

Shepherds: A Call to Praise
Luke 2:1-20
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Have you ever seen or witnessed something that took your breath away? For me it was seeing a sunrise on the south rim of the Grand Canyon and from atop a mountain in Scottsdale, AZ as it broke through the clouds. Or it was the night my family was at an outdoor concert at night with the sky lit up with stars and hearing Chris Tomlin and his band sing "Indescribable." Maybe for you it was witnessing the night sky extravaganza inside the Magic Kingdom of Disney World with "oooo's" and "aaaaahhhh's" as the evening fireworks display a show and grand finale that is a sight to behold. Each is a breathtaking experience. Each is a memorable moment.

But nothing this side of heaven could take the place of the shock and holy awe the shepherds experienced on the night that heaven came down and kissed the earth. The Magic Kingdom has nothing on the Kingdom of God when it comes to a heavenly host lighting up the night sky and blasting a chorus of praise that proclaimed the Call of Christmas. It was a call to praise! "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Those were the words the angels proclaimed on the night when their eternal King who was and is and is to come, took on flesh and was born in a manger. As Earl Ellis described this unforgettable holy night, "The splendor of the vision is in sharp contrast to the commonness of the event." A simple manger holding the Messiah coupled with a magnificent message from the angel that was magnified in song by the heavenly host.

Luke's gospel sets the stage of this scene in and around the little town of Bethlehem. This is where the prophecies of long ago foretold that the Messiah would be born. The ruler of the day, Caesar Augustus, thought a census needed to be taken so that updated tax rolls could be formed as Jews frustratingly made their way back to their roots and hometowns. This decree of travel and registration from the highest office in Rome made the Jews furious as it reminded them of their subjugation to Rome. That was the news of the day. But the Good News is that God sends Himself into our mayhem to bring us peace.

Little did Caesar Augustus know that God was at work through his annoying Roman decree. But God has a way of moving through the affairs of nations to accomplish His own purposes. If you are feeling furious, annoyed, or downright frustrated this Christmas, take heart, God longs to insert Himself into your life situations to bring you peace and give you hope.

And God has a knack for using the ordinary to highlight the extraordinary. Three times we hear Luke mention the common manger as the unique sign where the shepherds will find the Christ-child who will be wrapped in swaddling cloths. And the splendor of the vision from the angels to the shepherds would forever change not only their lives but also the lives of all who eventually would hear of this good news they would share. The call of Christmas to the shepherds would take their breath away as the angel and the heavenly host proclaims His Majesty's arrival.

The advent message the angel had communicated to Mary and Joseph months ago in Nazareth, had finally arrived. Jesus the Messiah was born to Mary the virgin and her faithful man, Joseph, who was by her side all the way. It had been a long 70-mile haul over many days and rough terrain from Nazareth to the city of David just outside of Jerusalem; especially for a pregnant woman in her third trimester. Traveling via foot and on the back of a donkey was not the most comfortable situation when a baby boy was bouncing on your bladder all the way to Bethlehem. But they made it. And their secret message from the angel soon would be expanded beyond just the two of them. The angels were about to go public with this proclamation of the Messiah's birth.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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.” Luke 2:8-9

It is significant that the lowest class of society, the shepherds, were included in the public announcement. God doesn't exclude anyone from His good news. Even though shepherds were considered lowly in occupation, untrustworthy in character and ceremonially unclean for worship, this was the group with whom God wanted the message to go public. What the shepherds experienced out in the fields was unforgettable. It all but took their breath away which is why the first words from the angel dealt with trying to dissipate their fear.

“And the angel said to them, “Fear not...” Luke 2:10

Billy Graham notes in his book, **Angels: God's Secret Agents**, how over and over again the presence of angels was frightening to those to whom they came. But unless they came in judgment, the angels spoke a word of reassurance. They calmed the people to whom they came. This tells us that the appearance of an angel is awe-inspiring, something about them awakening fear in the human heart. They represent a presence that has greatness and sends a chill down the spine. But when the angel had quieted the fears of the shepherds, he brought this message, one forever to be connected with the Good News.

