

**GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY
CHRISTMAS
Luke 2:8-20**

**Dr. Howard Batson
First Baptist Church
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I'll never forget that night. As usual, I was tending the sheep. Boy, how I know that tending sheep is a job of very little status, so I hesitate to share with you my occupation. I don't know how to make you understand how we shepherds were looked upon. We traveled through the country and some thought that we had sticky fingers. They claimed that we didn't know the difference between thine and mine. Perhaps our status was something like that of a preacher/used car salesman/personal injury lawyer in your day. Nobody trusted us.

I'm not at all sure why we were so harshly thought of. People never realize how difficult and skilled our labor really is. We are responsible for the safety and welfare of the owner's flocks. The **Sheep depend on us**. Unlike goats that can meander untended, sheep need the gentle care of a shepherd. They must be led to water and shelter, they must be soothed with medicinal oils. More than any other livestock, sheep require great care. Sheep are very timid animals and they refuse to lie down and rest until all of their needs are met. They will not lie down unless they are free from friction with others of their kind. If tormented by flies or parasites, they will not rest. If they feel the need to find food, they constantly search, and they will not lie down unless they are free from all fear. (Philip Keller, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23*) And of course our largest problem is keeping the sheep **away from thieves and wild beasts of prey**. That's right, our job could be very dangerous.

It was a difficult life, **living in tents**, really, **I hate to admit it** but the long days and nights made for a **lonely life**. Being away from my family so very much was a burden indeed. In fact, I talked to the sheep so much that they learned my voice. I can remember on one occasion that my sheep became all intertwined with the sheep of another shepherd's herd at a water spot south of Hebron. But a simple call **could get my sheep to "follow me."**

But still, we could never get any respect. I like to remind all of the merchants about Psalm 23, a favorite of mine, where the Lord himself is pictured as a shepherd. You can't really understand that psalm unless you are a shepherd.

**The Lord is My Shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;
He leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul;
He leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil:
for thou art with me;
Thy rod and Thy staff they comfort me.**

**Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of mine enemies:
Thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life:
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.**

More than once I've reminded people of the occupation of King David. You remember the story. **Jesse** of the city of Bethlehem, **Bethlehem**, a small town not many people had heard of until it was made known as the city of David, and the city of the birth of the babe in a manger. But, I'll tell you more about the babe later.

All of Jesse's sons passed by the prophet Samuel and the Lord said no as each one stood before Him. I can just see Samuel as he stands perplexed. He knew that a king was to be chosen on that day from among the sons of Jesse.

"Jesse, are you sure that all of your boys are here?"

"There remains the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep."

Oh yes, our profession was that of the king, King David. David, a shepherd, the son of a shepherd and the one to become the shepherd king of Israel.

"Go. Get the lad, I will not sit down until he comes."

And Samuel took the horn of oil, the horn of a sheep no doubt, and he anointed David. And it is written that the Spirit of the Lord came mightily upon David from that day forward. It was not the strongest, nor the oldest, nor the wisest chosen on that day. But nations trembled and giants fell when they stood in the shepherd boy's way.

How did I start babbling on about King David? Oh yeah, I was defending the worthiness of the shepherd.

Despite David's background, we remain as outcasts. In fact, we are not even permitted to keep the ceremonial law which means so much to religious people.

In the court of law, a shepherd is not permitted to give testimony, everyone thinks of us as liars.

So it seems odd **that on that winter night** shepherds were chosen as the first to testify to the glorious event. The one that was not permitted to testify concerning the things among men was chosen to be the first to testify concerning the things of God.

Given our reputation, I'll not be surprised if you decide not to believe me. But I do speak the truth, however incredible the story that I am going to share might seem to you.

That night I was keeping the flock. This flock that we were tending was close to the city of Bethlehem. These sheep were special because, as Rabbinic custom demanded, these sheep were

headed to Jerusalem to be used as a sacrifice in the Temple. They were to be offered up to God in order to appease his wrath over the sins of men. Little did I know that that night the Christ child, the ultimate sacrificial lamb of God was to be born.

