

Title: A Shepherd from Bethlehem  
Text: Luke 2.8-20  
Theme: How THE Shepherd cared for little shepherds  
Series: Advent 2017, #3  
Prop Stmtnt: The shepherds illustrate the desired response of everyone who hears about Christ.

Read Text:

Let's say that you buy someone a book for Christmas and they open it up and after thanking you ask, "*Where should I start reading?*" What is the obvious answer? At the beginning! If you start reading the book about 80% into the story, there is all sorts of stuff that you are going to miss because you have no idea of what has taken place before. The Bible does not begin with Luke chapter 2. Luke's gospel is about 80% into the Bible, which means that a lot has already happened and some of those things are necessary to understand if you are going to realize the significance of the events in Luke 2.

For example, when you read in Luke 2 that "*in the same region there were shepherds*", all sorts of alarms, sirens and flashing red lights ought to be going off in your head because you know that in the same region is referring to Bethlehem and Bethlehem has a long history with fields and shepherds. In fact, the story of God's people is closely intertwined with shepherds.

Adam's son Abel was a shepherd. Abraham was a shepherd. His son Isaac was a shepherd. His son Jacob (whose name was changed to Israel) was a shepherd and his 12 sons were all shepherds. But, being a shepherd was not a prestigious line of work with a long and glorious tradition. In fact, when Jacob's son Joseph was in Egypt and rose to a position of prominence, he sent for his father and his brothers to come and live in Egypt, where they could survive the famine that was upon that region of the world. But, in Egypt, shepherds were despised, so Joseph prepped his dad before he introduced his dad to the Pharaoh by telling him not to mention that he and the brothers were shepherds. It's sort of like the young girl bringing her boyfriend home for the first time to have dinner with the family. If dad bleeds Donald Trump, you tell your boyfriend NOT to mention that he was the local chairman for the elect Hillary campaign right? So, imagine that after he meets your dad that he gives him a signed copy of Hillary's new book. The evening is probably not going to go well. So, when Pharaoh asks Jacob what he and the boys do, Jacob completely ignores the advice his son gives him and immediately tells the Pharaoh that they are all shepherds.

Well, about 400 years later, a shepherd by the name of Moses leads the 2 million+ Israelites, like a flock out of the nation of Egypt and toward their own land. So, this shepherd theme is going on when in the book of Ruth, we read this fascinating little story that centers on a tiny little village called Bethlehem. Bethlehem has already popped up here and there in the Bible, but now an entire book of Bible is focused on Bethlehem. That is a setup because one book later (1 Samuel) the prophet Samuel is sent to Bethlehem in order to anoint the next king of Israel, who happens to be out in a field

nearby keeping watch over his flocks. You can't make this stuff up. And when the prophet gets to the home to anoint the man that God has chosen to be king, the family doesn't even bother to call David to the meeting because, after all, he's just a shepherd! But, this shepherd from Bethlehem does become a king and not only a king, but the Lord establishes a covenant with David and tells him that from his line, there is going to be a King who will rule all other kings and whose reign will be forever.

You would think that by now, shepherds would lose some of their crummy reputation especially, when the most beloved of all kings this nation has ever had, the king, who to this day is so significant that his star is the symbol on the flag of the nation, not only used to be a shepherd but wrote the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, you would think that people would have a little higher view of shepherds. But, they don't. In fact, shepherds were considered to be such lowlifes; their testimony was not even admissible in a court of law.

