

“The Annunciation to the Shepherds”

Luke 2:8-20

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“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” We hear these words so often, they are so familiar to us; we sing songs based on this story, songs like “The First Noel” and “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing” and “Angels We Have Heard on High,” every Christmas season. Yet when do we pause to actually *think* about what these words are saying?

“In that region” – the region near Bethlehem, where Jesus was born. Not immediately *in* Bethlehem, but someplace *near* Bethlehem. Ancient Christian tradition says that these particular fields were located near a place now called Beit Sahour, a Palestinian town of some 12,000 people (mostly Christian) east of Bethlehem, in the West Bank. You have to imagine what this region might have looked like before all the modern buildings: a broad plateau, surrounded by hills. It is – or at least, it used to be – a region of wheat, barley, vines, fruit trees, olive trees, bee hives, goats ... and sheep.

“There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” Sheep were an important source of milk, meat, and wool. Cheese would sometimes be made from sheep milk. Small flocks of sheep could be integrated into a family farm, but larger flocks required an ample amount of space, and the ability to move from pasture to pasture. So there was a profession known as *shepherding*. These were people – traditionally, all men – who would literally *live out in the fields* with the sheep. They did not come back home to the village at night; the sheep *needed* them out there in the fields, with them, to protect them from predators. These shepherds would wander with their flocks from field to field, out in the open expanse away from the cities, living a nomadic life, almost totally separated from the rest of society. Periodically they would bring their flocks to a village for shearing, but for the most part, it was a separate existence. Their home was in the fields.

Who were the shepherds? Where did they come from? Obviously, they could not self-reproduce; new shepherds would come from the towns and villages. Who would choose that job? Who would want to live a separate life, away from home and family and friends, unlikely ever to marry or to have any children? Generally speaking, people with nowhere else to go. Poor people unable to find any other work. Younger children in large families who would not inherit any of the family property. Maybe people who preferred the company of animals over the company of people. It was not a lucrative profession. Nor was it a very *respected* profession. They were poor, they were dirty, they probably smelled, they weren’t very domesticated or civilized. Shepherds were not held in high regard.

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Consider the *magnitude* of this little sentence. These shepherds probably *never* stepped foot in a synagogue or in the temple. Organized religion was definitely *not* part of their nomadic life in the fields. They weren’t known for their high moral character. Yet God chose to bring the message *here*. These were not the rich and famous; these were not people with influence or power, education or culture. Unimportant. Nameless. *Precisely* the kind of people who would *welcome* some truly good news.

“They were terrified.” No surprise; who wouldn’t be? Angels were heralds of the divine, majestic, powerful. We’re not talking cute little cherubs with wings – we’re talking *supernatural beings* with *supernatural power*. Part of God’s heavenly army. An angel could strike you dead before you had a moment to think. Who knows what those men were doing out there in the fields? Put a group of uncivilized men together; imagine the vices that might have been common place. Was the angel coming to judge them? Condemn them? *Destroy* them?

“But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.’” *Good* news of *great* joy for *all* the people. That word “all” is especially important. “All” does not just mean the normal citizens of society. It does not mean just those with wealth or fame, influence or power, education or culture. “All” means *all*. Even the misfits. The outcasts. Those who live apart. Those who never darken the door of a house of worship. The ones nobody wants to be around, the *poor* ones, the *dirty* ones, the *smelly* ones; the ones who aren’t very domesticated or civilized; the ones who just aren’t held in high regard. The good news of the gospel is for *them too*.

Maybe *they* need to hear it, more than just about anybody else.

The angel continues. “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” To *you* is born this Savior, this Messiah, this Lord. Jesus came for men *like these*.

Now I don’t know what you would think if an angel suddenly appeared to *you*, telling *you* good news of great joy. Maybe you would think the angel has come to the wrong place. Surely the Savior wasn’t born for *me*? It can be a hard thing to just *believe* the words of an angel – even if it *is* an angel. Maybe you would want some *proof*. Maybe you would need a *sign*.

“‘This,’ says the angel, ‘will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’” Swaddling clothes, that part makes sense; of course *every* baby would be swaddled. But what parent would lay their newborn in a *manger*? In a *feeding trough* for animals? Where the *slop* was? Goodness gracious, that baby might have smelled as bad as the shepherds themselves did!

Which, of course, made him *relatable* to these shepherds. No fancy bed, no ornate crib. Just ... a manger. Where the *animals* were. And the shepherds knew all about animals.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host” – that is, a whole *legion* of God’s heavenly army – “praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.’” Who would have thought ... that God would favor these *shepherds*? Who would have thought ... that God would favor *any* of the lowly, the uncivilized?

These are not the people the *world* thinks are important. Jesus Christ did not come to reinforce the status quo. Jesus Christ came to *change* the status quo. To humble the haughty and lift up the lowly. As Paul puts it in 1 Corinthians: “not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are.” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28)

God chose to appear ... to the *shepherds*. Not to the kings and queens, not to the politicians and the priests. God came to the nomads, the outcasts, the *dirty*, the *smelly*. Jesus Christ came for *them*.

What do you do, when you have been visited by angels? What do you do, when you – of all people! – have had good news, brought to *you*? “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’” When you have been visited by angels, when you have had good news brought to *you* (of all people!) ... you go check it out. See if it’s *real*. Fall down in *awe*.

For twenty centuries since then, pilgrims have flocked to the Shepherd’s Fields. People from all corners of the globe, people rejoicing that the good news of Jesus Christ truly is for *all* people, *everywhere*, even including *them*, have made their way to Beit Sahour, just outside Bethlehem. They have walked in the fields where the shepherds probably walked. They have stepped inside the caves where the shepherds probably sheltered their sheep. We don’t know the *specific* spot where the angels appeared to the shepherds ... but we can come close. Very, very close. Starting in the fourth century, Christians built churches and erected monasteries here, in these sacred fields. Today there stands a Greek Orthodox Church and a Roman Catholic Chapel right in the midst of the fields. Our group visited the chapel. The words of the angels to the shepherds are prominently displayed overhead: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...” Near the chapel are caves where groups can gather to worship the King. Some of those caves have mosaic floors that date back to the fourth century.

The shepherds, meanwhile, made their way to Bethlehem. “They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.” Just as the angels told them. The Savior of the World ... in the slop tray. “When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child.” Imagine the scene. “Uh, excuse me, madam and sir ... pardon us for intruding in your space ... we just felt compelled to come here, because, well, we don’t quite know how to say this ... but we just saw some *angels* in the fields, and they told us about this baby ... he’s a special baby, isn’t he?” And Mary and Joseph, they nod their head, and they smile. Yes, he’s a special baby. He’s a special baby, indeed.

“And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

They may not have been famous at first. But they are famous *now*. They were among the *first* to hear the good news. Poor, smelly, uncivilized ... the grace of Jesus Christ comes to such as these.

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