

Christmas Eve 2023

The Journey to Christmas: “Behold!”

Luke 2:8-20

Merry Christmas Church! I’m so glad you are here. As many of you know, we’ve been in a short series called *The Journey to Christmas* where we have been looking at Christmas from the perspective of those who were part of that great story. Pastor Tami began the series by looking at the story of Christmas through the experience of Mary. Last Sunday Pastor Greg helped us to see Christmas through the experience of Joseph, and this morning/evening I have the privilege of exploring the experience and impact of the shepherds and their message to a hurting world. It is true that my Friday note said I was speaking about the Wisemen tonight, but then it’s also true that my note got edited by a well-intentioned staff person who misread the preaching schedule! Pastor Mark will wrap up our series next Sunday looking at Christmas from the perspective of the Wisemen.

Now, given that shepherds were guys who inhabited the outdoors, I thought it fitting to wear some camo since I’m a guy who spends a great deal of my life outdoors as well! And to be clear, the word “pastor” actually means “shepherd,” so I can relate with these guys. God chose to announce the most important news in human history to shepherds, and He entrusted shepherds to share that news with a hurting world. Our text is Luke 2:8-20, so please stand and let us read the Word of the Lord together.

⁸ 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.

My message will fall under three subheadings: 1) Consider the Source; 2) The End of Fear; and 3) What Must We Do.

I. Consider the Source

Now, before we jump into my first point, some of you need to lighten up. I can tell already that some of you are getting into your “let’s just get this over” posture...some of you have issues with camouflage, and some of you need a little Christmas cheer. So, as a father of four, let me give you a little dad humor for Christmas. What do reindeer say before they tell you a joke? “This one’s gonna *sleigh* you!” What do you call Santa’s little helpers? *Subordinate clauses!* What are Christmas sweaters made of? *Fleece Navidad!* What is every elf’s favorite kind of music? *Wrap* music. Alright, I might sprinkle a few more in, but for now, let’s consider the source of our story.

The story of Christmas often raises more questions than it answers. For example, if angels did announce the birth of Jesus and declared Him to be the Messiah, how is it that Jesus was apparently raised in obscurity and only became known as the Messiah following His short public ministry, death, and resurrection? How is it that we know anything at all about the birth of Jesus? Who was keeping track of that information? Isn't it more likely that Matthew and Luke (the only two writers in the NT who refer to the birth of Jesus) made up some narrative about the birth of Jesus in an attempt to prove His divinity? These are all excellent questions...you always ask excellent questions!

As a life-long student of scripture, I am inclined to believe these events are historical and reliable. I don't have time to get too deep into this subject, but I would like to point out a few observations that we find here in the text. First of all, when we read the four gospels and the remainder of the New Testament, none of the NT writers hail back to the birth of Christ to "prove His divinity." We get very little information about a rather remarkable event, but it's never referred to again in the Gospel accounts or Paul's letters. Secondly, if you are going to make up a birth narrative about a "king" who is also "god," you probably don't have the king born to peasants, and particularly to a young woman who got pregnant out of wedlock. Thirdly, if you are making up a story of angels declaring the birth of the king who is also God-incarnate, you probably don't have those angels appear to shepherds out in a field in the middle of the night. Most of us are overly familiar with the narrative here in Luke 2, but if we step back and think about it, one could hardly make up a narrative like the one we read here in the Gospel of Luke. Why? The characters are far too drab—they look nothing like the characters of ancient myths and legends. These characters are average and unremarkable, and none are less remarkable than the shepherds.

In the ancient Jewish world, shepherds were commonplace. They were often uneducated young people who were hired to tend the flocks of wealthy landowners. The very nature of their work required shepherds to exist as nomads who often "lived out in the fields." They would wander throughout the middle-eastern hill country with their flocks in search of favorable areas to graze, and when evening came, they would corral their sheep into a makeshift pen created with branches and rocks. They would then lay down at the entrance of the pen such that their bodies would serve as a gate to keep the sheep in and keep the predators out. Shepherds were brave, but they were also crude, weather-beaten, foul-smelling outsiders. They would not have been considered the most reliable source for life-changing, soul-saving information.