But, God has a long history of doing things that you would never expect and using people that most everyone else overlooks. God chose Israel, a nation of slaves to be his people. Who picks a nation of slaves? God does! Where is the Cushite kingdom, the Egyptian kingdom, the Assyrian Kingdom, the Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Grecian and Roman Kingdoms? Where are the Ammonites, the Hittites, the Hivites and Jebusites? How do you explain the fact that there were all of these cultures, civilizations, countries, kingdoms and people groups who had so many more advantages than Israel, yet here we are thousands of years later and who is still standing? It's Israel. If our government recognized the actual capital of any other nation in the world, by moving our embassy to correspond to it, would anyone care? No. But, the fact that our government announced that our embassy would indeed be moved to Jerusalem, why does this set off riots and threats of terrorism? It's Israel. I do not have to tell you to not take your eyes off of Israel, because the world always is watching. But why? It is such a tiny spit of land that does not really occupy anything of serious geographical significance. If you were going to pick a nation to show off to the world, this would not be it. But God did. Who would have picked Moses who claimed to stutter when he spoke to pull off the most amazing liberation event in the history of the world? Who would have picked a shepherd boy from Bethlehem to go down into the valley of certain death armed with nothing but a sling and 5 stones and come out of it holding the head of Goliath while the Philistine army runs pell-mell in defeat?

So, when you read that "in the same region (that is near Bethlehem) there were shepherds out in the field..." your eyebrow ought to raise, your pulse ought to quicken, you sit up a bit more in your seat and put your seatbelt on because you know by now that something big is about to happen, and it is.

#### **I. God goes after those others are tempted to ignore.**

You ought to chuckle to yourself because God has done it again. In a tiny little hamlet that looks as if time itself forgot about it, where there was probably only one local inn and anymore than 6 guests would constitute "no vacancy", where a no-name, non-descript couple from an even more backward and obscure town are there, with absolutely

nothing about them that would cause them to be respected and taken seriously, are all just part of the pieces that God puts into the scene into which Christ is born. Over and over God goes after those others are tempted to ignore. It would be just like God to send his angels to these shepherds when the shepherds were in the exact same fields that David used to be in. But, that is speculation on my part. What is obvious is that...

#### **A. The angels were sent on a specific mission**

The angel said, “I bring you good news of great joy.” This angel is functioning as a messenger, which is one of the primary responsibilities of angels. This messenger is not creating the message, but delivering it. And while the shepherds aren’t the main focus of the story, they are a beautiful part of it. God sent angels to these shepherds. If an angel showed up with a message for you, you would be stunned. But, if the message was personal, from God, you would be overwhelmed to think that God really knows you.

#### **B. God knew the whereabouts and activities of those shepherds.**

The angels showed up in the right place because God knew where these shepherds were and what they were doing. They, like us, had many opportunities to question if God really exists and if he does, does he even know that I am alive and does he care? Again, remember that shepherds occupy the bottom rung of society’s food chain. These are the dishwashers in the back kitchen, the workers on the midnight shift that no one sees, these are the ones who never get recognized in the National Honor Society, or Who’s Who lists. These are the ones that no one in society cares about and if no one in society cares about you, then it is really easy to assume that God doesn’t either. But God knew who they were, what they were doing and where they were and he sent these angels to them. The angels did not have to go looking for them. God knew the whereabouts and activities of these shepherds – and you. “Behold, I bring YOU good news.” This is personal. This means that...

#### **C. God made a deliberate choice to make sure they heard the gospel.**

If you are here today, you are going to hear the gospel. Most of you who are here today have already heard the gospel. If you hear the gospel, it is by design. God sends people to tell others about the gospel. It’s usually not by means of angels, but God has done that before and here he does it. You didn’t just happen to hear the gospel. You didn’t just happen to be in place where you accidentally overheard the gospel. There were millions of circumstantial scenarios that came together for you to hear the gospel and God ordained all of them because he deliberately intended for you to hear the gospel. That should amaze you, thrill you and humble you. I mentioned last week, that one of the greatest weapons that God has given you in your fight against bitterness, discouragement and sinful habits is being amazed at your salvation. Knowing that God made a deliberate choice to make sure that you heard the gospel is humbling.

