

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 2:15–20 (NIV84)

We Have Heard and Seen So Much!

Did you have a good Christmas? What was the most memorable thing about it this year? If we took a moment and shared our answers to that question, we'd probably hear things like grandparents visiting or going to see people we love. For those families that had a new baby this year, or for those families that lost someone this year, those changes will no doubt be things you remember. Maybe there's a funny story about something that happened this year that you'll be telling for years to come. What was the most memorable thing about Christmas this year for you? Did you even think of the gospel? Was the story of the baby in the manger even a candidate for the most memorable thing about Christmas this year? Obviously, in one sense it is the most memorable thing, because we all remember that story. That story is the real reason for our Christmas season. On New Year's Eve, it's natural for us to look back and see what was significant about this year. When it comes to the gospel, it isn't just Christmas that was memorable. Since January 1st, we've heard the whole story about Jesus' life. We've heard how he healed and preached. We've watched him suffer and die and rise again, all to give us life. Like the shepherds who went to Bethlehem that first Christmas, **we have heard and see so much this year!**

I.

Are we amazed by it? The shepherds certainly were. When an angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, he told them that a Savior had been born for them in Bethlehem. He even gave them a sign – a way of recognizing the child they were looking for: they would find the baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a manger. As soon as the angel was gone, the shepherds said to each other, **"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."**

Then they told everyone what they had heard and seen. And it's clear that they felt the same thing that they communicated to their hearers: wonder and awe at what God was doing. Luke tells us that **"all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them."** What was it that was so amazing? That baby in the manger was Christ the Lord. That simple sentence **"He is Christ the Lord"** was full of meaning and wonder. All that we've spent the last year studying, all that we're going to consider in the coming year, are wrapped up in those five words, "He is Christ the Lord." Christ means the "Anointed One" – the One God chose to be our Savior. It implies the endless striving of God to save us. God had a plan before he created the world. God looked forward not just to one new year, but to all the thousands of new years that would come in the entire history of this universe and he knew that we would need a savior. So he planned for him and sent him. He chose the only person who could fulfill that plan and controlled all of history to bring him into this world on that night when the shepherds were sleeping out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks.

That Christ is "the Lord." Who is the Lord? We use that term every Sunday to pray and sing to God. So did the Jewish people. At the time of Christ, the Jewish people no longer said the ancient name for God, a name you and I know as Jehovah. Instead, even when that name came up in the Bible, they said "the Lord" or "my Lord." Our Bibles today reflect that by putting the LORD in all capital letters whenever that name occurs in the Old Testament. When the shepherds heard the angel call the baby "Christ the Lord," their Jewish minds would've heard "Christ the true God." That baby in the manger is God come in human form. At that message, the shepherds were amazed. And they told everyone they could about their Savior even before anyone understood that he was going to die and rise to save them.

You and I have spent the last year hearing and seeing those wondrous things that God has done. Are we amazed by it? Or did it really just sound like a lot of the "same old, same old"? Were we bored to go through

that life of Christ one more time? Did we feel like we didn't hear much this year that really mattered to our lives? And if that's the case, whose fault is it? Without a doubt, it's mine. I'm sure that many pastors do a much better job of making all this real and pertinent to your life. For all those failings as a servant of the Word, I have to kneel before God and beg his forgiveness and then rededicate myself to proclaiming the gospel to you in its truth and its purity, but also in a way that informs and engages you and that demonstrates why all this matters to your life.

But just as I have to confess my sins and faults as a preacher, don't you have to confess your sins and faults as a hearer? The truth is, the more you care about God's word, the more you will want to explore what that word says. The more you explore the deep truths of God's word, the more interesting you will find sermons that show you the amazing things of God. Ten years ago, when my children were very young, my parents took us to Germany. We visited some of the sites associated with Martin Luther's life. But how could we take a four and six year old, to say nothing of a one year old, through museums and churches and castles? You all know what happens when little kids get bored in a place like that. Well, my wife hit on a solution. She ordered coloring books and story books about Luther and she taught them about the places we would go. When we got to the Wartburg Castle, where Luther hid from the emperor and where he translated the New Testament, we had to endure a very long lecture, in German, about a Catholic saint who lived in the castle two hundred years before Luther did. Guess what? Our little kids were getting very difficult to manage. By the time we got to the Luther exhibit, they were at the point of a total meltdown. But as soon as we got into that room, their attitude changed. The older two children began to recognize the things they had been learning about. They got excited. They ran from glass case to glass case asking us to read what was inside. People on the tour with us commented on these little kids who were fascinated by this Lutheran history.

