

Fear Not Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

So far in our 'Fear Not' series, we've visited Zechariah, Mary and Joseph. Can you identify with any of them? Or do you feel like you're looking in on a story...part of the audience?

Today, you might feel a little more connected to our subjects. Because most of us have done hard thankless outdoor jobs or know people who do them. People like loggers, truckers, railway, hydro, farmers, and ranchers. It's honest work. Either you picked up that load of logs or you didn't. Most of us like to be outdoors but not many can do those jobs...the hours, the strain on the body, working in all kinds of weather (like this last week). Sometimes it's monotonous and sometimes it's an emergency in the middle of nowhere. These are the people who do the dirty work. The unsung heroes.

In our story today, we're going to see what the unsung heroes are made of. They're the first century ones-protecting and providing for sheep herds around little Bethlehem, in the shadow of Jerusalem.

Pray

We're going to skip the actual birth of Christ. Saving that for Christmas Eve...the candlelight service. But I will say this: The way Jesus our Lord was born, is not something anyone would look at and say, "Now that's the way a

king should be born." For a moment, the center of God's activity is in an animal trough!

The scene shifts quickly from the birth to God's announcement. The heavens are about to rip open for a show of God's glory for the first time in centuries. And ready to descend is the announcing angel and behind is a multitude of angels ready to break out in chorus...all in the dead of night. Now that's the way the king of kings should be announced! We can only imagine the conversation or just the quiet thoughts of those on the night shift...outdoor working guys.

Read V8 Men at Work

The task of the 1st C shepherd is to care for the flock, to find grass and water, to protect from wild animals (Am 3:12), to look for and restore those that stray (Ez 34:8; Mt 18:12), to lead the flock out each day (going before it) and return the flock to the fold at the close of the day (Jn 10:2-4). Sometimes the shepherd leads the flock far from home and must shelter them in a cave or sheepfold built of fieldstones. At night, they lie across the entrance. Shepherds are responsible to the owner for every sheep and if one goes missing, they must pay for it (Gn 31:39; Ex 22:10-13). Sheep get to know and trust their shepherd (2 Sam 12:3; Jn 10:3, 4) as they experience their protection and care

(Ez 34:4, 5; Mt 9:36; 26:31). Shepherds use a heavy cloak for cold and bedding, a staff (walking and counting), and for warding off predators - a rod and sling. What is it about shepherds that gain God's favor? God chose Abraham for his faith to begin the nation of Israel – to show the world there is only one God. And what was Abraham's main occupation? Raising flocks, herds, camels and donkeys (Gen 26:13-14). Was this considered a noble occupation in those days? No, when Abraham's great grandson helped his family settle in Egypt, they were given a remote area: Goshen, because shepherds were detestable to them (Gen 46:34). When it was time to rescue the Israelites from Egypt, God chose Moses. Not while he was living as a prince in the Pharaoh's palace...but in exile as a shepherd (Ex 3). And when Israel had settled in the Promised Land and they needed a king that was loyal to God, Samuel was sent to Jesse's family. Did he anoint the tallest son to be the greatest King in Israel's history? No, the Lord looks at the heart (1 Sam 16:7). He chose his youngest, a shepherd boy. To many, shepherds were unclean and even lazy. The famous Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384-322 BC) wrote *"that among men, the laziest are the shepherds, who lead an idle life, and*

get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks wandering from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a sort of living farm" (Lexham Bible Dictionary). Well, maybe the one's he saw were lazy...or he was just prejudice.

Shepherds were like outcasts. They took care of supplies while the "real men" went to battle. Remember how David's brothers treated him when he went out to see a battle (1 Sam 17)? Shepherds couldn't keep up with the religious life because work took them away from regular worship at the temple and they were ceremonially unclean most of the time (dirty job). Yet shepherds take care of the lambs that feed the priests and cover the sins of the people.

Shepherding was also used as a metaphor – a noble work: to provide, protect and restore those that have strayed (Ex 34:8; Mt 18:12). God is portrayed as the shepherd of Israel (Gen 48:15, Ps 23, Eccl 12:11; Isa 40:111; Jer 31:10). Picture their rescue from Egypt, entering the Promised Land and being returned from Babylonian exile. God also appointed leaders and kings to shepherd His people (2 Sam 5:2). Even Cyrus, king of Persia (Isa 44:28). God also promised punishment on those who do not care for His flock (Zech 10:3, Jer 10:21; 23:1-3; 50:6).

So why such favor for shepherds? It's not so much the occupation as the heart attitude. God looks out for the humble and lowly (Lk 1:51-53; 1 Cor 1:26-29). It's like Mary's song: *"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed"*

Tonight, our shepherds are not far from town. The sheep are safely in their enclosure. Tonight, it's easy. Ahh...rest.

V9 Close Encounters of the 3rd Kind
God's glory use to be in the tabernacle (Ex 40:34) but left because of Israel's sin. Now God's glory returns and will remain in the person of His Son (Jn 1:14). Most of us have watched a sci-fi movie with lights and aliens from above. But just imagine a 1st century person: sudden dazzling light from above and a being from another realm appearing out of nowhere...this would be terrifying. Close encounters of the 3rd kind times 10. Can you guess what the angel's first words are?