### **II. The News is good because of what it means.**

Luke writes his gospel for a man whom he identifies as Theophilus. Theophilus is a name that means “lover of God” and is probably not his real name. In the beginning of his gospel account Luke refers to Theophilus as “*the most excellent*” which, interestingly is the same title that Paul uses to address Felix and Festus, two Roman governors. It is therefore, likely that Luke researched and wrote about the life of Christ so that the things that this prominent official heard about Christ, would be verified by Luke’s investigation. So, how did Luke know exactly what the angel said? No doubt Luke interviewed Mary who told him everything that the shepherds said had happened, and it is very possible that Luke found some of the shepherds themselves and corroborated the account. Can you imagine? Of course, the shepherds were probably accused of smoking some wacky tobacky that night or something like that. But now, this doctor, this researcher, this believer, believes them and is listening to the account and writing it down. I think this is very possible because Luke is specific in his language. The way Luke writes this down is intended for us, the readers, to know that this is exactly what the angel said. And what the angel said is the gospel. He says so. “Fear not, for behold, I (am gospelizing you) I am bringing you (gospel) good news of great joy that will be for all the people.” So, right here we find out that while God is intentionally giving this message to the shepherds, this message is not only for the shepherds, which is something that they clearly understand, as we will see. But look at the actual content of this announcement.

A Savior is born. This means that One has come to rescue us. This means that we need to be rescued. This means that we have a problem we cannot solve. I was in a car with a guy on I-94. His car had one of those self-correcting steering features. So if you get drowsy and start to drift out of your lane then the car is supposed to correct that and put you back in your lane. It also has one of those self-braking features so, if you are not paying attention and you get too close to the person in front of you, then your vehicle will automatically slow down. Some of you design and build this stuff and I’ve got to tell you that it’s really impressive expect for someone like me, it takes the fun out of driving. So, here’s what happens. Companies analyze accident data and go to the engineers and say, “hey drivers have a problem with rear-ending the car in front of them” or texting or falling asleep while they drive and drifting out of their lane. Can we create a technology that helps cars stay in their lanes and not hit objects in front of them?”

The story of the human race is replete with stories of encountering problems and finding solutions for them. But the one problem we are plagued with is the problem of our sin. We cannot fix that problem. But here is the problem with that problem. We are usually willing to admit that we have some issues, but we are usually too proud to admit how serious they really are. We tend to think that a little bit of religion may not be bad if it sort of helps us to stay in our lane or slow down and not run into the person in front of us. But that is not what Christ came for. He came as a Savior. It’s not that we needed help staying in our lane, we were on the wrong road, going in the wrong direction and driving right to hell.

If God were cruel, then he would simply watch us destroy ourselves from a distance and do nothing about it. But, he sent us a Savior and this Savior was born. That means that this Savior was a man. This Savior was part of our human race. And this Savior is the

Messiah. That is what Christ means. But there is more. This Savior, this Messiah is the Lord. Not a lord; but, he is the Lord. That means that his Savior, who has been born of man is also God. So, right here, the angel tells the Shepherds about the humanity, deity, identity and purpose of the birth of Christ. Every word the angel said matters because the shepherds and you need to know these truths so that you can believe them. This really matters. This is not just a nice saying for a Christmas card. This is an announcement from heaven that is to be blasted to the ends of the earth. And the Shepherds are sitting there at ground zero.

On January 24, 1982, 81,270 packed the Pontiac Silverdome for the Super Bowl game between the 49ers and the Bengals, while an estimated 85 million watched on TV. It seemed like a big deal. People said it was a big deal. But with the destruction of the Silverdome (sort of) and the slow motion implosion of the NFL this season, it's safe to say, that in the story of life, that Super Bowl XVI really isn't that big of a deal. Just because people say something is a big deal doesn't mean it's a big deal. But, when the entire sky lights up with angels, it's pretty safe to say, that this is s a big deal. And it was, not only because of the appearance of the angels but because of what was announced. And yet, the whole thing had to be so stunning that when it was over, these guys were probably wondering what had happened. I think it was a wonderful grace for the angel to tell the shepherds that God had given them a sign. God gave them a reason to believe.

### III. **God gives us reasons to believe.**

*You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths.* That in and of itself is not surprising, is it? We should expect to find a baby that has just recently been born, to be wrapped in swaddling cloths. You parents know what that is. You lay out the blanket, you pull up the piece from the bottom so the infants' feet are secure, then you bind it snugly around the child and tuck it in like a little cocoon so that the infant has the same familiar closeness of being in the womb. Finding an infant wrapped in swaddling cloths is not much of a sign. But lying in a manger? Ok, now we just got a little weird. Who puts an infant into a feeding trough for animals?

