

The Call to Shepherds

Four Lessons of Advent:

Luke 2:8-12, 15-20

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In preparation for Christmas, there is a lot of work. Of course, there are decorations and baking. There are events to schedule... and there is shopping, much shopping. It gets harder when you are older. Much harder! One 90-year-old lady decided it was too difficult. She wrote out checks for each family member and friend on her Christmas list and then wrote on each Christmas card, "Buy your own present." She sent them all off so they would arrive before Christmas. After the Christmas festivities were all complete, she found all those checks in her desk drawer. Suddenly, she saw her message "Buy your own present" in different light. Her new found vision, an unfavorable one, moved her to act quickly.

I hope that will be the impact of our Advent Wreath this year. I don't want your vision to be unfavorable. I do want you to see some familiar words in a very different light that moves you to act in ways that specifically bless and heal.

Last week, we lit the Prophecy Candle. We remembered how prophecy helped people identify and respond to Jesus. Today they help people recognize the visitation of God and respond appropriately. Speaking of prophets, Peter wrote:

Pay close attention to what they wrote, for their words are like a light shining in a dark place... (2 Peter 1:19, NLT)

If we do not heed Peter's command, we will miss the great things God is doing in our time. We need to see our lives and world in the light of prophecy. Such a vision will lead us to very different actions.

The second candle on the wreath is the Shepherds Candle. It reminds us that the first news of Christ's birth was given to shepherds. Most of the time that news goes to family and friends, but these shepherds weren't close relatives. They weren't service providers or caregivers. They weren't rulers. They weren't chaplains, priests or teachers. To my knowledge, they had no familiarity or any continuing contact since Joseph, Mary and Jesus fled to Egypt within two years. Why was this announcement made to these nearby shepherds? Why did it not come to the synagogue ruler or rabbi who would lead Joseph and Mary in worship and Scripture reading? Why did it not come to the priests who served in the temple a few miles away in Jerusalem? Why was it not first given to devout intercessors like Simeon and Anna who fasted and rarely left the temple? Why did God favor shepherds with such news?

Of course, David had walked those same hills as a shepherd about a thousand years earlier. No doubt he prayed, sang to the Lord and created many of the psalms as he watched the sheep. Much later as a king he may have escaped to those hills from the press of his duties in Jerusalem. Whatever spiritual connection may exist between David and those shepherds or between David and those hills, the Bible does not comment on it. What does the Bible tell us?

First, the Bible reveals that shepherding was not the only industry of the town. David's grandfather Boaz farmed land around Bethlehem. His grandmother Ruth had walked those fields behind the harvesters gleaning food for her mother-in-law and her. Why then were the shepherds favored over the farmers? The Bible teaches us that God is not arbitrary. Paul wrote:

God does not show favoritism. (Romans 2:11, NIV)

In the announcement to the shepherds, God was not showing favoritism to any one. Although the Bible reveals that Egyptians despised shepherds and we can surmise that these shepherds most likely were either hirelings or had insufficient funds to hire others to look after their flocks

at night, we cannot conclude that the poor and despised are especially moral and therefore favored. Somehow, God was impartially orchestrating something and impartially responding to something. What was it?

Consider the guidance of the angel and the response of the shepherds. The angel said:

I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

(Luke 2:10-12, NIV)

The angel said that this good news of great joy will be for all the people. It is not merely for a few. It is not for just the religious. It is not merely for worshippers. The angel says a savior has been born to the shepherds. However, since it is good news for everyone, it includes people of every occupation and habitation. Then the angel tells the shepherds how they can identify this savior.

The shepherds respond:

"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. (Luke 2:15-18, NIV)

The shepherds' response certainly helps us understand God's action. First, the shepherds recognize the voice of the angel as the word of their Lord. They are receptive to the one true God. God announced his message to people who were receptive. Second, the shepherds act in accord with God's word and identify the visitation of God in baby Jesus. They are not hearers only. They act. God reveals things to those who act. Jesus himself later makes that point when he tells the story of three servants. One is given five thousand dollars, another two thousand and another one thousand dollars to manage. When the first two servants double their money and the third does nothing, the master takes the money from the third and gives it to the one who has doubled the five thousand. Jesus concludes that one who has much will be given more. Why?

Because he does more and is trustworthy! God reveals things to those who do something with what he reveals. Third, the shepherds spread the news of what they've heard and seen. They realize that this news is for all the people. Their status as shepherds validates their mission. This good news is for everyone. God gives this great blessing to those who willingly bless others.

Finally, hear what they do:

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 2:20, NIV)

The shepherds went back to work. They returned to work, but their experienced changed everything. Their work now becomes worship. They are glorifying and praising God as they care for the sheep. Any, who do business with these shepherds, taste the love and grace of God. God's redemption is spreading through their shepherding.

Although these shepherds heard from an angel and saw the host of heaven praise God, although they observed in Bethlehem the little baby accurately described by the angel, they have not seen what you and I have. They did not see our judgment fall on that child. They did not witness an empty tomb. They did not taste the gift of the Holy Spirit, the forgiveness and love that fills our hearts. Knowing that their work became worship and having received an even greater salvation, do you walk in the light of their experience? Do you worship Jesus in your work? Do you glorify and praise God wherever you spend your day?

Why do you think God deploys us throughout the community most the time? Why do you think we spend so much time in our neighborhoods and workplaces? That is where worship must rise to God. That is where we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. That is where people are either supported in faith and reverence for God or they are hindered. That is why you are there. A heavenly vision is unfolding before you. What will you do with it? Will you walk with these shepherds?