

The Shepherds  
Luke 2:8-20, Luke 2:1

### **Slide 1**

Most people in America are familiar with the shepherd's story found in Luke 2:8-20, even if they rarely open a Bible.

These verses from Luke have even entered the popular culture, through Linus' famous speech in the Charlie Brown Christmas video.

Every December since 1965, in between televised scenes of the Grinch slithering around Whoville, and George Bailey being saved by Clarence the angel, we've had Linus who discovered the true meaning of Christmas in the gospel of Luke, chapter 2.

Today, it'll be a welcome change of pace to hear the Bible being quoted on television instead of election news.

But, my concern is, that with all the annual repetitions, the familiarity of the story of the shepherds could cause us to take it for granted, to overlook just how amazing this incident was.

This is not just a story of God's love for some shepherds; it's a story about God's love for us.

And if we study this story carefully, we'll see that it has a message of love and hope for each of us here today.

### **Slide 2**

So, let's begin by looking at the most obvious feature of the story. To whom does God announce the birth of His Son? Who does He invite to come and see the new baby?

I'll tell you who, a ragtag collection of sheep herders, that's who!

There's only one announcement of Christ's birth recorded in Scripture, only one invitation from God to anyone to come visit Mary and Joseph and the infant Jesus.

And that one invitation went to a bunch of uneducated, smelly, low-class, social and religious outcasts... a bunch of shepherds.

So, let me tell you about these shepherds. They were the last people of whom you'd expect God to take notice. Why??

First, they were religious outcasts. According to Jewish religious law, these men were unclean which prevented them from participating in any of the Jewish feasts or holy days.

Also, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was going to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, or to participate in one of the annual feasts, they were stuck in the fields watching the sheep.

A modern day example might be a trucker or a shift worker, whose job keeps them from attending church.

It wasn't their fault. Yet, they were looked down on regardless of what might have been in their hearts since they weren't able to participate in the religious life of the community.

Not only that, but shepherds were social outcasts. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked on with suspicion.

Like the way people today look at gypsies or carnival workers. Because, if something came up missing, it must have been those shepherds.

Also, they weren't permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, as their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

And on top of all that, they didn't have much contact with other people. Most of the time, as verse 8 tells us, they were "*living out in the fields.*"

Theirs wasn't a 40-hour a week job. They didn't come home at night. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water, watching while the sheep grazed.

At night they had to keep an eye out for predators causing them to sleep in the pen with the sheep to guard against theft and animal attack.

Shepherds could also identify each one of their sheep by sight. He knew his sheep and they knew him.

John 10:2-4, "*The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.*"

Being a shepherd was lonely, wearisome, usually very boring and tedious, and yet sometimes extremely dangerous. It gave them a lot of contact with sheep, but very little exposure to people.

Many shepherds learned to play the flute or some other musical instrument because they had hours and hours with nothing to do but watch sheep eat grass.

No wonder that David, the shepherd who became king of Israel, was such an accomplished musician.

### **Slide 3**

Now, step back for a moment. Imagine you're God and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever; an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ.

The birth of the One who'll be the Savior of the whole world. The One for whom the nation of Israel has been waiting and hoping and praying for thousands of years.

Finally, He's come! So, who do you announce it to? Who do you tell? Who do you invite to come and see?

The point is that you would expect an event like the birth of Christ to be announced to the most important people in the nation like political leaders – kings, governors, magistrates, even Caesar.

Or maybe religious leaders – Priests, rabbis, synagogue officials, the head of the Jewish ruling council, the Sanhedrin so they could all worship their Messiah. But none of them were invited.

Now, some foreign dignitaries did figure it out and followed the star of Bethlehem, but they didn't get an angelic messenger, a choir of angels, or an invitation.

Only these few poor shepherds; these social and religious outcasts, received the announcement.

Can you imagine the conductor of the angel choir announcing this to them? It's like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsing all year to perform Handel's Messiah, but then give the concert to only eight guys on the building's maintenance crew.

So, why? Why did God do this? Why did He send His angels to announce the birth of Christ to these shepherds, to invite them, and them only, to come and see the child?

Were the shepherds especially pious, unusually holy? In spite of the fact they couldn't participate in organized religion, were they outstanding believers in God?

It's doubtful, although the passage does say that when they got the news, they believed what the angels said, and did what the angels told them to do.

But there's nothing in the text to indicate that they were more religious than anyone else.

Were they expecting this, were they looking to God to visit them? Could they have anticipated this in any way? No.

In fact, if I were one of those shepherds, I'd probably be convinced that God had no idea who I was.

Since I don't sacrifice at the temple, I don't show up for the feasts, I don't go to synagogue; and my deepest theological discussions are with a bunch of stupid, snot-nosed sheep.

In fact, if God did know who I was, I'd believe He probably didn't think much of me.

#### **Slide 4**

So, why did God send the angels to the shepherds? Several possible answers have been proposed, such as the fact that Jesus Himself was later called the Good Shepherd, caring for us as His flock.

