

Christmas Eve

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CHRISTMAS EVE AND LOW LIFE SHEPHERDS
LUKE 2:8-14

(PROJECTOR ON--- SHEPHERDS PICTURE WITH JESUS) Who could not have their heart warmed by this nostalgic picture? We have the baby Jesus and a beaming mother Mary. Probably it is supposed to be Joseph on the right side of the picture. Then there are these cuddly sheep and a couple of youngsters. Then there are these adoring shepherds who have just received the angelic message that this baby is the Savior of the world. It turns out that there were a lot of people at the time who would have found this picture somewhat repulsive.

Most of us have enough basic Bible knowledge to know that shepherds had a noble history among the Jewish people and in most of the history of the Bible. On Sunday mornings we have been looking at the life of Abraham, and we have seen that this ancestor of the Jewish people was by career a shepherd. His son Isaac was also a shepherd as was his son Jacob as were his twelve sons who became the leaders of the twelve tribes of Israel. The economy of the Israelites eventually diversified. But centuries later we learn that the great king of Israel David began his work experience as a shepherd.

In the wider world culture shepherds were not always so highly respected. Genesis tells us the story of Joseph, one of the twelve sons of Jacob. He was sold into slavery in Egypt by his jealous brothers. God eventually raised him up to become the second most powerful man in Egypt. He brought his family down from Canaan to save them from a famine in the land. Before he brought them to meet the pharaoh of Egypt, he gave them specific instructions. According to Genesis #46 vv. 33 & 34, Joseph instructed his family, **“When Pharaoh calls you and says, ‘What is your occupation?’ you shall say, ‘Your servants have been keepers of livestock from our youth even until now, both we and our fathers,’ in order that you may dwell in the land of Goshen, for every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians.”**

Shepherds were an abomination to the Egyptians. Egypt was the most powerful nation in the world at the time. The dominant world culture regarded shepherds as loathsome. Four hundred years later Moses arrived on the scene. He grew up in the royal household of the Egyptians. But when he killed an Egyptian, he had to flee into the wilderness. There he became a shepherd. The story seems to picture this as a fall from great power and influence to the bottom of the social and economic scale. From that lowly position God called Moses to lead his people out of Egypt.

Five hundred years later David shows up on the scene. He was the greatest king of Israel. He happened to be from the little town of Bethlehem. The prophet Samuel arrived at the family house with the direction from God to appoint the next king of Israel. David had seven older brothers. David, as the youngest, wasn't even invited in to meet

the prophet at first. He was the one who was watching the family's sheep. In that family's culture he clearly had low job on the family totem pole.

So now we jump forward a thousand years in history to the time of that first Christmas. The divine message about the birth of a Savior, not just of Israel, but of the whole world, is delivered by angels to a bunch of shepherds. What are we to make of that? How would this announcement have been viewed by the wider culture?

It seems that shepherds did not have such a great reputation at this time. Some of this reputation was perhaps deserved. Some of it was not. Some shepherds were known for appropriating sheep which did not belong to them. Some shepherds grazed their sheep on land that did not belong to them. Then it was also difficult for shepherds to meet the strict requirements of religious cleanliness codes. They were often away from home. They dealt with animal fluids and waste products. They dealt with dead bodies. In the New Testament Gospels we learn that the Pharisees had added additional strict requirements to the Old Testament laws on cleanliness which made it almost impossible for shepherds to maintain ritual purity. So from the perspective of the dominant religious leadership of the day, shepherds were pretty low on the social and religious scale.

A Jewish philosopher from Egypt who lived in the time of Jesus said this, **“Such pursuits (as looking after sheep and goats) are held mean and inglorious.”** According to Jewish law that goes back to this time shepherds were not allowed to testify as witnesses in a court of law. They could not serve as judges. There was a Jewish writing called a Midrash which declared, **“There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd.”** A German scholar by the name of Joachim Jeremias says, **“...men who followed [these] trades... were not only despised, nay hated, by the people; they were *de jure* and officially deprived of rights and ostracized. Anyone engaging in such trades could never be a judge, and his inadmissibility as a witness put him on the same footing as a gentile slave.”** (*Jerusalem in the Time of Jesus*, Jeremias, p. 311)

So why would God send such an earthshaking announcement to shepherds? Such a way of doing things seemed to not only go against the dominant religious culture among the Jews but also among the stronger and more dominant Romans. Judea in terms of the geopolitics of the world at that time was but a bit player in the much more powerful and dominant Roman Empire. What would the Romans think of such an announcement?

It turns out that there was an announcement of a savior of the world in the Roman Empire about this time. But that savior was proclaimed to be Caesar Augustus who was ruler of the empire at the time when Jesus was born. Archaeologists have discovered an inscription from a town in what is today Turkey that was called Priene. This inscription speaks of the birthday of Caesar Augustus as the beginning of the gospel announcing his kingdom. The authors of the inscription are pagan priests writing in Greek who use the same word for “gospel” as the New Testament does. In this Calendar Inscription of Priene they announce a decree to start a new calendar system

based on the year of Augustus Ceasar's birth. So how did that calendar system work out? Whose birth actually became the basis of the counting of years?

Listen to how this inscription from Priene reads at one point: **“Since Providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, and since he, Caesar, by his appearance (excelled even our anticipations), surpassing all previous benefactors, and not even leaving to posterity any hope of surpassing what he has done, and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the gospel for the world that came by reason of him...”** So this was the proper way of announcing the coming of a savior in the Roman world. The proclamation came from authorized and respected priests and was recorded on a stone monument and it was addressed to the Roman emperor.

