

Characters of Christmas

Message Four

The Shepherds

Luke 2: 8-20 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.

10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us."

16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger.

17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child.

18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Introduction

Christmas time is filled with tradition.

One tradition that some families have is to read the Christmas story on Christmas

Chances are good the story you chose to read from the Bible is ***Luke 2: 1-20***.

In these verses God teaches us that a census has been ordered in the land.

Residents are to return to the city of their lineage.

This brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem because they are in the line of David.

While they are there, the Son of God is born, just as prophesied in Scripture.

Out in the field's shepherds are watching their flocks.

The shepherds, these characters of Christmas, provide a different perspective on the Christmas story, reminding us that the gospel reaches all people.

A Message of Hope Is Heard

Not all stories include a message of hope.

I am reminded of one such a story.

Have you ever heard of a tragic tale where it started off with the words, “I never thought that something like this could ever happen in our town?”

A man named Paul Rickenbacker had walked into the local mall and fatally wounded many of the townspeople.

He was soon captured and taken into custody.

His crime and arrest made national news and was the talk of the country, because it was the largest tragedy in history at a public venue.

When arrested, Paul confessed to the crime and was sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole.

The town was ecstatic when they heard of Paul’s life sentence.

They hated this man.

We will come back to this story.

In Luke's gospel we learn that on the same day Jesus is born in Bethlehem, there are shepherds in the fields around Bethlehem who are doing their job, watching over their flocks.

Shepherds were not a very popular group of people.

They were considered social misfits, thieves, and religious outcasts.

They were considered unclean and were not able to participate in temple worship.

They spent their entire lives taking care of sheep.

Their job was dangerous at times but was mostly boring and tedious.

While we do not know how many shepherds there were, the plural usage of the term helps us conclude there were multiple shepherds in the field.

I find the point striking that this unpopular group of people is the first group to whom God announces the birth of his Son.

Luke tells us that it was night when the shepherds were watching their flocks in the fields.

The setting is significant.

On a clear night, away from the city's lights, we can gaze into the night sky and see a multitude of stars.

Bethlehem was not a big city and we can imagine the darkness that consumed the shepherds on this special night.

This setting was not unusual for shepherds, but what is about to happen is something we still talk about to this day.

God dispatches an angel to this region of the world with a special announcement and invitation.

In verse 10 the message comes from a singular unnamed angel and concludes with a host of angels giving praise to God for the peace he has provided to the earth through his Son.

I have a question for you.

Can you remember where you were and who God sent your way to announce Jesus and invite you to follow him?

Maybe you were a young child or a teenager or a young adult when you heard the life changing message of the gospel.

But consider this, God used that person at a precise time in your life to save your soul and to bring you peace.

For the shepherds, the night sky lights up with the glory of God and all those sitting in the fields were overcome by the light's intensity.

This sudden appearance in the dark sky brings fear on the shepherds (I think we would have all jumped out of our skin at this appearance in the middle of the night).



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The first words from the angel's mouth are to calm their fears.

But reread the Scripture at this moment and listen to the angel's words.

The angel has good news (the gospel) which is great joy and is for all people.

The angel then goes into detail about who Jesus is: ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior (rescuer, redeemer, deliverer) who is Christ (Messiah, anointed one) the Lord (Master, ruler).”***

Packed into that one statement is rich theology.

The Savior has been born to rescue us from sin.

This Savior is the promised Messiah, the anointed one spoken of in the Old Testament whom the Jewish people anticipated.

This announcement brings a host of angels in the night sky who bring God the praise and glory he rightly deserves because peace is the result of this joyful good news.

Just as fast as the angels appeared in the sky, they vanish from sight and the shepherds are plunged into darkness once again.

Back to Paul Rickenbacker who has served ten years of his life sentence.

Every Saturday morning during that time, a Bible study has been held at the prison.

A local church has adopted the prison and they come to share God's Word and be an encouragement for the inmates.

Paul never attended these services; never thought they were important and often thought of them as a waste of time.

But one Saturday, Paul sensed the need to attend.

He didn't not know what to expect but what he heard changed his life.

The gentleman sharing the devotion that morning spoke about the good news.

Paul learned that a Savior had come to rescue him from the bondage of sin and redeem him from a life in sin.