So, how do we know this story at all? Where is the source of our information? The answer is in the text. Luke reports that the shepherds apparently told lots of people about their experience with angels and testified to finding the Christ-child in the manger just as the angels had announced, and though people were amazed by what they heard, we don't get the sense that anyone believed them, save one...and her name was Mary. Luke tells us that Mary "treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart." Mary is clearly the source of everything that we know about the birth of Jesus, including this bizarre intrusion of local shepherds who breathlessly reported their encounter with angels on the night Jesus was born.

And that make sense. Why? Well, I suspect we have many moms here tonight. Let me ask you moms a question? How many of you remember every detail surrounding the birth of your firstborn? Exactly. Now, how many of you moms remember every detail of your second born? Exactly. I'm a second born...no respect.

Church, Mary remembered that night...she remembered every detail, and long had she pondered the testimony of those sincere, albeit crude shepherds who likely employed crass language even as they communicated the pronouncement of heaven! I suspect it was some time after Jesus ascended to the Father before Mary spoke a single word about the events that took place prior to and on the night of Jesus' birth...after all, who would have believed her? As we think about the four Gospel writers, Matthew would have learned of the birth narrative from Mary as a disciple of Jesus who traveled with Mary, and we know that Luke took great pains to research facts before writing his gospel...research that likely included multiple interviews with Mary. So, I think it's safe to say that Mary, the mother of Jesus, is our source when it comes to the Christmas story, including the testimony of the shepherds.

Now, why don't we have any other record of people going crazy over the report of the shepherds? Why didn't this encounter with angels and the report of the shepherds leave a mark on history? The great Scottish preacher, Alexander MacLaren, wisely observes that we soon forget even extraordinary events if they do not have immediate consequence on our lives. We are also inclined to dismiss important information if we suspect the source is potentially unreliable. So, what's my point?

I have two challenges for you. First of all, I would ask that you not dismiss the good news of God's Word tonight based upon the shoddy messenger! As I stand here before you tonight in my camo and boots, I am no more impressive than an ancient shepherd, and you might be tempted to set aside the proclamation of the Gospel because you don't trust "sketchy shepherds" like me. I get that, but you setting aside the Word of God because you don't trust me is a copout. God's revelation of His Son to a sin-sick world deserves our best attention, regardless of the messenger. I hope you will, like Mary, treasure the Word of God and commit to pondering these things in your hearts long after you leave this service.

Secondly, if the good news revealed by Heaven does strike you as true this evening, allow it to have an immediate and wholistic consequence in your life! When the shepherds heard the Word of God, they got up and went to Bethlehem to see for themselves, and they shared the good news with all who would listen. My challenge is that we would all do the same. The proclamation of the Gospel is never simply a matter of information...it is always a matter of implementation, transformation, and proclamation...amen? So...what is this good news of Christmas, and why does it matter? The good news of Christmas proclaims the end of fear, and that matters to every human heart. That leads us to my second subheading, but first, let me ask you a question: what do reindeers hang on their Christmas trees? *Hornaments*. What do you call an obnoxious reindeer? *Rude-olph*. I know...brilliant dad humor! OK,

II. The End of Fear

As we look to our text, the shepherds are confronted by an angel of the Lord and their testimony is that “the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear.” Now, we often observe in scripture that when messengers from the unseen realm of heaven step into the physical realm, people are horrified. We usually assume that the reaction of fear is associated with the appearance of the angels, right? We imagine that the angels are very tall, very strong, wrapped in brilliant light...in other words, they are awesome and intimidating in their appearance. That may be true, but I suspect something deeper is attached to the extreme fear that is regularly associated with the appearance of the holy.

If you think about the biblical narrative, when Adam and Eve are first created, they are not terrified at all in God’s presence. The picture of creation is that human beings were made to live in a perfectly harmonious relationship with God, with each other, and with the rest of creation. Fear did not exist in the garden. There was no fear of rejection, no fear of failure, no fear of the future, no fear of circumstances...God was near, and there was no sin, no death...it was “good.”

