

December 4, 2022 God's Gracious Choice Luke 2:8-15

People have a tendency to get hung up on the idea of a virgin birth. The truth is, that is only one of the many miracles that are part of the story of Jesus birth. Stop and think about it. Angels from the realms of Glory. Hark the Herald Angels Sing! Christmas is a season in which we read of miracle after miracle after miracle. When Jesus was born, the Magi, the Wisemen set out on a journey following a star they had never seen in the night sky before. It disappeared for part of their journey as they headed ever West. The angel that appeared to Zechariah foretelling the birth of John the Baptist to an old man whose wife was "well along in years." The angel that visited Mary and told her she had been chosen to be the mother of Jesus. The angel that visited Joseph convincing him to marry Mary. And the angel that appeared to the shepherds.

Even today when you visit Bethlehem, you can see shepherds on the hills that are part of the landscape in that region. They wear blue jeans and leather jackets. And the group I saw were standing around an old Ford F-150 half ton. But they were doing the job shepherds do. They were watching their flocks of sheep. And this is really important. They were not out on those hills to be seen by tourists. They were working. A group of men doing the work that they loved and to the best of their ability keeping to the old ways.

My point? For centuries before the birth of Jesus, and for centuries after, shepherds have been keeping watch over

sheep on the Bethlehem hills. In the midst of that common task, that very ordinary job, the miracle occurred. “An angel of the Lord appeared to them. And the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid...terrified!”(Luke 2:9)

They had good reason to be terrified. They knew at once that this was no ordinary experience. The angel! The light in the midst of darkness! They knew they were in trouble. After all, they are shepherds. Everyone knew...they knew...this heavenly messenger obviously knew they were unclean. By the nature of their work, their lives, the definitions of the Law, they were unclean. Sinners. Caught, found, discovered, whatever... in their trespasses and sins.

They remind us of something we know something about: it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of God who is HOLY, HOLY, HOLY. Their first expectation is that the light that surrounds them will reduce them to dust and ashes. Surely, they are about to die!!

No. Nothing of the sort. God has made a gracious choice. It is another miracle! Something that is hard to accept and harder still to understand. “Do not be afraid,” says the angel. God says that a lot to the people HE chooses to bless, and calls to be part of HIS kingdom.

I expect the reaction of the shepherds was, “Easy for you to say!” But that is what they would tell Mary and anyone else who would listen to them. “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy, that will be for all the people.” Good news.

News that will cause them to be happy. News that is for all the people...the priests, the religious, the non-religious, the poorest of the poor, outcasts, tax collectors, fishermen, even shepherds.

This is the heart of the real story of Christmas, the Christ feast: "Today in the town of David (Bethlehem), a Saviour has been born to you. He is Christ, the Lord." That is, HE is the Messiah promised in the writings of the prophets, the anointed ONE of God. And HE has not been born for them...HE has been born for you. Shepherds. All the people. Whosoever will come to HIM. Whosoever will follow HIM.

And the angel defines the great miracle. It is not just a bunch of words. It is not just a lot of theological babble. "This will be a sign to you. You will find the baby wrapped in cloths, (for those who like the old words...swaddling clothes...and lying in a manger." Not born in a palace, or even a house. Not born in a hotel, or a hospital. In a barn. Not even a shed. A cave cut out of a rock face by time and wind and water and ice. For all the people. Even you. Even me.

And if that is not enough, "Suddenly," that is what the text actually says, "Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel." The night sky is full of them and they praise God and they say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men, (to mankind) on whom HIS favour rests." And just like that...as fast as it began it's over. The angels have gone back into heaven. And the shepherds look at one

another and start talking. And the things they say have to do with the invitation they were offered. There is a sign that they did not drink to much wine, or were dreaming, if they dare to go and see it. "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened." With their own eyes.... "Which the Lord has told us about." Suddenly they are talking like believers.

They hurried off. They found Mary and Joseph, and the baby. You know the scene. It is portrayed in every Nativity set that exists. The ox and the ass are part of the scene. And it is a manger where the baby lies. The baby who will become the man, Jesus, who will change the world. The great miracle is not the angels. It is the shepherds. And that is precisely why Luke tells us their story. God's gracious choice is that the salvation HE provides for us in HIS Son is not just for the leaders of the nation. In fact they have no idea it has even occurred. It is for common souls. All the people. The poor. The lame. The distressed and depressed. People who know they are....sinners. To shepherds and inn keepers and a handful of travellers. Probably more women than men it was revealed. And Joseph played his part. Mary gave birth. And Joseph named him Jesus.

So where did Luke get all this from? Well he told us and Theophilus for whom he wrote the account that he was careful about the details. And he tells us just a few verses later where he learned these details. The shepherds told Mary and Joseph what happened out on the hills and why they came to town. And she, "treasured up these things and pondered them in her heart." We know about the shepherds for one reason. God

made a gracious choice. He revealed what HE was doing to the least expected group of people in Judea. Shepherds. They are the chosen symbol of HIS love for all the people, including us.

Let us

pray:

Lord we give thanks for the details that have been shared with us by your servant Luke. We thank YOU for caring about Shepherds. We thank YOU for every one of the marvelous details of the story of the birth of Jesus. Help us to cherish the word we have been given. Unto us a child is born. It is the meaning of the season. Help us to not be afraid. Help us to be filled with the joy YOU intend for the people. All of them. YOUR gracious choice. Amen