So, the shepherds who are stunned by what just happened now go on a mission to find this child. It wouldn't be too difficult because all they have to do is find the local sheds barns or cattle stalls in the area, wherever a manger might be, something that they would all be very familiar with. Again, Bethlehem is tiny and provincial. It was probably not too difficult. But, can you imagine their awe when the announcement by the angel is confirmed by their discovery to find this baby exactly like they had been told. What do you do with that? Well, the obvious response is to believe.

But, you may be sitting here thinking how that is all well and good for the shepherds, but God hasn't given you any signs like that at least not any that you can think of. In fact, there are things that you have asked God for, and he didn't do it and you are seriously wondering if God really exists at all cause you told God that he would just give you a sign, then you would believe. Belief is not easy. I know that, but more importantly, God knows that. He is fully aware of how prone we are to believe ourselves and how quick we

are to doubt him. So, God has given you an incredible sign. In fact Peter, who saw way more than the shepherds did, said that we have something that is even more certain than his memories of his experiences with Christ. We have his Word.

Look at this thing. This book is amazing. It absolutely defies all serious attempts to discredit it as a made-up work by mere men. Oh sure, men were the human instruments who penned it, but what they penned was all orchestrated by God so that 66 different books by over 40 authors over 1,500 years all write in wondrous harmony. It is so amazing it is crazy. You can't make this stuff up. You hold a sign in your hands called the Bible. Its very existence screams the validity of God and the historical reality of Jesus Christ. So, what are you going to do with your sign?

#### IV. **The Shepherds show us what saving faith looks like.**

They believed. How do we know they believed? They said so. "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." They did not say, "let's go and investigate this to see if this is really true." No, they believed it and the legitimacy of their believe is seen in the fact that they all took off running toward the city. Their faith drove their obedience.

Saving faith means that you profess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord. If you believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you are going to say it. But its not just saying it. Saving faith is professing with your mouth and believing in your heart. That means to be all in. And if you are all in, then your faith will demonstrate itself in what you do.

My daughter and a friend have been sharing Christ with another officer in the Army. Recently, the conversations about the gospel came to this point of – what are you going to do with this? They both said that following Christ is not something you test, like sticking your toe in the water to see if you like the temperature. It's not something that you try out for a while and then maybe you try something else. No, if you follow Christ, you are all in. There's no turning back. He's Savior, yes, but he is also Christ, the Lord. That means; he is King.

Well, they took off running and not only did they respond to the announcement with faith that evidenced itself in their obedience, but then they started telling others. That's what saving faith looks like. If you really believe in Christ, then you are going to follow Christ and you are going to tell others. Listen, if you do not tell others about Christ, you need to seriously ask yourself if you really believe in Him. Sure others may blow you off, ignore you, and be condescending toward you. So, what? That probably happened to the shepherds too. It certainly happened to the disciples and anyone who heard the rumor that Mary was a virgin probably made more than a few jokes about that. Doesn't matter. When it's true, you've got to tell others. The shepherds did not do an apologetics seminar did they? Neither do you. They just told others what had happened to them. That is why Jesus told us to be witnesses. Just tell others what you have witnessed in your life.

#### V. **It's all amazing!**

The Shepherds were amazed. Then after they showed up and told Mary and Joseph what had happened, well the text says that Mary was amazed and everyone who heard what the shepherds said, were also amazed. 2,000 years later, we are still talking about that night because it really was amazing. Can you think of anything in your life that the world will be talking about 2,000 years from now? I can – Jesus.

Conclusion:

The story did not end there. The baby, king who was born in the line of kings started by a king who used to be a shepherd, grew up and said, “I am the good Shepherd.” He said this after defining what a good shepherd does. A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. And this king demonstrated that he was a good shepherd because he laid down his life by dying on the cross as the payment for the sins of every single person who would ever believe in him. These people who believe in him he has called them to be part of a new nation called the church, that is to be led by men who are called, shepherds.

The story of God’s people has always and will always involve shepherds.