But then the serpent whispered his lie to Adam and Eve. He sowed the seeds of doubt. He convinced Adam and Eve that God was holding out on them...that God did not have their best intentions in mind. He essentially said, “You need to be in charge of your life. Don’t let anybody else be in charge—including God—because you won’t be happy. You will miss out on what is best for you. You have to do what’s best for you, even if that means disobeying God.”

That lie has been passed down from one generation to the next, and we are all inclined to believe the Liar...so much so that we fear trusting God. We remain convinced that our only hope for having a happy and fulfilling life lies in our ability to control our own lives, to make up our own rules, and to trust our own resources. We are, by nature, hostile to God’s claims of control over our lives, and this is a universal situation.

Now, you may be thinking to yourself, “I’m not hostile to God. I’m a good person. I do a lot of good things.” OK, let’s talk about that for a minute. There is more than one way that our hostility towards God is expressed in human behavior. The first and most obvious way of expressing hostility towards God is to live a completely irreligious, self-indulgent lifestyle. The irreligious person thinks, “I want to live on my own terms and do what I want to do, and I don’t care what God or anyone else has to say about it.”

However, our hostility towards God’s control can also be expressed in a religious lifestyle. The religious person covertly asserts his or her independence from God. The religious person thinks, “I am going to obey the Bible and do all these things, and now God has to bless me and give me a good life.” The religious person’s good works are an attempt to control God, not trust Him.

Again, both of these strategies and lifestyles are hostile to God, and we see both represented in scripture, right? We either fire God from being our Lord or we fire God from being our Savior, or both. In either case, we lack peace with God because we do not actually trust God. In both the religious and the irreligious lifestyle, we are still obsessed with control.

But here's the truth: we can never get control of our lives in this world. I learned that truth firsthand just a few weeks ago when I woke up at 1:30 in the morning with a kidney stone. I went from feeling safe in my bed, with the illusion that I was in control of my life and my schedule, to being tortured by a 2 mm messenger from HELL! The pain rendered me powerless. I was in unspeakable agony; I could barely walk; my plans for the next day were completely irrelevant, and there wasn't a thing I could do to control the situation. Any illusion that I was in control of my life was immediately shattered...and, you see, that's why we are so afraid of everything. If peace in my life depends on my ability to control everything, I am going to be constantly afraid of anything that I cannot control, right? I'm now 53 years old, and here's what I can tell you: the older we get, the more we come to realize that we have very little control in this life at all. We are constantly at the mercy of the weather, constantly at the mercy of other people's choices, constantly at the mercy of aging bodies, constantly at the mercy of forces we cannot see or understand...forces that we simply cannot predict or manage.

And friends, somewhere in the secret place of our hearts, we all know that our obsession with being in control is in direct defiance of the God who is there. The evidence of God's presence, God's creation, and God's provision is all around us all the time. We've heard of God's mercy and His grace, and yet we simply don't trust God. We are alienated from God because we don't believe we will be happy unless we are in control of our own lives.

So, is it any surprise that sinful human beings are horrified when confronted by God? Tim Keller writes, "Human beings are radically threatened by the presence of the holy. When God's glory appears, it always accentuates and intensifies our fundamental fearfulness because we are alienated from God."

This is always the context for Christmas, by the way. If we are not willing to be honest about our control issues...if we are not willing to be honest about our chronic anxiety about all the things out there that can snuff us out and cause us to lose control...if we are not honest about our alienation from God that comes from our mistrust of His intentions for our lives...we will never grasp the good news of Christmas. The presence of the holy will remain terrifying, and our deepest hope as we approach the end of our lives is that God is NOT there...because we suspect that if God is there, we are going to be held accountable for our rebellion against Him. That's true by the way...which is exactly the reason that we need some good news, right?

Now, can you see yourself on that hillside? Can you relate with these shepherds--these average, everyday human representatives who are horrified in the presence of the holy? If so, then hear the good news from heaven. The angel of the Lord brings this message from God, "Fear not! 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."

