

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”*

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2:8-20)

Who did God Tell First?

Last week, I went to my son’s Christmas concert at school. One of the choirs sang a song called “Run, Shepherds, Run!” Obviously, it was a song about the angels coming to the shepherds in Bethlehem and announcing the birth of Christ and then those shepherds racing off to Bethlehem to see this great thing that God had told them about. Again and again, the choir sang the refrain, “Run, shepherds, run!” It struck me for a couple of reasons. First of all, the angel never actually said that. In fact, the angel did not tell the shepherds to go to Bethlehem at all. He just told them what had happened and what they would find there. The other reason it struck me was that it sounded condescending. “Hey! You shepherds, run!” Outside of a sports practice, how often do we tell people to run? We tell children to run. In the past, people told slaves and servants to run. But when was the last time your boss told you to run and do something? In the song, the angel did that over and over again. While that seemed funny to me, it did make me think about those shepherds and their humble station in life. That was who God sent these angels to.

I.

God didn’t send the angels to Herod’s palace. That’s where the Wise Men went because they assumed the king would be born there. But God made a different choice. God didn’t send the angels to the temple. He didn’t tell the priests or the Levites or the experts in Old Testament law first. **Who did God tell first?**

Humble shepherds who believed his message.

Being a shepherd isn’t a high paying job. It’s dirty and repetitive and most of the time, I bet it’s pretty boring. You have to get the sheep to their pasture and back again and watch them while they stand around and eat. You have to count them over and over and again and find the strays. You have to protect them from predators. When they’re having lambs, you have to sleep out in the fields with them. Most shepherds were either the owners of very small flocks, or they were hired men who took care of the large flocks of rich men. Shepherds were not the movers or shakers of society. And that’s who God chose to hear the message first.

This isn’t about the backstory of church leaders. As far as we know, none of the men who heard the angel’s words that night went on to become a leader in the New Testament Church. If they were even members of the congregations that formed after Jesus ascended, God doesn’t tell us that. They may very well have been. But we can’t tell that because God doesn’t bother to tell us the name of even one of the shepherds who heard the message that night. We know nothing of their lives and faith except what we read in these thirteen verses.

But what a wonderful faith we do see! Now, at first, the shepherds were terrified. Why? Because they were standing in the presence of a holy angel. They were sinners and they could not deny that truth at that moment. They were terrified that this angel had come in judgment to make them pay. So the very first thing

the angel said was, **“Do not be afraid.”** He hadn’t come to strike them down for their sins. He had come to announce good news of great joy, not just for them but for all people. This message was intended for every human being on earth. This message was intended to bring joy to us sinners in all the pain and sorrow of life down here. Jesus was born to free us from our fear and guilt, to free us from our dread of facing God on Judgment Day. That message changed the shepherds’ fear to joy.

The angel said, **“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”** “Good news” is the gospel. Did you hear good news in that simple sentence? It’s one of the greatest summaries of the gospel there is. Note, first of all, that the good news is all about Jesus. It’s about what God does for us. Faith is our reaction to that message; it’s trusting all that God promises and all that he did. But the work, that’s God’s doing from first to last. He does it “for you,” for us sinners who desperately need it.

The child in the manger was in the town of David. That’s Bethlehem, the town where King David grew up. He was a shepherd, too – the youngest of eight sons stuck with taking care of the sheep while his brothers were doing more important stuff. But God raised him up to be king and the ancestor of the promised Savior. The people were waiting for the true King to come from David’s ancient line. But that King would not be a warrior who would conquer Israel’s physical enemies or set up a human empire. In fact, to all human eyes, he would lose. He would never own a home, never take a wife, never hold office in Israel. In the end, his enemies would execute him in the most painful and shameful way the Romans could think of. But by losing, by dying, he won. He rescued us from our sin and death by dying in our place and rising again from the dead.

The angel called Jesus “Christ the Lord.” Christ means “The Anointed One” – the one chosen by God to do this work. The one promised since the Garden of Eden to come and undo our sin. He is the Lord. For us, a lord is just a high ranking person. But for the Jews, it was a name for God. You see, in the Old Testament, there’s a special name for God. Sometimes we say it as “Jehovah.” The people of Israel probably said something like “Yahweh.” But when Jesus lived, the people no longer pronounced that name. They considered it to be too holy to speak. So when they read their Bibles, even in church, whenever they came to that name, they would say the Hebrew word for “my Lord.” Whenever the New Testament quotes a passage that has this name for God in it, it puts in the Greek word for “Lord.” So they were used to hearing God referred to as “my Lord” or “the Lord.” When the angel said that this was “Christ the Lord” almost certainly, they heard him saying, “This is the promised Savior, God himself.”

