

While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks by Night

Luke 2:8-20

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=59iKRfdMRn0&t=35s> From 42s

Close Encounters of the Third Kind.

How many of you remember this at the movies? 1977, I was 14 and I remember being amazed with the special effects, because they were of a calibre that we had never seen in a movie before.

You may recall that the plot of the film was built around the arrival of space ships from some distant planet. When these UFO's first showed up there were power outages all over and Richard Dreyfuss, who played the role of an electricity company worker, was called in to help.

There was this early scene where he was driving around in the dark on back roads in his truck and he got lost—so he stopped at a railroad crossing and unfolded his map to figure out where he was?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HYtuw0c3dJ4> cut at 2.09s

From then on he was obsessed with what he had seen....understandably

He had an irresistible urge to go to this mountain, this “urge” was a subliminal summons broadcast by the aliens...an invitation to meet them at this location—this mountain.

He got there and it was amazing. He saw the huge mother ship covered with pulsating lights and lasers....and what's more, he eventually met the aliens ...the same ones who had issued his invitation to come in the first place.

I dredge up this old movie memory because...there is a sense in which 2000 years ago something like the plot in Spielberg's fictional film actually happened. You see, twenty centuries ago a group of people did in fact receive a special invitation, signalling the visit to earth of a 'being' who was beyond time and space. But the invitation these men received led to a far more significant encounter than that of Dreyfuss' character. You see, their invitation was not merely from some alien people of another planet. No, theirs came from the very God of the universe Himself...the one being who made all the stars and planets...Who according to Psalm 147:4, “determined the number of stars and calls them each by name...”

In case you haven't guessed, the group of people I am referring to are of those shepherds who were caring for their flocks that first Christmas night—and God's invitation was for them to be present at the birth of Jesus, His only Son. Scripture tells us that these guys accepted God's invitation—they responded to His special summons—and travelled to visit the Christ child.

This morning I would like us to focus on these humble men...to see what their experience can teach us about the arrival of the Son of God. You see, we too have received an invitation to hear and respond to the good news that Jesus' birth signalled. Unlike the shepherds, we don't have angels to guide us to Jesus but we do have the Bible and 2nd Peter 1:19 describes it as "...a LIGHT shining in a dark place."

It is important that we pause to look at the biblical accounts of the Christmas story because these days the true message of Christmas tends to be lost. I used to think that in spite of the secularization of this holiday, most people still knew the Christmas story. I'm a bit out of touch with what younger non church families teach about Christmas. I suspect there are a growing number who really don't know what Christmas is really about, but there is another concern, and that is for people who are very familiar with it... perhaps too familiar...in that it has become part fable and part legend...such that we forget who it was that arrived on our planet that night. I'm reminded of the young child who misquoted John 3:16 by saying, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only *forgotten* Son."

One of the ways that helps us REMEMBER all of what happened that first Christmas...is through the Christmas Carols and they are an intricate part of the tradition and celebration of the story of Jesus' birth. I find people either love them or hate them, I love them – well most of them.

If there was a relevant carol for today's sermon it would be *While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks By Night*.... It is probably one of the most biblically accurate carols, straight out of Luke. But I don't like that carol so we won't sing it!!!! So instead let's take our Bibles and let's review the account of the role that the shepherds played in that first Christmas. I'll be reading from Luke 2:8-20.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were

terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven,
and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go to Bethlehem! Let’s see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger. ¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, ¹⁹ but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often. ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

What can we learn from these shepherds’ involvement in what happened that first Christmas night? I want to highlight three things.

(1) First, their part in the Christmas story helps us to see that **everyone is important to God**.

One of the things I love about the whole life of Jesus is that he did nothing in style, everything he did was simple and earthy, no pomp and ceremony.

Born in an animal stable/cave, placed in a manger and the only ones to receive a personal invitation to be there on the night of Jesus’ birth were a bunch of lowly shepherds—a very unlikely group to receive such an invite because they were despised and mistrusted by everyone of that day—and for several reasons.

- First, since caring for sheep was literally a 24-7 kind of job, they couldn’t observe all the meticulous hand-washing rules and regulations required by the Jewish religion.