The birth of Jesus marks the end of fear...that's the Good News...that's the Gospel! How does the birth of Jesus mark the end of fear? Because Jesus has come to reconcile a rebellious creation

to a loving Creator. Jesus is the Messiah...the Promised One...the long awaited Anointed One...He “will save His people from their sin”, just as the angel proclaimed to Joseph.

But how does that work? Well, Jesus will save us from the punishment we deserve due to our self-indulgent, control-obsessed rebellion against God. Jesus comes to earth as one of us to save all of us because, unlike us, He will be perfectly trusting, perfectly obedient to God with no sin, no error, no selfishness...and He will willingly take our place on the cross and exchange His perfect relationship with the Father for our alienated relationship with the Father. In other words, Jesus will make it possible for us to be completely, utterly forgiven. Forgiveness is found only in Jesus. Only Jesus will make peace with God a possibility for all who will trust in Him. Church, if we have peace with God, we will never have to fear again. Peace with God is the end of fear.

And this is exactly what the shepherds recalled from their encounter with the holy. Their testimony to Mary was that “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 well pleased.”

Friends, hear the good news: your alienation with God has been overcome by the sacrifice of Jesus. God so loved the world that He gave us His Son, that whosoever would believe in Him would not perish but inherit eternal life. This is the good news of Christmas. It is true. It has been accomplished. So...

III. What Must We Do?

How is Christmas exactly like your job? *You do all the work and some fat guy in a suit gets all the credit!*

So...what must we do have peace with God this morning?

In his little book entitled *Hidden Christmas*, Timothy Keller beautifully addresses the first thing we must do find peace with God. He writes:

The first step toward peace with God is to recognize that there has been a conflict. One way to do that is to say: “Not only have I done bad things, but even the good things I have done have been done to be my own savior, to assert my independence from my Creator and Redeemer. So, I need to be saved by sheer grace because even the right things I do have been done for wrong reasons. I need to rest wholly on Jesus’ saving work on my behalf!” When you say that, you have finally admitted the full extent of your resistance to the Lord’s sovereignty. You have confessed that you can’t save yourself. You rest in what the Lord Jesus Christ has done, and you turn away from your old way of living. That is making peace with God.

Now, you won’t feel and experience peace with God until you learn to “BEHOLD.” Remember what the angel said to the shepherds, “Fear not! For behold...the good news of the GOSPEL.”

I don’t know if you picked up on this fact, but our culture has an unprecedented case of attention deficit disorder...can I hear an amen? Some of us cannot go more than 30 seconds without looking at our phones or we begin to shake. Many of us struggle to read a book or even sit through an entire movie! The internet has besieged us with so much stimulus that we find it very

hard to “behold” anything for very long. Even the videos on social media are called “shorts” because we so quickly get bored by looking at anything for over 30 seconds.

But listen: to discover anything of profound worth in this life, we must learn to “behold”. The literal translation of the Greek here would be something like, “Do not be fearing, be perceiving...” We can’t “perceive” the Gospel in 30 seconds or less. We must learn to behold the Gospel. And here’s the promise: behold the Gospel, and you will no longer be afraid. Take time to comprehend the profundity of what God has done in Jesus on your behalf, and that truth will remove the fear that has caused you much so anxiety and depression.

Listen: the power of the Gospel to eradicate fear from your life will depend on the degree to which you truly behold—gaze at, grasp, relish, internalize, rejoice in—the Gospel.

So, right here, right now, I challenge us all to allow the Gospel to have immediate consequences in our lives. Hear the Good News from heaven, and act upon it. Surrender your obsession with control, admit your issues with God’s sovereignty, confess that you cannot save yourself, and behold the Good News of what Jesus has done to reconcile us to God! Act upon that conviction. Share your thoughts with a family member. Pray and ask God to restore your relationship with Him because of what Jesus accomplished on your behalf. Surrender your control to the Father in Heaven who loved you enough to give you His only Son. God is with us; God is for us; and God has forgiven us. We need not fear anymore.

Behold, the Son of God...He is worthy of our worship.

Will you pray with me?