

Christmas – Learning from the Shepherds.

Luke 2:1-20- The Birth of Jesus

¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2: 1-20.

The centre of this part of the Christmas story as told by Luke was a group of people known as the shepherds. They were told about the birth of Jesus before anyone else. When the Angels told of the birth, this message did not come first to kings, presidents or priests but to a group of shepherds. This is such a familiar part of the story that we quickly move past this. I want to encourage you this morning to stay with this part of the Christmas story. That is the angelic announcement to the shepherds.

Early in the Bible almost everyone was a shepherd. They had to be because almost every family-owned sheep, so someone in the family had to be shepherd and look after the family sheep. Many of the early leaders in the Bible were shepherds, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and David. By the time of the 1st and 2nd century, fewer people owned sheep personally, and shepherding had become more of an outsourced enterprise.

That’s not all. The people who worked as shepherds were looked down on. Pastor James White comments, **Shepherds were considered a very low-class group of people - nomadic, uneducated, dishonest, they had a reputation of being thieves, they inhabited the bottom rung of the ladder of society, and among the Jewish people, they were even considered**

ceremonially unclean which meant that a fellow Jew wouldn't interact with them in a way that brought them into close physical contact.

I want to talk to you about your spiritual self-esteem this morning. This isn't talked about very much and I wish it was discussed more often. Now, we all know about self-esteem, but we don't often talk about this in terms of our spiritual lives and how low this can get. So, let me ask you this question and please don't cruise past this, how do you think God feels about you this morning?

I know that at times we don't want to think about this because our answer is not good. When it comes to God's attitude toward us, many of us are not really sure. This is compounded if we are struggling to live a life worthy of following Jesus Christ. We don't feel particularly worthy at all. We hear about God's love but in our hearts and minds we automatically think of others who seem more worthy than us, people who really deserve his love, but we don't think we are one of those people.

Maybe we experienced that wonderful feeling of grace and forgiveness when we first became a Christian. However, after messing up we felt that we had used up all the grace, forgiveness and acceptance from God. Most weeks someone phones me or pops in at the church in the hope they might be able to speak to a pastor. They are broken people. They are filled with shame, guilt and failure. Many are now paying the price physically for alcohol and drug addiction. It's taken its toll on their bodies, and they are totally wrecked!

This is the declaration of Christmas. God is saying, I've come for people who are filled with grief and sorrow. People who are flat on their face with moral failures and he wants to reach down and pick them up and tell them that this is not the final word on their lives. I am the final word in your life and that word is Love. God's love. Given by a God who is so full of love and tenderness toward us that he sent his son so that we may have a way back to him. A new relationship with him.

Don't let those tapes play in your head over and over that create this terrible low spiritual self-esteem. This is crucial to our life in Christ and it's a good reminder at Christmas. Brennan Manning once wrote, **"... if we continue to picture God as a small-minded bookkeeper, a niggling customs officer rifling through our moral suitcase, as a policeman with a club who is going to bat us over the head every time we stumble and fall, or as a whimsical, capricious, and cantankerous thief who delights in raining on our parade and stealing our joy, we flatly deny... [that] God is love. "... [And] if we continue to view ourselves as moral lepers and spiritual failures, if our lives are shadowed by low self-esteem, shame, remorse, unhealthy guilt and self-hatred, we reject the teaching of Jesus and cling to our negative self-image."** Brennan Manning in *The Furious Longing of God*.

I think that so many of our emotional and spiritual issues are the failure to understand, receive and live out God's unconditional grace and forgiveness. It's also the failure to pass on this wonderful grace to others in our lives. Grace isn't an idea. It's not a theory. It's not based on a mathematical equation. It's the very DNA of God.

Its behind everything he’s done for us. As Philip Yancey has written, **Grace means there is nothing we can do to make God love us more and nothing we can do to make God love us less. Philip Yancey, What So Amazing About Grace.**

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Luke 2: 10-12.

I want you to notice in these verses that the baby who was announced was called three names. Saviour, Messiah and Lord. Three of the most important words the world would ever hear. Now there were plenty of religions and cults in Jesus’ day. Plenty of people and groups claiming to be Lord or Saviour. However, the one word that would have got the Jewish people’s attention was this word, Messiah.

The idea of the Messiah was someone who would come and be God’s person to lead the Jewish people. The first part of the Bible, the Old Testament looked forward to the coming of the Messiah. There were expectations that he would come like King David and free the people from the Roman occupation and take back the Holy land. Many Jews longed for the Messiah who would start a revolution both political and spiritual.

There are two other words that that are used, Lord and Saviour. Lord is another word for God. Here is the Messiah who is also Lord or God. The Messiah has come, and he is God in human form come to planet earth. Why has he come? That leads us to the third word, Saviour.

Jesus came to save us. This Messiah, who is Lord, will minister to the deepest needs of our lives, the areas where we are most vulnerable, where we are in most need. We need saving. We are drowning. We need the lifeline of grace and forgiveness that only God can give that was bought and paid for us by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Luke 2: 10.

Good news, what an understatement. In all of history this is the good news. It was then and it is today. So, what did the shepherds do.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. Luke 2: 15-20.

The shepherds went off to see the baby. To see it for themselves. They found exactly what had been foretold to them. This led them to glorify and praise God. Remember shepherds were

on the lowest social ladder with no chance of ever climbing up and out of their plight but now they have a new chance.

They have seen the Messiah; their lord and saviour and their lives will never be the same again and if you accept Christ this morning for the first time your life will also never be the same again.

The real leap of faith isn't that God exists, but that God loves you. Then the final leap after that is that God doesn't just love you, but he actually likes you. The Christmas story is a reminder about how much God loves you. Enough to send his son so that you can have a way back to him. It has nothing to do with whether you feel like you measure up. In fact, you don't – neither do I. That's not what it's about. That's why it's grace. That's why it's a God-thing.

Don't make light of the sin and rebellion in your life. Don't cheapen grace by purposefully chasing after a life that would break the heart of God and then throw up an 'air prayer' asking for forgiveness, especially when you know that you will chase after the very same thing the first chance you get. Don't make a mockery of God's grace for you.

Also don't live in paranoia, guilt and shame for needing grace either. Accept that you need it daily, just like I do. The coming of God's grace is the real gift of Christmas. Heralded to this bunch of lowly shepherds and then born into a manger or into today's equivalent a cow shed. Here rests the Saviour of the world.

This what the prophet Isaiah said hundreds of years before the birth of Christ.

¹ Who has believed our message and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed ² He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.³ He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

⁴ Surely, he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:1-16.

Maybe this Christmas is the one to get more serious about God in your life. Whatever your Christmas looks like God wants to be right in the middle of it. Whether it's fun and joy spent with family and loved ones, or you find yourself feeling more like the shepherds, looked down on and rejected. God's grace exists for all of us, right now, and for all time.