

The Shepherds Encounter Jesus: Luke 2:8-20

Read Luke 2:8-20. The record of the angelic visit to the shepherds when Jesus was born is a vital part of the Christmas story.

There are three particularly interesting aspects of this story. **First**, God choose to reveal that great event to shepherds. **Second**, the response of the shepherds to the declaration that a Savior had come illustrates the response God expects from all of us. **Third**, what the shepherds did after the angelic visit should be a challenge to Christians of all ages.

First, it is exciting that God would choose to reveal that important event to shepherds. Luke records that when the angels appeared to the shepherds the shepherds were filled with fear and were told they didn't have to be afraid. The visitation of any angel would upset anyone but there was far more to this than merely fearing an angel. They were afraid because of the place shepherds found themselves in when Jesus was born. Historically the shepherd was a central part of Jewish life. Abraham, the father of the nation was a shepherd as were his sons and grandsons. Everyone knows that David, the greatest king of Israel, was a shepherd and that he wrote the 23rd Psalm which we all know as the shepherd Psalm. The Old Testament often talks of God caring for His people as a shepherd cares for his flock. (See Psalm 80:1-2; Isaiah 40:11.) By the time of the New Testament, shepherds were despised even though sheep were at the heart of their economy.

There was some farming in Jesus' day, but sheep were all important to them. Sheep provided the food and clothing they needed as well as being essential to their worship. Shepherds, however, were not the ones any good Jew would have expect God to appear to with anything but judgment. Shepherds were viewed as just a little better than Gentiles and as individuals far from God. The religious leaders of the day continually told them that all they could expect from God was condemnation and judgment.

Sheep are among the most dependant animals God created. Left alone they will not survive long. They cannot find their way back once they have wandered even a few feet from the rest of them. They cannot find their own food or water. They have absolutely no way to defend themselves. Because of that, sheep desperately need a shepherd and they need him 24/7.

The rich who owned the larger herds of sheep were unwilling to commit to that kind of work so they hired others to do it for them. Only the poor and uneducated who could not find any other work were willing to do that kind of labor. The down and out of society were hired to look after someone else's sheep.

Think about such individuals. They were outdoors almost continually. They had no social amenities such as a shower. They were so poor that they wore whatever they had well beyond the time it should have become a rag. Because of spending literally day after day in the fields they were out of touch with what was going on in the rest of Israel. They were not even allowed to testify in court because they were considered uninformed and unreliable.

The fact that they were hired meant they were not willing to risk their lives for the sake of the rich owners. It was not uncommon for shepherds to help themselves to one or more of the sheep. An absentee landowner was not going to miss them. Bottom line, they were not viewed as reliable, contributing individuals of society.

Add in the spiritual dimension or perhaps we should say the lack of it and understand why no one would expect God to care about them. When religious celebrations were taking place in Jerusalem and faithful Jews were at the temple as God had instructed, the shepherds were miles away in the fields tending sheep. Being absent from required worship meant they were considered irreligious. The rabbis used them as examples of what one should not be. Shepherds were encouraged to think of themselves as worthless sinners awaiting God's judgment.

Then came the birth of the Savior and God sent a whole host of His angels to announce to the poorest of the poor, to the lowest of the low, to the loneliest of the lonely that Jesus had been born. The first words uttered by the angels were "Do not be afraid." The shepherds had been taught that angels came from God and their primary task was to judge sinners. All their lives they had been told they were no good sinners and God could not wait to judge them. Suddenly a host of angels appeared to them. Simple conclusion, this is it. This is the judgment they said was coming.

If you think about it, it should seem as strange to us as it had to have seemed to the shepherds that God would declare to these seemingly sinful shepherds that a Savior was born, and God announced it to them first. The reality of it is that God has always been interested in coming into the lives of those who know they are sinners. About 30 years later the religious leaders, who are mentioned in the Christmas story only in connection with the Wise Men, accused Jesus of associating with sinners. Jesus responded that He had not come to care for those who were well but for those who were sick.

When God chose to tell the world that Jesus was born, He chose to announce it first to lowly shepherds who knew they were sinners deserving judgment. God wants us to know that His love and compassion is always available to everyone regardless of how sinful one might have been. What an exciting declaration He made to them. *"Shepherds, you truly do deserve judgment, as do all men, but if you accept the Savior whose birth took place in Bethlehem you need not fear. He came to be our Savior."*

God is an awesome God who will judge Satan and sinners, but He is also the God who loves us so much He sent His Son to a manger and in time to a Cross to bear our guilt and thus our death sentence. That means that when we accept His provision, we hear Him declare to us as He did to the shepherds of old, *"You don't need to be afraid of death and judgment any longer. It's all been cared for. I call you unto myself not to condemn you but to give my peace to you."* That peace with God is available to all who will accept it because Jesus was born in a manger and later died in our place on a Cross.

The story does not end there. Read Luke 2:15-20. Second, the shepherds truly believed that a Savior had come (Luke 2:15 and they determined to go and see what had come to pass, not to go and see if it came to pass. They believed what God said. They accepted the message that a Savior was born. Belief in the provision Jesus made for our sins is essential and we must appropriate that provision in our lives by asking Jesus to be our Shepherd/Redeemer. The shepherds believed. Their belief was demonstrated when they acted on what they knew. They went. In fact, they not only went they went with haste. And they worshipped this child born in a manger (Luke 2:16). The message of Christmas is a message that calls on us to respond in a life changing way. For far too many, Christmas is a season that seems to come too quickly and is over far too soon. The message of Christmas, however, is that a Savior has been born and He is worthy of our going to Him and of our worship. Verse 20 tells us that when they returned to their fields, they

continued to praise God. He is worthy of worship as we seek to live each day as He would have us live.

Third, they shared the news with others (Luke 2:17, 18). They spread the word to others. It is always our responsibility to share with those around us that a Savior has been born.

God announced to the Shepherds that a Savior had come. We know from later teachings that anyone who accepts the provision He made for us on the Cross need not fear death or the judgment that follows because their names will be written in the Book of Life. God wants us to know that His love and compassion are available to everyone regardless of social standing. Perhaps He chose the shepherds because He knew they would believe Him, they would act on it, they would share it with others, and they would praise Him for His gift to them. God makes His love known to us and we should be encouraged to respond as the shepherds did.