All that their people had been waiting for since Moses led them out of Egypt was now being fulfilled. How did the shepherds respond? They believed. They didn’t question. They didn’t argue with the angel like Zechariah had in the chapter before this. They simply heard and believed. Why? Because the Holy Spirit works through the gospel message and he creates faith. He is working tonight. Because that baby wasn’t just born for those shepherds outside of Bethlehem. He didn’t just come to save the Jewish people or the people of his day. The angel announced good news of great joy for all people. Jesus came for us. Jesus came to take away our guilt and our fear. What sins would you never want anyone to hear about? What sins would destroy your life if they came out? What sins do you fight against and lose the battle with and hate yourself because of? What sins make you fear facing God? Do not be afraid. Jesus has come to rescue you.

II.

Faith isn’t about how smart you are. It’s not about how important you are. It’s about God changing your heart. Many years ago, when I was studying for the ministry, I spent a summer in New York City working at a mission congregation. One day, the pastor sent me to subway station to talk to people. Lots of people were willing to talk with me. I had conversations with people from almost every ethnic background imaginable, except for one: middle class white people. Now, you’d think that a guy like me could talk to people like that, right? I’m middle class white guy. But those middle class white guys had no time for me because they thought they were doing OK. But those minorities and immigrants, those people that our society isn’t always fair to, knew how precarious life really is. They understood that they needed God. If I could tell them something about God, it might be worth listening to. God loves humble hearts. Humble hearts rejoice to hear from him. When Jesus was born, **who did God tell first? Humble shepherds who rejoiced at his message.**

Those shepherds went from being terrified to rejoicing in about five minutes. How did they show their new found joy? **“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”** No one worried about what was going to happen to the sheep if they left work to go and see their

Savior. They trusted that this was much more important. Luke tells us that they raced to Bethlehem. Maybe the angel didn't say, "Run, shepherds, run!" but those shepherds did cover the ground as fast as they could.

The angel told them to look for a baby in a manger and that's what they found. Luke says: **"When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."** They told everyone why they had come! They even told Mary and Joseph, who had a pretty good idea already who was lying in that manger. But they needed that gospel message, too. And the good news about Jesus never leaves a person untouched. All those who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. Now, I'd like to know if any of them came to faith in Jesus because of these words. I'd like to know how many of the shepherds and the people they spoke to will be in heaven with us. And when we get there, maybe we'll have a chance to ask around. But down here, God doesn't tell us how many conversions there were that night. He only tells us that the shepherds rejoiced and they couldn't keep the message in.

That is still true today. Almost every year some parent whose kids never went to church before but who now go to our school, tells me how their kids talk about Christlight, the religion classes they have here. Those kids are excited and they tell their parents what they learned about Jesus or Moses or John the Baptist. Their faith and their joy shine through. I hope that we adults don't let our grown up concerns about how we appear to other people interfere with letting our joy shine through, too. I know we have that joy because I know we wrestle with our sin and our hurt in this life. Jesus gives us comfort and relief. The more we dwell on what he has given us, the more joy we have. Let that joy shine forth.

The shepherds did that. And then they went back to work praising God for all that they had seen and heard. Praising God that it was all just as they had been told. Christ had come for them. And God loved them enough to let them know. He chose them to hear it first. Now, that doesn't mean that God didn't love other people, too. In time, King Herod would hear. In time, all the leaders and the important people would know. In time, Jesus would go to the temple and travel around the country, and he would send his disciples into all the world, because God loves everyone, not just humble shepherds. But God does love the meek and the humble. God does love the simple believer that no one will ever hear of. If this world is still here in a hundred years, if Peace Lutheran Church is still gathered here on this corner a century from now, how many people will even know our names? How many people will be able to tell about our joy at Christmas and our efforts to teach our children to know their Savior and to reach out and tell other people that Jesus has come? Almost none. But God will know. We will be standing with him in heaven, praising that baby who was born and who lived and died and rose to give us life. God chose humble shepherds, God chose nobodies, so that you and I know that he loves us nobodies. He loves you and me and he remembers our struggles and sees our faith. He sent Jesus to give us joy. Rejoice in your Savior's birth. Amen.