V10-11 Good News for Everyone
Caesar Augustus' birth was announced as "good news". And he was called "savior for humankind. He was even given a divine title 'son of God' after his death. Under his leadership the Roman Empire was united for their longest peace and prosperity (over

200 yrs). The Stoic philosopher Epictetus said, "While the emperor may give peace from war on land and sea, he is unable to give peace from passion, grief, and envy. He cannot give peace of heart."
Steven W. Mitchell, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 3 (Peabody, FL: Victor Books, 1992), 176.
Our Lord Jesus is willing and able to bring peace to the very soul. And not only for Israel, but the whole world. Not only for this time...but for all time. This is truly and deeply Good News. And the Gospel about Jesus, Son of God is proven by fulfilled prophesy, historical witness and the ongoing work of God's expanding church. Soon to be proven again by His return.

V12 A Sign for Shepherds
God uses signs several times in the OT (1 Sam 2:34; 10:7; 2 Kgs 19:29; Ps 86:17, Isa 7:14) And now in the NT, we've already had Zachariah being muted, old Elizabeth becoming pregnant and virgin Mary pregnant by the Holy Spirit. Until this week, I didn't think a lot about God's sign for the shepherds. But back in Jacob's day (Gen 35:21), a place near Bethlehem is mentioned - near where his wife, Sarah died giving birth to Benjamin. It's called Migdal Eder. To the Jews, it's also known as tower of the flock. It's likely this would have been a two-story tower in pasture land. Jewish sources indicate that the shepherds would watch the flock from above and a special division of shepherd-priests would assist below

with the birthing and care of lambs...wrapping them in strips of cloths to keep them unblemished and place them on a manger to keep them from getting trampled. These lambs would be destined for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem a few miles away. Scholars believe this is the same 'watchtower of the flock' that Micah prophesied about (4:4). *As for you, O watchtower of the flock, O stronghold of the Daughter of Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to the Daughter of Jerusalem.*

Could this be foretelling the announcement of Christ? At this very tower? The next chapter in Micah, predicts the Messiah will come from Bethlehem (5:2-5).

Imagine the shepherd's amazement: their newborn King Savior is wrapped up in a manger...just like the unblemished lambs they raise for sacrifice. The Lord Jesus Christ left the riches of heaven to become poor for our sake (even to become the Lamb of God), so that through His poverty, we might become rich (2 Cor 8:9). Not only does this sign demonstrate God's detail, but the care He takes to fit His message to His hearers. And just when they're beginning to grasp this surprise, another one hits.

V13-14 Blessings on heaven and earth

Imagine countless multitudes from heaven coming down to earth to provide a symphony of praise to God and to bestow a blessing of peace. Jesus comes for all but not all are ready or willing to receive. And what is this blessing of peace? Have we experienced it lately? Don't let the world squeeze us into it's worry and self-centered busyness. Be still and know God. In faith and thankfulness, we can bring to Him our burdens, our fears and worries. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and our minds in Christ Jesus (Phil 4:6-7).

V15-16 Let's Go!

The first reason God chose these shepherds is because they are **responsive**. Let's go! They **obeyed** God's instructions. The first Christmas rush. Think about it...those guys would know every place around town to shelter and feed the animals. The feeding trough could have been in a local cave used to shelter animals and the trough made from stone. It could also have been adjacent to or on the ground floor of a home. The bible is not specific about it.

V17 Go Tell It

The second reason God chose the shepherds is because they told everyone they could. Who are rugged shepherds going to tell? Other common folk. They continue what

heaven started. And this hope spreads fast. God goes before us. When we share the Good News, we don't make the hearts of people understand and respond with repentance and belief. That is the work of the Holy Spirit...Who goes before us and with us.

V18-19 Response

Some respond to the news with amazement...wonder. But only God knows the heart.

Read Romans 10:12-15.

That's our part. Some cultivate the heart with love. Other's plant the seeds of truth. While others water. It is up to God, whether we have the privilege of reaping...seeing a person come to saving faith or not.

Church, Go Tell it on the Mountain.

Mary stores all this up in her heart's treasure chest so she can take it out again and again. Remembering God's faithfulness in times of doubt that will come. Remembering when they take her Son away. When they hang Him from a cross. When she comes to His tomb and finds it empty.

V20 Transformation

Anyone can praise. A proud parent will praise a child. But to glorify is to be in awe. It is worship. And why do the

shepherds return as transformed worshippers? They know that God is faithful. God really cares.

Like the shepherds, we have received God's message and mission. Through His Word we can know Him better and better...to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ

(Eph 3:14-19). Will we respond like the shepherds 1. obey, 2. tell others 3. return to worship the Lord.

How can we engage our community, our family, our home...beyond celebrating baby Jesus?

How do we make the most of opportunities?

I think it helps to think of our time as a gift from God. Make it count for eternity.

What would you do, if you were one of those rugged shepherds?

Tell others what you experienced. The journey to know God and His peace through Jesus. And to share His love. I plan to share the Gospel next weekend...the Candlelight Service and Christmas Morning Service. I placed an ad in the paper...some posters are up. But it comes down to personal invitation. Will you go tell it on the mountain?

Prayer