But I prefer a simpler explanation. God wanted to show that His love doesn't discriminate on the basis of class, wealth, or social standing.

He doesn't respect kings and princes more than hourly laborers. He doesn't value priests and pastors above the people in the pews.

God doesn't show favoritism; He doesn't give preferential treatment to one group of people over another. His love is available to all on the same basis – faith in Jesus Christ, and faith alone.

In fact, many passages of Scripture indicate that God loves to lift up the lowly and humble, while at the same time bringing down the proud and self-satisfied:

*2 Samuel 22:28, "You save the humble, but your eyes are on the haughty to bring them low."*

*Psalm 149:4, "For the LORD takes delight in his people; he crowns the humble with salvation."*

*Isaiah 66:1-2, "This is what the LORD says: ... "This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word."*

*Matthew 23:12, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."*

*1 Peter 5:5-6, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble."*

In other words, God demonstrated, by His choice of these humble shepherds, that Jesus wasn't going to be the Savior of just the political, social, or religious elite.

Jesus wasn't going to be the Savior only of kings and governors, or popes and priests. Jesus was to be the Savior of all, equally. He wouldn't give preference to any group or any class.

Nor does He discriminate on the basis of intelligence, education, wealth, profession, political power, social standing, or any of the other qualities by which human beings are judged.

His love is offered indiscriminately to anyone who'll repent and believe, anyone who'll trust in Him as Savior.

Paul makes the same point in his first letter to the Corinthians: 1 Corinthians 1:26-31, *“Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things--and the things that are not--to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. It is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God--that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: “Let him who boasts boast in the Lord.”*”

In other words, God likes to use people who're humble and lowly and ordinary, because that makes His power and wisdom all the more evident.

When He uses people who are gifted and powerful, then the results can be attributed to human effort and human talent.

But if He uses people of obviously low to average abilities, then all the credit for the results go to Him.

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So, what does all this mean to us? Well, if you identify with the shepherds, it should be very encouraging.

I imagine that many nights, as the shepherds sat out in those cold, lonely fields, with nothing but dumb animals to keep them company, they looked over at the village, saw the lights of the homes and heard the faint sound of families and people laughing, and wished they could be a part of that.

Maybe you've felt that way too. Not one of the "beautiful people," not especially wealthy or powerful or influential. Not likely to ever see your name in the paper for some great accomplishment; on the social fringes.

Maybe when you compare your level of religious observance to others, the comparison isn't favorable. Spotty church attendance, little Bible reading, infrequent prayer.

You think that if God is even aware you exist, He probably doesn't have a very favorable opinion of you. And you know what? A lot of people deep down, secretly feel like that.

Even people you'd think of as "having it all together." On the surface, everything is going great. But on the inside, they feel like they don't fit in. They feel like God doesn't care, or couldn't care, about someone like them.

If any of that description strikes a chord with you, then I have good news. Great news. The best news possible. God loves you. Just like He loved those shepherds. And you're special to Him.

Just like those shepherds were special to Him, so special that He gave them the incredible privilege of being the first to hear of Christ's birth, being the first people other than Joseph and Mary to lay eyes on the Son of God, being the first to tell others about Christ.

He didn't give those privileges to the Roman Caesar or to the Jewish high priest, He gave it to the shepherds.

Not in spite of who they were, but **because** of who they were... humble, ordinary people with no high opinion of themselves.

Simple people who were willing to believe what God told them and to just do what God commanded them.



When they heard the news, they didn't seek out the religious professionals for a second opinion. They simply accepted what the angels told them.

When they were invited to visit Bethlehem to see the newborn Messiah, they didn't worry about who was going to watch their sheep.

They didn't get bogged down in debates about how they were going to find one small baby in such a large town. They simply obeyed and went.

## **Slide 6**

### Conclusion

Will you do that today? God didn't send an angel to give you the news, but He did send me and He did give you His Word... the Bible. God is inviting you today, just like He invited the shepherds.

Will you receive His love? Will you believe what He says and do what He asks? Will you acknowledge your need of forgiveness and put your trust in Jesus Christ for salvation?

You don't need to be a genius or a member of the "in" crowd. You just need to believe and obey.

Listen to Christ's promise: John 3:16, *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."* And John 6:37, *"Whoever comes to me I will never drive away."*

But what if you don't identify with the shepherds? What if you identify with the social and religious elite, the gifted, the accomplished, the powerful?

Then recognize that in God's sight, you're on the same level as everyone else. You don't have a head start with God.

In fact, anything that causes you to think too highly of yourself; anything that stimulates pride, actually puts you farther behind. If that's the case, then ask God to purify your heart and grant you true humility.

Understand that you're accepted before God on the same basis as anyone else – not because of anything you are, or anything you have done, but only because of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

He gave His life and suffered the penalty for your sin so that you could have eternal life and receive forgiveness. Humble yourself before God, so that He doesn't have to do it for you.

Finally, what did the shepherds do in response to what they had seen and heard? Verse 17 tells us that they "spread the word."

Let's do the same, especially at this time of the year for the sake of all the others who are still waiting to hear the Good News.