- To make matters worse, their flocks kept them away from the temple for weeks at a time which made it next to impossible for them to be made clean in the eyes of Jewish law.
- Now—you would think that this demanding of a job would pay well but it didn't. In fact, no job paid less than that of a shepherd which put these men at the bottom of the ladder financially.
- Perhaps because of their nearly non-existent pay—they had the reputation for making off with things that did not belong to them, which led people to think of shepherds as crafty and dishonest.
- In fact, their reputation was so bad that they were not even allowed to give testimony in a court of law. It was just assumed that people who worked as shepherds were people who would lie.
- On top of this they were illiterate...they had no formal education whatever. Who has time to go to school when you have to watch sheep 24-7!?

To summarize, in most people's minds, shepherds were looked down on as being part of the lowest of the lowest of their culture. The only group lower were lepers.

And yet God issued His invitation to these men! And that is the exact opposite of the kind of person most would invite to celebrate a birth—especially the birth of the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

Let me put it this way. When my grand-daughter was born a few months ago, the most important people were told first, and that was me!!! Gay was in the room so she doesn't count!! Who cares about the local shepherds! We want to tell our close family and friends and celebrate with them with photos and all.

Well, that's the way we do this kind of thing, so we would assume that when God's Son was born, invitations would have gone out to the Roman Caesar or the High priest...or the Pharisees or Sadducees...or the wealthy of the day...but none of these angelic messengers were sent to any of these guys that first Christmas night. No—the choir of Heaven only sang for a few, poor, smelly shepherds—social and religious outcasts.

I believe God intentionally chose the shepherds—because He wanted to let it be known that His love is all-inclusive. He wanted everyone who would hear this story to realize that He loves all people. God wanted to make sure we

know that He is not a respecter of position, but a respecter of people. He does not show more respect to kings than He does to minimum wage earners.

And that is phenomenal news! It is so easy to doubt that God is even aware that we exist, let alone have a favourable opinion of us. If you think that, you are not alone because deep down a lot of people feel like that. But, listen, no matter how insignificant you may think you are—God knows you and you are vitally important to Him.

God's love is offered indiscriminately. You may think of yourself as someone who is on the "outside" of things—looking in. I'm too young, I'm too old, I'm too bad, I have too many doubts, I'm a hypocrite.

If so, this part of the Christmas story should be very encouraging! I imagine that many nights as the shepherds sat out in those cold, lonely fields, with nothing but dumb animals to keep them company, they looked over at the village of Bethlehem, saw the lights of the homes and heard the faint sound of families—people laughing—and as they looked they wished they could be a part of that. Maybe you've felt that way too—felt you were not one of the "crowd" then I have good news. God loves you! He values you more highly than He does the life of His only Son!

So looking at the shepherds' experience tells us that all people are important to God. He sent His only Son because He loves all of us!

(2) This leads to a second thing I want to mention. The shepherds' experience reminds us that **Jesus' birth signalled good news.**

Look at verse 10 and following:

They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Saviour—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!

Did you note the first four words in the angels' message? "Don't be afraid!"

No doubt they said this to help calm the shepherds down—who I'm sure were terrified at what they saw. I mean, try to imagine their position. They are out in the hills one night when suddenly out of the darkness the blinding light of an angel of the Lord appeared to them. Then just as their eyes are beginning to adjust and their minds are beginning to deal with the fear that a single angel

caused, the sky is filled with a multitude of angels...uncountable thousands... singing praise to God.

In some ways those four words could be seen as a Tui's phrase, "Do not be afraid!" "yeah right".

However these words were meant to calm much more than the anxiety of those shepherds. Those words are meant for all people! This is good news because living in this fallen world all of us have so much to be afraid of. Here's a quote from Max Lucado's book, *Fearless*:

"Each sunrise brings new reasons to fear. Layoffs at work, slowdowns in the economy, flare-up in the Middle east, downturns in the housing market, breakouts of al Qaeda cells. Some demented dictator is collecting nuclear warheads the way others collect fine wines. A new strain of flu is crossing the border. The plague of our day, terrorism, begins with the word TERROR. We are peppered with bad news: global warming, asteroid attack, genocide, wars, earthquakes, AIDS. News programs disgorge enough hand-wringing information to warrant an advisory: 'Caution: this news report is best viewed in the confines of an underground fault in Iceland.'