“...for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2:10-12

As Dr. Graham goes on to say in his book, the angel brought good news, not bad news. The shepherds already knew the bad news that the human race had sinned and was lost. But the angel had come to tell them that God was doing something about their lostness. And he points out that the good news was not simply for the people of one nation, but for the whole world!

The good news was that the Savior had come. In the ancient world, a Savior primarily was a deliverer from disease, from danger or from the human predicament in the world. Jesus was arriving to cure the sin problem of humanity once and for all. The human race needed someone who could bring them back into fellowship with God because the blood of bulls and goats could not do this in any permanent way. But the blood of the Savior could and did.

The angel message was that God had come; redemption was possible. This Savior was Christ the Lord. Christ is a name that means Messiah, the anointed one to rule as King in fulfillment of God's promise to David as heir to his lineage and throne. Lord is a title and name that speaks of the divine nature of the One who was born and is a reference to Yahweh of the Old Testament. The Lord had visited His people with salvation in a divine and promise-fulfilling way. And it was further validated, proclaimed and accompanied with a call to praise when the angel army of heaven showed up in the night sky over the fields where the shepherds were with their flocks.

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” Luke 2:13-14

First, God sends a single angel to meet with the men of the field. As they catch their breath and begin to understand they are not going to die, then the heavenly host breaks onto the scene and lights up the sky with their presence and praise. Had the order of their arrival been reversed, the shepherds likely would have had a heart attack from being overwhelmed. But God sent the one before He then sent the host to follow.

The angels who had resided throughout eternity in heaven around the throne of God consistently had lived lives that praised and honored and worshiped King Jesus. They had become aware of man's fall and had been informed that God had provided a way of salvation for all of humanity. No wonder that they shout: "Glory to God in the highest!" The incarnation was a call to praise because that is what they had always done. The angels desire that all creation praise His holy name! Their demonstration before the shepherds that Christmas night made an indelible impression on these who had a front row seat into heaven. As the host returned to heaven from where they came, the shepherds soon would heed their call of Christmas to join in the praising of the Savior they would find in the manger.

"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." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them." Luke 2:15-20

The shepherds were told that the manger would be the sign to indicate which baby in Bethlehem would be the one who would save all the people from their sins. And they went with haste and found everything just as the angel had said. That's the trick, isn't it? You know what to do. But do you do it? The doctor prescribes the treatment, but you have to take it. The financial planner can help you with the plan to get out of debt, but you have to do it. The trainer says you have to lift these weights, run these drills, and get your heart rate to this level, but they can't make you do it. The shepherds knew what they had been told. But then they had to go.

And go they did! When they got there, they told all who were present what the angel had told them. Suddenly the secret was out. It was no longer just a Mary and Joseph message from the angel. These men from the fields had been told where to find the Messiah; look for the baby in the manger wrapped in swaddling cloths. That will be the sign. And that message is what Mary treasured in her heart. It is the message the shepherds would tell all whom they came into contact with upon their return to their jobs. And don't miss that part either. They went back to work after they celebrated Jesus' birth. At some point you have to go back to work.

Never underestimate the fact that the shepherds not only were the first evangelists of the good news but also that they went back to work. They saw their domain where they worked as the greatest place to be on mission and tell others about Jesus.

We, too, go back to our jobs and schools and neighborhoods and friendships and lives after the holidays are over and do them well as we love others well and tell the story of the good news of Jesus. He is the One who came to save us, our Savior, Christ the Lord.

We get to be like the shepherds, telling the story of Jesus as we go about our day and our way of life whatever domain we happen to work and live. And the shepherds did so as they praised the One whom they met in the manger.

That is the call of Christmas. It is a call to praise.

This Christmas may we be the people who carry the good news of Jesus into all the domains of society so all the people of the earth can hear this call of Christmas that leads to praising Jesus just like the heavenly host did that night and continue to do throughout eternity. In Jesus, amen.