It was already dark, and it was my turn to stand guard over the flock. Thieves and hungry beasts were forever in the shadows. But the night seemed ordinary enough. I was daydreaming about something. To tell you the truth, I cannot even remember what I was thinking about. I was probably trying to quiet the sheep for a peaceful night. As a shepherd, I had spent many late hours gazing into the heavens, wondering if all that I had been taught about God was true. Did He really desire to have a relationship with mankind? If so, He seemed so very far away.

But all of a sudden the Darkness was instantly overtaken by what seemed to be the rising of the sun. And in all the brilliance I could make out what I thought was an angel, the angel of the Lord.

I have faced wild beasts of every sort, and even a thief or two. You know those times in your life when you can't even feel the limbs of your body, all you can feel is the unrelenting pounding of your heart. As my heart grew louder and louder, it seemed as my heart had moved upward and became stuck as a lump in my throat. I was terrified as I have never been terrified before. Who was this terrible creature that was before me?

Who am I that the angel of the lord should appear to me?

I'm neither prophet, priest, nor king.

I had not been trained to interpret dreams and visions, for this terrible event I was not prepared. Funny, I was not even able to lift my rod to defend myself. Each shepherd boy, from the time that he starts to tend his father's flock, takes special pride in the selection of a rod and a staff exactly suited to his own size and strength. I had spent much time learning to hurl my rod with great speed and accuracy. But I was shocked, frozen and helpless.

Needless to say, the brilliance of the moment caused all of the herdsmen to awake.

The first words out of the mouth of the angel to us were FEAR NOT.

I can only imagine how I, the shepherd, must have appeared to the angel, as I stood dazed and helpless.

Fear Not, well that was easier for him to say than it was for me to do. We were fearful, and we were helpless. But we trusted, really we could do no other, and we listened.

FEAR NOT, FOR BEHOLD I BRING YOU GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY! WHICH SHALL BE TO ALL PEOPLE.

He told us not to be frightened for he was the messenger of Good News. And the Good News that he was going to share was to be for all people everywhere.

At that point I thought that I might know what his good news was going to be about. For the **people of God had longed** for the day when God would send his messiah. The hope of the ages was about to come to pass, and the angel of the Lord came to earth to tell me.

But I had been taught that the Good News was only for the Children of Israel, for their political advancement. But this angel was proclaiming good news to all men.

No, this can't be happening. I am a nobody, an outcast, and I am in no place. Should not the messiah be born in Jerusalem, the temple city? And here the event of all of the ages was taking place before my very eyes.

Since that day I have read the Scriptures. And one thing that I have learned is that God chooses to do his work through ordinary people. He does not seek the wisest, the most beautiful, nor the strongest. Just ordinary people obedient to the Lord and empowered by the Holy Spirit are instruments that he has used to change the world. Yea, that's it. Ordinary people like you and me. It is amazing what wondrous works God can perform with those who are committed. If you think that you are not "good enough" or "informed about the Scriptures enough" to be used of God, then you have not grasped the workings of the creator. He passed over the most pious Pharisees and the best informed of the Sadducees in order to use a humble shepherd like me. I'm not sure why, but He did.

The angel continued to speak. "FOR UNTO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID, A SAVIOR WHICH IS CHRIST THE LORD."

Today, the messiah has been born. My people had cried out "How long must we wait O lord until we see the coming of the promised one?" The hope of the centuries has been fulfilled. This is for all people who have longed for his coming, to every true member of the people of God. The words that he used to describe the newborn are unmistakably clear: **SAVIOR – the one who saves from all dangers, the one who saves from sin and death, the one who gives blessedness in the full sense of the word. CHRIST THE LORD – God's anointed as prophet, priest, and king – The messiah who is God in the flesh.**

GOOD NEWS OF GREAT JOY

The Messiah has come this day.

AND THIS SHALL BE A SIGN UNTO YOU; YE SHALL FIND THE BABE WRAPPED IN SWADDLING CLOTHES, LYING IN A MANGER.

