

The Shepherds' Light

How Christmas Can Light Your Way

Luke 2:8-20

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Bethany Church

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This past week I walked into the house after practice with our worship band. Over every doorknob in the hall was a dirty white sock. "Who's playing this trick?" I thought. Both my girls are away, so my thoughts turned to my 15 year old. But I noticed that all the socks belonged to my 4 year old. Later that evening Diane confronted our 4 year old: "Why did you place socks on the doorknobs down stairs?" The tiny voice answered, "I'm decorating for Christmas."

I was not expecting that answer. It can be difficult to keep a straight face as a parent, but sometimes you must. Little children have big feelings. Although neither Diane nor I laughed, my grin grew so wide that it hurt.

There are unexpected events in our lives that catch us totally off guard. Some are good. They bring great joy. Some are difficult and hard to bear. When I look at the second candle on our advent wreath, the shepherds' candle, I'm reminded of something that was totally unexpected, that left no one with a poker face. Today I want us to consider how the shepherds' experience that first Christmas can help you live. I want to share how it can light your way.

Most of us find our lives either busy or boring. Imagine being both, busy and bored. That was the life of a shepherd. They were busy in that they had many tasks and they could not leave their sheep. The shepherds had to deal with storms, thickets, wild animals and raiders. They had to make decisions about diseases and infections and become midwives that delivered some lambs. But they also could be bored because often they were no more than passive observers watching their sheep graze hour after hour. The Bible reports that the shepherds near Bethlehem were living out in the fields. The Greek term that scholars

translate "living" actually carries the image of somebody camped out in a field, with no shelter, leading animals as he plays a flute. Whether any of the shepherds in the Christmas story played flute is unknown, but many of the Bible's psalms were written as David watched and maybe sung to his sheep.

The life of a shepherd was not conducive to social climbing. As a rule, shepherds were not educated, articulate or societal leaders. The vocation was not for the ambitious, industrious, socially-engaged person. It was for the patient and independent. The shepherds carried a stigma. They commanded little respect. In fact, the Egyptians despised shepherds. This stigma is the reason why all the Israelites were located in one area of Egypt before their exodus.

Shepherds not only suffered from a stigma but their situation was confining. Unlike Simeon who recognized 8-day old Jesus because of his devotion to God, shepherds spent most their time with sheep. They had little opportunity to explore other things.

On the first Christmas, the shepherds near Bethlehem were keeping watch over their flocks at night. It was a thankless and uncomfortable task; nevertheless, there was something noble about it. These shepherds continually cared for helpless creatures, something their ancestors Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David did. In a spiritual manner, this is what Jesus did. Christ identified with shepherds because of their care. God puts a premium on our relationships with others. God is especially concerned about our relationship with those, who like sheep, need help. In reality, shepherds did God's bidding with helpless animals and illustrated God's care for people in need. Despite that, shepherds were not known for their religious experience.

Many people are afraid of religious experiences. They are afraid of losing a grip on reality. They are afraid of getting caught up into something emotional and irrational. The idea of visions, dreams and visiting angels spook them. It doesn't occur to them that these very things may be a gateway to a better grip on reality. Similarly, it was not the norm for shepherds listening to their flocks and watching over them to see visions. They were not sitting in the fields asking themselves, "When do you suppose we'll see an angel?" Instead, when an angel appeared, the shepherds were terrified. First, they were scared because this was unexpected. They were unprepared. They knew what they would do with a wolf or a thief, but they had not thought about what they would do with an angel. What do you do? Duck and cover? They were caught unprepared, kind of like Florida. Second, these were people who heard about omens and had no empirical studies to discount them. Maybe, they had relatives who testified to seeing an angel before they died. Whatever the case, enough stories had been told over the years about people seeing an angel before they died that they all thought they were goners when the angel appeared. Talk about fearing religious experience.

However, instead of bringing death, the angel sought to calm them. He carried good news from God. There was cause for celebration; there was cause for great joy. God had good news for all the people. God was revealing his compassion. These shepherds were discovering God's heart for them. Have you discovered God's heart for you? Have you

discovered how God really feels about you? Did you know that God sent me to you to share God's heart for you? When I realized the truth about God's heart for me, my life underwent profound changes.