So again we are left with the question: Why would God deliver such an important declaration to low-life shepherds? There may be several reasons. But I will identify two. First, God has this way of bypassing dominant cultures and powerful political structures to reach ordinary people. Later this Jesus would call Himself a shepherd and He would say that He is looking for sheep who are willing to follow Him. He would later get criticized by the Pharisees, the religious elite, for hanging out with tax-gatherers and sinners. His response was: **“It is not those who are healthy who need a physician, but those who are sick; I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners.”** (Mark 2:17)

If you don't find yourself in the upper echelon of society, if you don't sense that you always fit in the world around you, if you sense that you are a hot mess, if you recognize that you are a sinner, then the message of the angels is for you. A Savior is born for you this day in Bethlehem.

A second key reason why this proclamation came to these shepherds in Bethlehem was that they had a very important job from the perspective of the Lord. According to the Old Testament Law faithful Jews who wanted to follow God's law had to be involved in bringing animal sacrifices to the temple in Jerusalem. The religious system which God ordained required lots of animal sacrifices. The Old Testament specifically required that sheep be sacrificed. This sacrificial system was designed to teach that sin is serious, that the wages of sin is death. God required the shedding of blood to cover the sins of the people.

The time of year when the most sheep would be required would be at Passover. For at Passover every Jewish family was required to provide a sheep to be killed. The first century Jewish historian Josephus says that as many as 265,000 lambs were sacrificed for this Jewish feast day. Where did they get all of these sheep and lambs? You see, Bethlehem was just a few miles south of Jerusalem. Many of the sheep which were

provided for the sacrifices in Jerusalem came from Bethlehem. The shepherds of Bethlehem provided the sacrifices which covered the sins of the people.

Do you see the significance? The preparation for Jesus to become the ultimate sacrifice who would pay the penalty for the sins of the world began in Bethlehem among these shepherds. For thirty plus years later the God-man Jesus would go to Jerusalem at Passover time and die on a Roman cross as the final sacrifice for the sins of the world. As a result of that sacrifice we can have forgiveness of sins and eternal life if we will simply put our trust in Jesus.

I have a friend from seminary who is pastor at Jerusalem Baptist Church. Usually tonight at this time he is conducting a service in Manger Square in Bethlehem. But this year Bethlehem is shut down to outside visitors because of the fighting that is going on in Gaza.

But the Lord continues to have a presence in Bethlehem. A guy by the name of John Leonard was a missionary to Muslims in France. It looked like he might have to return to the States. He was invited to substitute for a couple of weeks for his home church in Miami. He was involved in conducting a baptism service in the church when something unusual happened. He tells about it in a book that he wrote entitled *Get Real*. He says that an elder in the church came up to him at the end of the service and told him that a Latino man in the parking lot had something to confess and wanted to speak to the Father.

John Leonard was scheduled to return to France the next day and was reluctant to get involved with someone who was wanting to confess something to a priest. But he decided that the right thing was to go see him. He was standing outside at the far end of the parking lot. John went forward to meet him and the young man shook his hand. He told John. **“I’m a Palestinian from Bethlehem. I’m here today because I want to confess Jesus as my Lord, and I want to become a Christian.”** John asked him why he wanted to become a Christian and why he had come to this church today. This was his story:

“I was born in Bethlehem into an important Muslim family, but I never felt that Islam was for me. I never practiced Islam, except for keeping the fast at Ramadan, but everyone fasts during Ramadan. When I was in high school, each day I walked by the church where Jesus was born. Beside the church there was a beautiful garden that seemed calm and peaceful. One day I decided to go inside and sit in that quiet place. I like the garden so whenever I had time on my way home from school I would go sit in it. That garden became a special place for me.

“One day, while I was enjoying the garden, one of the Fathers asked if he could sit next to me. He said he had often seen me in the garden. I told him I hoped I was allowed to be there since I was a Muslim. The Father was very nice and said, ‘I’m happy that you are enjoying the garden; please feel free to come back whenever you like.’ Over the next several years, the Father and I became friends.

We spoke about many things, but what I enjoyed most was listening to stories about Jesus.

“As Muslims we’re taught to honor Jesus as a prophet, and although there’s a chapter in the Qur’an that speaks about Jesus, we don’t know a lot about him. I had never known any of the stories the Father told me. The more we spoke together the more I began to believe that Jesus was the truth and that I must follow him, but I was afraid to convert to Christianity because of my family. So I kept all of these things a secret. No one knew about the time I spent in the garden or about the conversations I had with the Father.

“I decided I would come to America to do my university studies and that while I was here I would confess my faith in Jesus.”

So this Palestinian Muslim from Bethlehem just happened to show up at a church where a missionary to Muslims from France was speaking who knew a little Arabic. John asked him how it was that he turned up at this church parking lot. Farid said, **“When I was delivering pizzas for Domino’s last night I drove down this street and God told me to come to this church to make my confession.”**

So John brought Farid to a friend’s home that night and went over the Christian gospel. John specifically talked about Jesus’ identification as the Lamb of God who had come to pay the penalty for the sins of the world. He explained Farid’s responsibility to put his trust in Jesus. That night this Muslim from Bethlehem did.

That same opportunity is available to any of us who have not already trusted in Jesus. The simple gospel is expressed in this verse in John’s gospel in #3 v. 16: **“For God so loved the world that He gave his unique Son that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”**

This same Jesus in this same New Testament gospel declared Himself to be the light of the world. In a time when darkness seems to be gaining an increasing hold in our world, that is a message which we need more than ever. According to John #8 v. 12, **“Then Jesus again spoke to them, saying, ‘I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the Light of life.’”**

We have a tradition on Christmas Eve to light candles to remind us of this claim of Jesus that He is the light of the world. He also told His followers in the Sermon on the Mount, **“You are the light of the world.”** He added a couple of verses later, **“Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.”**

So we are going to have ushers come forward to light our candles. Then we will proceed to sing the familiar Christmas carol “Silent Night.”