This resonated with Paul because he understood what literal bondage was but had no idea the impact of sin on eternal life.

As Paul sat quietly in his metal chair, in the state issued orange jumpsuit, God grabbed a hold of his life and Paul gave his life to Christ.

Every week since that moment, Paul has been disciplined by the man who gave the devotion that day, and his life has never been the same.



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The Message Heard is Proclaimed to Others

Back in the fields outside Bethlehem the shepherds sit around discussing what they just witnessed.

The angel had told them who the baby was and how they could find him.

The angel said the sign they were to look for that would identify the Savior, was a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, which was normal for any newborn at the time, placed in a manger, which was certainly not normal in that day.

A manger was a feeding trough for animals and served as a bed for the Savior to lay his newborn head.

This is what the shepherds were to look for in the city of Bethlehem.

Stop for a moment and let this idea impact your thinking.

God arranges a census to be taken in the land.

This causes Mary and Joseph to travel from Galilee to Bethlehem to be registered.

God was working behind the scenes to bring prophetic Scripture to fulfillment.

Now think about the manger scene.

The manger is the epitome of humility.

As **Isaiah 53** teaches, ***the Messiah did not come in the royalty he deserved.***

No one would see a halo around his head as he walked through the streets in His lifetime, but his humility would serve as our example to follow today.



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The beginning of the Messiah's days on earth started in great humility, as he was placed in a feeding trough for animals.

Jesus, however, would later teach that he was the bread of life.

With Jesus, there would be no hunger or thirsting.

So, maybe being placed in a feeding trough was fitting for the one who is the bread of life.

The shepherds decide very quickly to head into town to find the Savior.

Luke tells us they left in haste to find the one, as told by the angel.

The angel does not tell the shepherds to go, but how else could they find the Savior?

It was the shepherd's decision to go and to find the Savior.

One can only imagine the faces of those present in the stable when the shepherds show up.

Remember, these were not guys people wanted to be around, yet it is this group of unpopular people that first come to see the Savior.

As they come into the place where Jesus is, they communicate to all who are listening the message they heard from the angel out in the field, this is the Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Packed into that one statement is the good news everyone needs to hear.

The text tells us that those who heard what the shepherds said, stood in amazement and wondered at what they heard, but Mary sat by the manger and pondered what they had said in her heart.

She knew who the baby was, and this unpopular group of misfits has arrived to confirm it.

They make her ponder this wonderful moment as she looks into the face of her Savior, the Messiah.

The shepherds leave the site where Jesus is, and return to the fields.

Now, however, they have a spring their step and a new song of praise as they return to their work.

Paul Rickenbacker sat in his cell and spent most of his waking hours reading the Scriptures and growing in Christ.

Paul's crime had made national news.

The massacre in the mall ten years earlier surpassed anything in prior history.

But ten years had passed, and Paul was a new person, inside and out.

A major news network decided to revisit the tragedy and run a special on TV.

They wanted to interview Paul and learn more about that day.

Paul spent the hour-long interview answering questions.

As the interview came to an end, Paul shared with the viewing audience how the Lord saved him and changed his life.

He explained that he was a new person because of the gospel, and he called on others to believe.

Many people did not buy what he was saying, even some in the Christian community did not believe him.

They thought a man who committed such a crime could not come to Christ, but that is the amazing thing about grace.

The message that this hated man heard is the message he proclaimed to others—just like the unpopular shepherds heard the message of hope and proclaimed it to others.

Like the shepherds, Paul had a new song of praise in his heart.

Conclusion

The story of the shepherds reminds us of and helps us to understand the reach of the gospel to all people.

The shepherds heard and were impacted by the gospel—this group of people who were unpopular in society, seen as a criminal, and without a religious bone in their bodies.

This is the group that God chose to speak to in the field.

Then the shepherds became the first missionaries of the gospel!

The lowly men went quickly and shared what they heard with others.

No one is beyond the reach of God's grace.

It is God's grace that saves a person through faith.

The gospel reaches into the lives of all people with a message of hope and salvation.

God has entrusted believers with this life saving message of hope.

As believers we must understand that the gospel reaches all people, a lesson we can learn from the shepherds at Christmas.