What happened in that field changed those men. They found out that God was working right now where they were. "**Today in the town of David,**" the angel said. They discovered God was working right now. Have you? Moreover, God was working on their behalf: "**a Savior has been born to you.**" God was giving them a gift. In addition, they could see if they choose: "**You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.**" When the first angel and all the others left, the shepherds talked among themselves. It took little discussion for them to decide: "**Let's go and see.**" Indeed, the Bible says that they hurried off and found things in Bethlehem just like they were told. They now were witnesses of a vision and its confirmation.

Have you ever wondered why the shepherds got the vision? The rabbis didn't. The priest didn't. The civic leaders didn't. The rich didn't. The educated didn't. Why the shepherds? Was not God signaling to us that truth is for us all, and that truth can come through all? There is no favoritism with God. God does not favor educated over the illiterate, the rich over the poor, the healthy over the sick, the fortunate over the unfortunate. God does not favor the young over the elderly, the adult over the child, the saint over the sinner, or the born over the unborn. God's love is for *all the people*. A savior has been born to *all the people*. A great joy is for *all the people*. That's the shepherds' light. God chose people, who some detest and others ignore, to see and to convey the greatest truth for humanity.

What people are you discounting? What people have you shut your ears and hearts to? Are you writing off people whom God loves? Who is it that you detest? Who is it that you ignore? The light of the shepherds illumines their value.

The shepherds gave light on Christmas because they were witnesses. They testified not to what they merely believed. They spoke about what they experienced. Witnesses are not people who speak about what they believe, they are people who share what they've seen, what they've heard, what they've felt, what they've experienced. That's why people were amazed by the shepherds. They were amazed by what they reported. The shepherds were witnesses not teachers. They didn't teach what they believed; they told what they experienced. Consequently, Mary remembered these things. She pondered them and treasured them. The shepherds' report helped Mary parent our savior.

The shepherds remind me that we may not all have the call to teach, but we all can report our experiences. When Christ fills us with his Spirit, we are witnesses.

One day a young woman walked into my office. "Wes," she said, "I feel such an emptiness in regard to God. I feel so distant." Even though this woman was baptized, confirmed and worshiped regularly, she felt estranged from God. She could talk about what she believed, but she could share nothing of what she experienced. She was the shepherds without an encounter. She had nothing to report. She believed in the love of

God, without tasting that love. She believed in the reality of Jesus, without any personally confirming evidence. The day she came to me, she wanted more.

I can't make the heavens rip open and cause angels to sing for you. I can't make you experience the love and power of Jesus Christ. I know God loves you, but I can't make you feel it, taste it or receive it. I was scared that day because I wanted this woman to taste, feel and know what I know, but I wasn't in control of what she experiences. I knew from the shepherds' light that God's love for her was not an ounce less than his love for me. I didn't want her to walk out of my office feeling the same way that she did when she walked in. I remember us kneeling together in my office that day. I don't recall what all we prayed, but I remember that it was honest and sincere. When it was over, I was afraid to ask what she felt; and when she left the office I still wasn't sure. However, in the coming days she could not keep her mouth shut about the love and peace Jesus had given her. Her burdens were gone. Her heart was full; and she said with a smile, "I've become a Jesus freak." That was something that would have turned her off a week earlier.

When I think of the shepherds' light, I think first of a God who loves us all. God's love includes us all. God in love pursues us all. I think of good news, great joy **for all the people**. Second, I think of how encounters with God and his love make us witnesses. We don't have to go to witness school. We don't have to be teachers. We can just report what we see and hear. Jesus told us that when the Holy Spirit comes upon us, we'll be witnesses. It is automatic. We get to tell ghost stories, Holy Ghost stories. We witness the work of the Holy Spirit.

Let Christmas and the shepherds' light remind you of how loved you and all those about you are. Let it lead you to open your eyes, ears and heart to God's forgiving and healing love. Let it free you to report what you observe God doing today.