

WITHIN YOU
Luke 2

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First Baptist Church
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It wasn't much of a place – but it was his. It had been his father's before him, and his father's, and so on. There weren't many places like this in town.

It wasn't much of a town. Just a small town down the road from Jerusalem, but it was the home of King David. Imagine that! A king being born right here! That made the town special – but still not very big.

He thought about that on this day of all days. People were streaming in – still streaming in from everywhere. He had never seen so many in his town. Where did they all come from?

Business was good – almost too good – at his place. All the thatched rooms were taken. People were even camping in the courtyard. The sights, sounds, and smells of people and animals milling about almost drowned out the sight and sound of the coins now tucked away in a safe place.

As he moved about the crowd, he watched and listened. He was still nervous about some of the things he had seen and heard. There was a great deal of anger and hostility in this bunch of weary travelers.

The orders from Rome were being bitterly opposed but grudgingly obeyed. The census was Caesar's way of keeping the Roman boot on the necks of the Jews. No one liked it, but what could you do? The penalty for rebellion was swift and certain. So they came. It was more than inconvenient. It was galling to the proud people who were united in their common hatred of everything Roman.

Those born of the house of David had to report to the home of David – to this little town whose name meant “the house of bread.”

“Well,” thought the innkeeper to himself, “if any more show up, there will be no more bread.”

The mood of the travelers had begun to change. There was an almost festive attitude now. He breathed a sigh of relief as he turned toward the gate of his inn. There were still more seeking admittance. Only a few more, and then he would have to turn them away. There was little enough room now, and some were beginning to complain.

Night was falling. He glanced to the distant hills. The glow of the cooking fires meant that the shepherds of the temple flocks were settling down for the evening.

He laughed to himself about the irony of it. Those dirty, profane shepherds tending animals that were destined to be used for sacrifices in the holy place in the Temple. What a contrast: lowly shepherds and unblemished lambs. Those shepherds wouldn't even be allowed entrance into the temple grounds to see their perfect animals used in the rituals. They weren't good enough, but their animals were!

“Oh, well,” he sighed, “who said life was fair?” (Mark O. Wilbanks, “Christmas: Joy to the World!” www.preaching.com)

This night did not really seem any different from other nights. A shepherd was at his point of duty, gazing into the stars, wondering if, indeed, God would ever send a Messiah, wondering if He would hear the cries of His people.

The shepherds took turns, so probably only a few, or just one was awake.

An angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds. All at once, with no forewarning, the darkness was overtaken by light. The light was so powerful it was as if the sun itself had risen. The brilliance was overpowering.

By now every shepherd was awake, but wondering if he were not somehow in a nightmare. The glory, the *doxa*, of the Lord illumined the entire pasture. Strangely enough, the usually timid and spookish sheep did not seem bothered by the event. But the shepherds, for once, were not worried about saving the sheep. They were worried about themselves. They had long forgotten that sheep were around.

It is natural that men should be afraid when the invisible, the unknown, suddenly becomes visible to them.

The angel of the Lord anticipates that fear. “Fear not.” That was certainly easier for him to say than it was for the shepherds to do! They were fearful; they were helpless – but they trusted and listened, because they could do no other.

I. THE SHEPHERDS HEARD THE MESSAGE.

V. 8-14

They listened as the angel brought to them the good tidings that in Bethlehem, the city of David, the long-awaited Messiah had been born today. The hope of the ages has today been fulfilled!

The Savior is here. God's anointed one has at last arrived.

It is good news for all people, everywhere!

The shepherds heard the messenger.

Can you remember the first time that you heard – that is, really understood the news that Christ had come?

How your heart danced at the understanding!

To know that your sins can be forgiven.

To know that the Savior has come.

To know that death no longer reigns. The Savior has come.

To know that life now has purpose. The Savior has come.

To know that God has heard the cries of His people. The Savior has come.

The shepherds heard the message – the new age had appeared, things would be forever changed.

Some of us can remember the first time that we understood that the Savior had come.

Life forever changes when you hear that message.