We fear being sued, finishing last, going broke; we fear the mole on the back, the new kid on the block, the sound of the clock as it ticks us closer to the grave. We create elaborate security systems and legislate stronger military, yet we depend on mood altering drugs more than any other generation in history. Fear, it seems has taken a hundred year lease on the building next door and set up shop."

All this bad news is taking its toll. It has been said that we are the most worried culture that has ever lived. Apparently for the first time since the end of WW2 parents expect that life for their next generation will be worse than it was for them. This prevalence of fear is a sad thing because fear feels dreadful. There's no button you can push to make it go away. And while you're trying to find a way to deal with it—fear sucks the life out of your soul. It drains you of contentment. It makes you self-centred. Fear can paralyze even the strongest person.

I'm saying the message the angels entrusted with the shepherds is good news indeed! Now, we need not fear because the saviour has been born.

Let take an illustration from the movies where the good guys are surrounded by the bad guys...and the good guys fear that if something doesn't happen they will be overrun. But then as we imagined a couple of weeks ago, the sound track changes (Star wars [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= D0ZQPqeJkk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0ZQPqeJkk)

And you know something wonderful is about to happen and sure enough, reinforcements come over the horizon and save the day.

In a very real sense that's the situation all people were in before Jesus came. We were behind enemy lines surrounded...outnumbered. Sin was defeating us—pushing us further and further from God. The situation looked grim. We were lost people with no hope of being saved. Then that Heavenly choir sang, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=akb0kD7EHlk> changing the “sound track” of life, letting us know something wonderful was about to happen...and it did! Jesus came!

Did you know that Jesus' most common command was some form of the words: “Fear not!” In the Gospels Jesus says this 125 times. He made this one statement more than any other. The second most common command—to love God and neighbour—appears only 8 times.

So, a study of the shepherds helps us to understand that everyone is important to God and that Jesus' birth signalled good news for us all...but it highlights one more thing...

(3) ...the shepherds' example shows that **what you do with the Good News makes all the difference.**

Put yourself in those shepherds' sandals for a moment. Review their options as to what to do with their angelic summons.

- They could have **doubted** what they had been told. They could have said, “This message can't be true. In fact, who are we to have heard this? We better just forget about all this.”
- They could have **ignored** it. They could have any number of excuses that would keep them from checking out the news they had just heard. After all, theirs was a 24-7 job!
- They could have **debated** it. They could have sat down and analysed what they should do. Could they afford to leave the sheep? What if something happened while they were gone? You can't just jump up and leave 99 sheep to fend for themselves, who would encourage that???

- They could have **rejected** the angels' message outright. They could have said, "This is not for us! In fact, this whole thing sounds kind of woolly!" (you see what I did there, woolly – sheep!!)

But the shepherds chose to **believe**!

Note the exact wording. They didn't say, "Let's go see *if* these things are true." No they said, *Let's see this thing that has happened,*

Listen, it's not enough to hear about Jesus. It's not enough just to sing a few carols, to look inside the manger at Christmas and say, "Oh, how nice. What a lovely story. Pass the Christmas mince pie." You see, unless we **act** on the angel's message. Unless we **believe** we are forgiven. We can get all sentimental at Christmas and have a warm fuzzy feeling but if we don't use our God-given free-will and choose to do something, it's all for nothing.

But if you act on this good news as the shepherds did—if you reach out in faith—you'll find that Jesus is real! You'll see that the angels' message was true! You'll meet Jesus Himself just as certainly as the shepherds did!

Since the night those shepherds acted on the Angels' invitation, millions upon millions of people have responded as well. They decided to believe the good news of the Gospel and in that faith-step, they came to know God Himself. If you haven't made that faith step—if you haven't decided to follow the Christ of Christmas, why not do so today?

Why not act on this Scriptural invitation and believe that this close encounter, Jesus, is God's Son, who died in our place?

Let us pray