem.

Then the angel gave the baby three titles that identified him: "**A Savior, who is Christ the Lord**" (2:11c). Commentator Darrell Bock says, "**Savior** points to his role as deliverer; **Christ** points to his office in terms of the promised Anointed One of God; and **Lord** indicates his sovereign authority."⁵

⁴ Robert H. Stein, vol. 24, *Luke*, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 108.

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 225.

To help the shepherds believe what was being said to them, the angel gave them a sign to confirm his promise, much like the signs that had been given to Zechariah and Mary. He said in verse 12, **“And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.”** The sign was not what Jesus was wearing, because most newborn babies wore **swaddling cloths**, but rather that that he would be **lying in a manger**.

C. At the Appearance of the Multitude of Angels (2:13a)

Third, the shepherds wondered at the appearance of the multitude of angels.

Before the shepherds could respond to the statement of the angel, **suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host** (2:13a).

A multitude of the heavenly host refers to “a very large group of angels from heaven.”⁶ Sometimes Christmas cards will have a picture of the sky lit up with thousands and thousands of angels. However, it is likely that the single angel was standing on the ground, and then this vast army of angels joined the angel on the ground too. I think that is more likely since there is no report that other people saw the angels.

D. At the Song of the Multitude of the Angels (2:13b-14)

And fourth, the shepherds wondered at the song of the multitude of angels.

This vast army of angels were **praising God and saying** (2:13b). The Bible does not say that they were singing. However, with a multitude of angels speaking, it must have sounded incredible. They said: **“Glory to God in the highest, and on**

⁶ Richard C. Blight, *An Exegetical Summary of Luke 1–11*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 84.

earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” (2:14).

This is now the fourth of five nativity songs that Luke has published. This song is called *Gloria in Excelsis Deo*. These are the first words of the Latin version of the song.

The angels’ song first glorified God in heaven. And then they pronounced **on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased**. Luke began this chapter by explaining that a decree had been issued by Caesar Augustus (2:1), which reminds us of the *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace that Augustus introduced. Augustus was hailed as the one who ended many years of civil war and introduced “peace on earth.” But Augustus only “gave peace as long as it was consistent with the interests of the Empire and the myth of his own glory.”⁷ But those who enjoyed the Roman peace did not have rest for their guilty souls. That is the peace that God alone provides!

But this peace is not for everyone. It is only for **those with whom God is pleased**. As Phil Ryken points out in his commentary: “The *Gloria* is often taken as a promise of universal salvation: ‘Peace on earth, goodwill to men.’ But as surprising as it may seem, this song actually teaches the doctrine of election.”⁸ God’s peace is only for **those with whom he is pleased**. According to Bible scholar Darrell Bock, the phrase “**with whom he is pleased**” is “is almost a technical phrase in first-century Judaism for God’s elect, those on whom God has poured out his favor.”⁹

The shepherds are a perfect example. They did not choose God. God chose them. They had to respond in faith, of course, but it was because of the sovereign grace of God that they were chosen to receive the good news.

⁷ Arnaldo Momigliano, Quoted in N. T. Wright, “The Most Dangerous Baby,” *Christianity Today* (Dec. 9, 1996).

⁸ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, Volume 1 (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 84.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1–9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 220.

III. They Went (2:15-16)

Third, we learn that the shepherds went.

Luke tells us that **when the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger (2:15-16).**

The shepherds heard the good news, they believed it, and they acted on their faith. Luke doesn't tell us what they did with the sheep. Perhaps one of them stayed behind. Or perhaps they closed the sheep pen, and prayed that no one would come and steal the sheep while they were gone.

IV. They Witnessed (2:17-19)

Fourth, we learn that the shepherds witnessed.

Luke doesn't give us many details about the visit to Jesus. They knew that of all the babies born in Bethlehem that night they were looking for the one that was lying in a manger.

Then Luke said that **when they saw the baby Jesus, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child (2:17).** The shepherds gave witness to all they met that the Savior, Christ the Lord had been born! The hope of Israel, the Savior of sinners, had come to earth! Now was the day of salvation! They were so filled with joy that they could not keep quiet. They told everyone!

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them (2:18). The people probably thought that the shepherds were a little weird. That is not unlike the reaction that you get when you are excited about Jesus and start telling others about him, isn't it?

But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering

them in her heart (2:19). One day she would share all that happened that night with Luke so that he could write the Gospel of Luke for all generations.

V. **They Worshiped (2:20-21)**

And fifth, we learn that the shepherds worshiped.

Luke said that **the shepherds returned** to the fields to continue watching their flock, **glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them** (2:20). We never hear of the shepherds again. But surely they worshiped God for the rest of their days, knowing that their Savior had arrived.

Finally, Luke noted that **at the end of eight days, when he was circumcised, he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb** (2:21).

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the account of shepherds visiting the baby Jesus in Luke 2:8-21, we should respond as the shepherds did.

The shepherds heard the revelation of God from the angel. They believed what they heard. And they then responded by telling others about Jesus, and worshiping God.

That should be our response as well. We should receive God's revelation, believe his word, then witness to others about the salvation that we have received, and worship God for sending Jesus to be our Savior.

If you have never put your faith in Jesus, I invite you to do so today. Jesus came to save everyone. No matter your situation, Jesus will be good news for you if you trust him to pay the penalty for your sin. Do so now. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

O Lord our God, we thank you for the visit of the shepherds to Jesus. I pray that if there is anyone here today who does not yet know Jesus savingly that you will grant that person faith in Jesus. And God, will you also make us who believe in Jesus as excited as the shepherds to tell others about Jesus.

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and tell others about Jesus!