It forces you to make ultimate choices when you hear that message. Life can no longer be lived in the neutral zone. You are forced to the point of decision. Are you hearing the message today? I don't know how many times you have heard the gospel story. Perhaps we have heard the message so many times that we have become numb to it.

God born. God becomes man. There is God's Son – dependent, helpless, crying – the baby that gives us hope.

Without the message of the baby, we have no hope. We have nothing to offer. The message is dependent on Him, the baby of Bethlehem, being the anointed one of God.

By now the story for you is too predictable, the lines memorized. But hear the story again for the first time. God broke into history. A poor Jewish teen was His mother. A stall in a small city, His abode. The angels tell a bunch of shepherds of God's plan, of God's act. The kings of the world sleep in silence as the King of Kings makes a manger His bed.

The angel gives them a sign by which they might locate the Savior – a most unexpected sign from a glorious angel. The child shall be wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. Surely in a meager city like Bethlehem there would be many babes in swaddling clothes, but ironically, only this special baby – the Christ Child – was to be placed in a common feeding trough.

Then, from the depths of the invisible world of celestial beings, there is all at once a great host of angels with the angel who brought the tidings. It is their heavenly calling and pleasure to glorify

God continually. And how they praise Him, there around the group of shepherds chosen by God to be the beholder of this celestial glory.

The manger and the cross standing at the two extremities of the Savior's earthly life seem most fit and congruous the one to the other. He is to wear through life a peasant's garb; he is to associate with fisherman; the lowly are to be his disciples; the cold mountains are often to be his only bed; he is to say, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not where to lay his head;" nothing, therefore, could be more fitting than that in his season of humiliation, when he laid aside all his glory, and took upon himself the form of a servant, and condescended even to the lowest estate, he should be laid in a manger.

By being in a manger he was declared to be the king of the poor. They, doubtless, were at once able to recognize his relationship to them, from the position in which they found him. "This shall be a sign unto you; you shall find the child wrapped in swaddling-clothes and lying in a manger." In the eyes of the poor, imperial robes excite no affection, a man in their own garb attracts their confidence. Workingmen cleave to a leader of their own order, believing in him because he knows their toils, sympathizes in their sorrows, and feels an interest in all their concerns. Great commanders have readily won the hearts of their soldiers by sharing their hardships and roughing it as if they belonged to the ranks. The King of Men who was born in Bethlehem was not exempted in his infancy from the common calamities of the poor, nay, his lot was even worse than theirs. (Charles H. Spurgeon, "No Room for Christ in the Inn," www.preaching.com)

II. NOTICE SECONDLY, NOT ONLY DID THE SHEPHERDS HEAR THE MESSAGE OF THE ANGELS, THEY ALSO HEADED THE MESSAGE!

It is one thing to hear – it is another thing to act!

If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost. (Corrie Ten Boom, "Each New Day," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 31, #18.+)

Verse 15.

The host of angels had appeared unexpectedly and suddenly, but, perhaps, they departed gradually so that the shepherds could see them ascending to heaven.

Verse 16.

The shepherds make haste, heeding the message of the angels. They are obedient to the word delivered to them. They must act upon it.

Some here this morning have heard the Good News about the birth of the Babe, but they have failed to follow in obedience!

It is never enough to hear. We must always act upon that which we hear.

Would not the story seem truncated if the shepherds were to refuse to let the birth announcement interrupt their lives?

Could you imagine, for one moment, a scene in which the angelic choir, in all their brilliance, slowly fades into the black night? The shepherds look at each other, seemingly only slightly disturbed, only to go about the task of tending sheep as “business as usual.”

But that is not the case. The shepherds not only heard the angelic message, they heeded it as well. It would have been an absurd ending to the story if the shepherds had only heard but not heeded, if they had walked on in the darkness of the night never seeking to find the Babe at Bethlehem – the light of the world.

Perhaps there are some here this morning who have heard the story, but have yet to allow the story to have an effect on their lives.