Surely in a meager city like Bethlehem, there would be many babes in swaddling clothes. But only this special baby, ironically the Christ-child, was to be placed in a common feeding trough. I promise that is what the angel said. If this shepherd had been making up the story, you can be sure that the Son of God would not have been placed in a feeding trough.

I know that sounds suspicious, but that was the sign that was to distinguish the birth of the babe of God.

And suddenly the angel of the Lord was accompanied by a multitude of angels and they were singing, praising God and saying,

Glory to God in the Highest, and on Earth, Peace, Good Will Toward Men.

Now I can't describe to you what the heavenly host sounds like when it proclaims the glory of the most high God. But one day you'll hear it and even join in the proclamation. After you hear the angelic choir, you never again doubt the goodness nor the power of God. The sounds of the host make finest sounds of a lyre seem as a bellowing donkey. Oh, I forget, you would not know what a lyre is today, would you? A small harp.

By this time I was conscious that I was breathing, I was awake, and the other herdsmen were awake as well.

THE MESSIAH HAS COME

Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace, good will toward men.

Of course, the Roman Government had given us its peace, *Pax Romana*, **but the people of God did not have peace in our hearts.** Only the birth of the Christ child could bring us hope. Hope over death, grief and strife.

Then, almost as quickly as they came, the angels faded out of sight as they ascended to heaven.

Of course we immediately left the sheep with the youngest lads, the under-shepherds, and made our way in search of this glorious event. For we knew that the Lord had made it known to us.

Your King James Version reads, "And They Made Haste." That is putting it mildly!! We were breathless by the time we made it to the scene. We searched far and wide until we came upon the babe. Just like the angel said, "lying in the manger was a baby and there was his mother Mary and Joseph was there too."

I wish that you could have been there. A simple scene. A little baby lying in a feeding trough. But wow, the power and hope that was felt in that room. Somehow, you could just feel that things would never be the same.

Of all of the moments in the life of this lonely shepherd, that moment stands alone as supreme.

I'm here talking to you this morning because I want to spread the good news of the babe's birth. As Luke so correctly portrays, we shepherds were the first to announce the birth of the babe. As we traveled we made known this good news of great joy. And again I make it known to you today.

We could not keep this wondrous news to ourselves. We could not hide the coming of the hope of mankind. So it is with all persons that have met the Christ child. If you've experienced Him, you are compelled to tell the good news to others. You have to proclaim the message – it is earth shattering, it is transforming!!

Good News of Great Joy the Messiah has come!

And we glorified God that day for letting us be a part of the birth of the Messiah.

What a scene. A baby in a manger, lowly shepherds going to worship him, while most of the world never knew what was happening.

But God was at work in simplicity and power, God was at work.

So I come to pass the message of the angel on to you, so that you in turn may share it with others:

Fear not, For behold I bring to you Good News of Great Joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

Now you go, make haste, and find the Christ Child this Christmas Season.

I have been told that in one of the books of the Apostle John that this baby Jesus, thirty years later as he was teaching was overheard saying, "I am the Good Shepherd, the Good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep."

Although I never saw Jesus after that day, I'm told that even the Pharisees recognized that he was a teacher sent from God. But somehow his message of love and hope was not accepted by a generation seeking earthly gains. He did lay down his life in turmoil that we might have eternal life.

Do you think that in some small way that Jesus remembers me? The lowly shepherd who adored him as an infant and makes known his birth, who proclaims "Good News of Great Joy to all people."

Perhaps you're here today seeking Good News of Great Joy. You need to accept Jesus as Lord.

Perhaps you're here today and need to recommit yourself, even with your limitations, to the work of God's Kingdom through His church.

Perhaps you're here today because you want a glimpse at the hope that accompanies the coming of the babe in the manger.

Perhaps you're here because you realize that there may be more to Christmas than Santa Claus and presents. All of the toys of your childhood have been cast away.

For you, the Shepherd shares Good News of Great Joy.