

The First Noel

Luke 2:8-2:20

Most of us are pretty comfortable with the Christmas story. Maybe we're so familiar that it's become part fable and part legend in our minds. Some have sentimentalized it so much that they skim along on a superficial level, counting down the remaining shopping days, stressing about all the things to do, while neglecting the Nativity. It reminds me of the little girl who misquoted John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only forgotten Son." The music this morning has helped us remember that the baby who was born in Bethlehem is Jesus, the Son of God, who brings great joy today.

The cantata that the choir sang was arranged around the old French Carol, "The First Noel." The opening line of that song says, "The first noel the angels did say was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay."

Certain poor shepherds. I find it very interesting that God chose to send the birth announcement about His Son to certain poor shepherds. Luke 2:8 doesn't tell us much about who they were. Luke simply records for us: **"Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night."**

Why shepherds? Throughout the history of Israel, shepherding had been a noble profession. Adam and Eve's son, Abel, was the first to have this job. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David were all shepherds. David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

But by the time we come to the first century, shepherding has lost its luster. Shepherds were considered the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: "No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds."

God entrusted the greatest message ever sent from heaven to a bunch of smelly shepherds. Imagine if you will that over in England when Prince William and Kate had their baby, that instead of all the media attention and birth announcements to presidents and heads of state, the news of their births was delivered only to London dock workers unloading cargo in the middle of the night. It's not the way things are done in this world.

But it is the way God does things. God has always worked wonders for the forgotten, for the despised, and for the lowly. From the very beginning of his time on earth, Jesus came to those who felt horrible and were humble. In Matthew 9:12-13 Jesus said, **"Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. ... For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance."** Jesus reached out to sinful tax collectors like Zacchaeus and Levi, prostitutes and the demon possessed, lepers, strangers and Samaritans. Jesus did in His ministry what the Father did in a borrowed stable when the lowly shepherds looked at the Lord as the cattle were lowing. Mary captured this in her song recorded in Luke 1:52: **"He has put down the mighty from their thrones, And exalted the lowly."** Paul said it this way in 1 Corinthians 1:26-29: **"For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called. But God has chosen ... the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence."**

The Lord comes to the lowly, to the most undeserving, to the neglected and marginalized in order to show His power. The Shepherds help us see that God has a message for sinners just like us. Everyone matters to God. And the only announcement of Christ's birth goes out to a bunch of uneducated outcasts.

You may be thinking that God doesn't even know you exist and if He does, He's somehow mad at you. Friend, you are not insignificant to Immanuel. God will meet you right where you are. You don't have to clean yourself up on your own or act like someone you're not. If you smell like a shepherd, let Jesus wash you up. If your sins are wiping you out, allow Jesus to lift you up. Heaven chooses to bring a message to the messed up, to the low achievers as well as the high. You were created in the image of God as an original masterpiece and the signature of the Creator is inscribed on your soul

How did these shepherds respond to the first Noel?

1. They were Awed.

While they were watching over their sheep, they are suddenly awed by an angelic announcement in Luke 2:9: **"And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid."** God meets us where we are but then he brings us to our knees.

God's glory lights up the sky and causes them to quake in their sandals. Whenever we come face-to-face with God's holiness, we fall apart because of our sinfulness. Peter had this response to Jesus in Luke 5:8, **"Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!"**

I wonder, when's the last time you were in awe? Do you marvel at the Messiah? Has it been awhile since you hit your knees before Him?

2. They Accepted the Good News.

The shepherds are filled with awe and now they accept the message of good news of great joy in Luke 2:10, **"Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.'"** The angel calms them down, telling them that he is bringing good news. This is good news of great joy. Listen, when Jesus comes He brings joy with Him. Joyless faith in Jesus is a contradiction in terms!

This message personal and universal. It is good news for "you" as well as for "all people." It's for the whole world but it must also be for you.

What was the message of Good News they heard? **"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."** Being Jewish shepherds they probably heard this in their native Hebrew. Three words grabbed their attention: "Yasha", or "Savior". The Jewish name "Yeshua", which we know as "Jesus" comes from this word and means "Savior". They heard the word "Mishiach". We know that word as Messiah, Christ, the anointed one of God, the one promised by the prophets. And they heard "Adonai", the LORD. The One who is above all to whom all the world should bow. Yasha, Mishiach, Adonai. Our Saviour, Christ the LORD.

After verse 11 gives some specifics about the baby, in verse 12 a whole regiment of rejoicing angels fills the sky, praising God and saying, **"Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace, goodwill toward men."** We know that the shepherds accepted this message because in verse 15 we read, **"Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us"**

Have you accepted the message and allowed the word of God to work in you? God's good news is a gift that must be received.

3. They Acted by Faith.

These shepherds didn't just accept and enjoy the message they received, they acted upon it. Look at Luke 2:16: **"And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger."**

The Bible is clear that acceptance must lead to action, or as James 2:17 says: "...faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead." They could have doubted or delayed but instead they decided to act and hurried to Bethlehem.

Think about how strange this is: Unclean shepherds came to a smelly stable to see the Holy Lord Himself lying on a bed of hay. They leave their sheep behind to visit the Lamb of God. A millennium earlier, David kept watch over his father's sheep in this same pasture and now they see the Son of David born in the City of David.

But not only did they come and see, they went to tell. It's striking that they don't pull up a bale of straw and make themselves comfortable. They didn't hang around the manger because they knew that they were now managers of the message. Notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels and there's no reference to Mary's magnificence or Joseph's job. They came to see the Savior, Christ the Lord and now they head out to tell about Him. Look at verse 17: **"Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child."**

In what area is God calling you to some action? It's not enough to just say you have faith, or to feel good about something; there comes a time that after seeing, we must be involved in sharing.

4. They Adored God.

The shepherds went back to their sheep but they weren't the same on the inside. Verse 20, **"Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them."** They don't just wonder about what they saw, they worship the One whom they saw.

A clear evidence of conversion is always adoration. Someone has observed that many of us worship our work, work at our play and play at our worship. When a person is genuinely converted he or she will praise God. Allow yourself this Advent Season to adore Immanuel as you glorify and praise Him for all you have seen and heard. You can return to the same place tomorrow but not as the same person.

Do you want to take on the role of the shepherds? Or, will you just plant yourself like a tree and be as unmovable as a rock? The shepherds were changed forever by what they saw and you can be as well if you follow their example:

- Be awed by God's message to you
- Accept the gift of good news
- Act on the good news
- Adore the Lord

The choir has reminded us that Jesus is the center of it all. Is Jesus the center of your life?

- Is He "Savior" to you?

- Is He “Christ” to you?
- Is He “Lord” to you?

I love what Corrie Ten Boom once said: “If Jesus were born one thousand times in Bethlehem and not in me, then I would still be lost.”

There may be some here who have not found the joy and salvation that only Jesus Christ can bring. Would you let this be the moment you pray, “Jesus, be the center of my life. I turn away from my sin. I believe you died to forgive me. I believe you were raised from the dead to give me life. Come into my life and be my Savior, my Lord.”?

There may be others here who have forgotten what it was like when you first responded to the good news in faith. Would you let this be the moment you remember, repent, and return to the Lord saying, “Jesus, once again be the center of everything that I am.”?