They act as ridiculously as the shepherd who might ignore the message of the angel. The Son of God was within their grasp - – dare they ignore Him? The Son of God is within your grasp. Dare you ignore Him?

By your presence here today, I know you have heard. The question remains, will you likewise heed?

Jesus didn’t come into the world only to teach us a better way, or show us how to live, or simply to heal the sick and raise the dead, though He did all these things. Nor did He come into the world to condemn it.

Rather, Jesus came to save us for God almighty; to turn us against unrighteousness.

He came because we needed a savior. From the beginning, God’s plan was that Jesus would save us from our sins. Before Christ was born, an angel said to Joseph, “You are going to give Him the name Jesus, because He will save his people from their sins.”

What began at Bethlehem was finished at Calvary.

The God-man – Infinite and an Infant. Eternal, and yet born of woman. Almighty, and yet hanging on a woman’s breast. Supporting a universe, and yet needing to be carried in a mother’s arms. King of angels, and yet the reputed son of Joseph. Heir of all things, and yet the carpenter’s despised son. (C. H. Spurgeon, “New Park Street Pulpit,” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 33, #18+)

III. BUT NOTE, NOT ONLY DID THE SHEPHERDS HEAR THE MESSENGER, NOT ONLY DID THEY HEED THE MESSAGE, BUT THEY HERALDED IT AS WELL!

Verses 17-18.

What had been made known to them, they now made known. Just as they were the first persons to whom the glad tidings had been communicated, so, in turn, they were the first proclaimers of the event to others.

Could they keep such a wonderful message to themselves?

The message had been shared to them. In turn, they must share it.

The message has been shared to you. In turn, you must share it.

Could you imagine the shepherds seeing the glory of God and the hope of man, only to turn and be silent?

No. No. They were like the robin of the morning with a song to sing.

They were the watchmen on the wall with a horn to blast.

They were men with hope to share.

What about you? Perhaps you've heard, you've heeded, but you've never heralded.

I'm afraid one of the areas in which we fail most as followers of Christ is in sharing the good news. The Great Commission has become the great omission. We become keepers of the aquarium instead of fishers of men. We need to return to the "go and tell" attitude of the New Testament church rather than the "come and hear" approach of today.

If this world is to be won to Christ, it's going to require the effort of all church members, not just ministers. Could you imagine a football game in which fifty football players sat on the sidelines as they cheered on their coaches whom they'd sent onto the playing field? It wouldn't be much of a football game, would it? The players have to get off the sidelines and play the game. We can't just keep sending the coaches (missionaries, ministers) out onto the field to play.

Dr. Lynn Broughton, the founder of the Baptist Tabernacle in Georgia, was one of the great preachers of the generation gone by. In the foyer of the church one day, he found a teenage boy. He engaged the boy in conversation and asked him where he went to church. The boy said, "Right here." "How long have you been going here?" "Nine years," the boy said. He was fourteen at the time and had been at Broughton's church since age five. Broughton said, "Tell me son, are you a Christian?" He replied, "No sir, I'm not." Broughton said, "You've been coming here nine years and you aren't a Christian. Why not?" The boy said, "Dr. Broughton, to tell you the truth, I don't know how to become a Christian." Lynn Broughton then took just fifteen minutes to explain the gospel to that young man and lead him to Christ. Looking back on the incident, he said, "I was able to do in 15 minutes of one-on-one evangelism with that boy what I had not been able to do in nine years from the pulpit."

Someone told you. Now, you tell others.

Who in your family does not know God? Have you prayed for them?

Who in your workplace is without a church family? Have you invited them to worship with you?

We must, like the shepherds of old, hear, heed and herald the message.

They were not worthy. We are not worthy. But God places the Baby before men and says, "I'm doing a wondrous thing." He places the Baby of Bethlehem before you and invites you to allow Him to be born in your own heart.

If Jesus were born 1,000 times in Bethlehem and never in you – you are still lost and hopeless.

But the Bethlehem Babe awaits. He says:

"Come to me..."

"Follow me..."

"Die with me..."

"Rise with me..."