Why did that happen? Of course, I'm tempted to say that it's because my kids are exceptional. But that's not the reason. They were interested because they knew something about that history already. The more you know about something, the more interested you are in learning more. That's just how our minds work. When you add to that the work of the Holy Spirit through the gospel, you can't escape the conclusion: the more you know about Christ, the more interested you will be in learning more. Then you will do what Mary did – Luke says **“Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”**

Do we treasure up all that we've heard this year and ponder it in our heart? If not, the blame rests first and foremost on ourselves. We can blame boring pastors all we want. But no matter how boring our pastors are, we still have to admit that we haven't taken the interest in God's Word that every one of us should. Why not? Because we're all sinners. The sinner inside doesn't care about what God says. Every time we're bored, every time our mind wanders during a sermon, every time we count the minutes until we can escape from here, our sinful nature is in control. Luther called that “despising preaching and his Word.” He reminds us that we should fear and love God that we regard that Word as holy and gladly hear and learn it. And when that's not true about us, we deserve nothing but death and hell.

But that's exactly what this whole year of hearing God's Word is about: Christ died because we are sinners. Christ died because we sinners don't care enough about God's Word. Christ died because the best response of our sinful hearts is to be bored with this incredible message. Christ died because even we believers have a sinner inside us who can't wait for this service to be over. Christ died and he paid for that sinner inside us and for the sin we're guilty of. Then he rose and said that God sees us as even more excited and amazed than the shepherds were. He sees us as perfect. And in heaven, that's what we will be.

II.

All that was built into what the angels told the shepherds. They were the first worshippers of Christ outside of his immediate family. And in them, we see how faith responds to what God has done: praise. My friends, **we have seen and heard so much this year! Will we praise God for it?**

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” When we see and hear Christ and all that he has done for us, the believer inside has to praise God. Do we do that? Sure we do! We praise God in every hymn we sing and in all good Christmas carols. Now, I'm not talking about “Deck the Halls” and “Jingle Bells.” But think about what we really said when we sang, “Joy to the world, the Lord has come!” Or “Peace on earth and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” We praised God in those great songs of Christmas.

What is praising God? It's announcing what he has done and thanking him for it. It's holding up the wonders of the gospel for all to see them. It's proclaiming the gospel. That's what the new man inside us wants to do. Seen from that perspective, praise isn't just our hymns and our prayers. It's every time we proclaim the gospel. We praise God when we read the Christmas story to our children during our home devotions. We praise God when our pastor proclaims him and our teachers teach about him. The shepherds praised God when they told everybody they could find all that the angel had said to them about that child. We praise God when we share the good news with our friends and neighbors.

Do we do that? Do you parents have devotions with your children? Or do you use the excuse that you don't know how? If that's really the problem, come and see me. I'll teach you how. Do you talk about Jesus with friends and neighbors? I don't mean forcing a conversation to be a witness opportunity. But when the subject naturally comes up, do you tell what Christ has done for you? For those shepherds, this was new and exciting stuff. Maybe we who've heard and seen these things for so many years don't feel the same excitement and so we don't feel the same drive to share it. Why is that? It goes back to the same problem: the sinner in our hearts who hates God and doesn't find anything exciting in his message at all. The answer is still the same: confessing that sin and trusting in Christ as our Savior.

You know that Savior. He has loved you and taken that sin away. That's the greatest reason to be excited about the gospel. That's the message that we want to live and breathe and share. Praising God is a way of life. It flows from a heart that's constantly tuning in to the word of God. Tonight, we are on verge of a new year. God willing, it will again be a year of hearing and seeing the wonderful things of Christ. May those wonderful things fill our hearts with joy and love for our Savior. May they fill our lips with the good news about Christ. Amen.