



December 2-3, 2017  
Pastor Larry Hackman  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Inviting God: Shepherds* Luke 2:8-20

Christmas is here! How many of you love Christmas? I love so much about it. When I think of Christmas, I think of keeping warm when it's cold outside. I think of snow, which is also something I love which it seems some people hate. I think of lights in the darkness. I think of the feeling of anticipation and excitement and culmination on Christmas morning. I think of new stuff to play with! Yes, I'll admit it, I like getting presents on Christmas. As a matter of fact, I love it. That's a confession! I know that's probably the worst part of Christmas, isn't it? That part of Christmas, the getting new stuff part, is what has led to our stores putting up Christmas trees and decorations in September. Whole industries live or die based on how greedy we get during Christmas. Consumerism has consumed our culture, and it's dragged way too many families into its maw of debt and misery.

I mention this in the family life letter in your bulletins, but I'm amazed by how *prescient* A *Charlie Brown Christmas* is about this. All the way back in 1965, Charlie Brown was complaining about how commercialized Christmas was. We can all sympathize with him when he eschews the sleek aluminum Christmas trees in favor of the only scraggly real tree left. We want to hold on to what makes Christmas, Christmas, right? But what is the meaning of Christmas after all? Underneath all the candy canes, the trees, sitting in Santa's lap, all that stuff, I can't shake the feeling that we've lost sight of why we do all this anyway. So I leave it to Charlie Brown and Linus to set up what our sermon is about today, and to read our text in Luke 2 for us.

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

This is the word of the Lord! - Thanks be to God.

Linus' response to Charlie Brown's exasperation is to tell the story of angels appearing to the shepherds. What's interesting about the cartoon is that Linus never unpacks that. He just goes back to Charlie Brown and says, "That's the meaning of Christmas Charlie Brown." By which, I guess he means

the Christmas story. But, I'm going to give Charles Schultz some credit and say that maybe he meant something more by choosing the story of the Shepherds. After all, Linus could have read the story of the three kings in Matthew. He could have read a little earlier in Luke 2 about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem and giving birth to Jesus. But instead, Linus reads the story of the shepherds. Is he right, that the meaning of Christmas is held within this story? Let's dig in a little and find out.

Because we read this story year after year, it's easy to miss how surprising it really is. I think we take so much for granted because we've heard it so many times. The first thing that should really take us by surprise is an obvious question, why do angels bother to show up to shepherds? We might have a romanticized idea of shepherds now, but when Luke wrote this account people would have recognized shepherds as kind of the ne'er-do-wells of the time. Shepherds had a reputation of being dishonest thieves. They didn't make a lot, and often times they lived as a kind of indentured servant. To boot, they were considered ritually unclean according to Jewish religious law. So when a shepherd was around you in that time, you didn't know if your reaction should have been to plug your nose, or to make sure you knew where your wallet was. So again, why on earth would angels bother to show up to these guys of all people?

Well, I think we get more insight into an answer for that question when we take a closer look at what they said to the shepherds. Let's read it again, from Luke 2:10, *"Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."* Again, we've lost sight of how remarkable this is. It's one big giant oxymoron. You guys know what an oxymoron is, right? Two things together that seem to contradict. Like, "negative growth," "open secret," or, my favorite, "devout atheist." What the angel declares to the shepherds is an oxymoron. Let me explain why.

First of all, we have to see these key words that the angel uses, "Savior, Christ, Lord." Even "good news." When Jesus was born, with the exception of "Christ," those words were most commonly associated with the Emperor. Listen to this quote from an inscription that was carved into a temple wall in Priene, Greece just 9 years before Jesus was born. Some temple officiants were arguing that Rome should change the calendar to start at 0...when Caesar Augustus was born. Listen carefully to his argument.

It [changing the calendar] seemed good to the Greeks of Asia, in the opinion of the high priest Apollonius of Menophilus Azanitus: Since Providence... has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior... that he might end war and arrange all things... and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him...

Doesn't this sound remarkably similar to what the angel declares to these shepherds? In the Greco-Roman world, good news, the "gospel" so-to-speak, was that Caesar Augustus was in charge! He was their so-called savior, their lord, who would bring peace to the Roman world. Wow. So when the angel says this to the shepherds, he's directly contradicting what they would otherwise know about the way things stood. The angel is saying, in effect, hey that guy sitting in Rome is sitting on a throne of lies and smells like beef and cheese. The real Savior and Lord is here, and it's not Caesar Augustus, that's really, truly good news!

That, in and of itself, would be enough to shock the shepherds, but the angel tells these lowly shepherds there will be a sign. And here's where this turns into an oxymoron, because he says that

their savior, this big shot who is going to dethrone the Caesar, is a baby. Not just any baby, but a baby wrapped in strips of cloth, lying in a feeding trough. Try that on for an oxymoron: Savior-Baby. Right? A savior-baby lying right next to a cow munching on its lunch. It's patently ridiculous on the face of it. If the shepherds hadn't been so freaked out, I believe they would have laughed out loud.

But what happens next would have wiped the smirk off of anybody's face. Luke records for us that, "And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Here's what I think is going on here. Imagine that the angel hosts are peaking in on what this one angel is saying to the shepherds, Gabriel or whoever he is. They hear him telling the shepherds that God is sending a savior-baby, and there's something so magnificent, so beautiful about that, that the angel hosts are compelled to burst out into song. Think about it.

I believe that there is something key here. What the angel has said about who God is, this is a paradigm shift, a revelation. Something intrinsic to who God is has been shown to these shepherds, and the angel hosts are celebrating it. We are so used to power and glory being about who is the most visible, who wields the sword, who has the most money, the one doing the killing. But what if, in reality, the most powerful in our world are the ones who, for the sake of love, are poorest? The ones who, for the sake of love, take the hit to the face and don't punch back? The ones who, for the sake of love, are being killed? Because those are the ones who are following in the way of the most powerful of all, the babe Jesus.

You see, Caesar Augustus, and most every body who's been in power before or since has got it all wrong. God showed us that the thing that really takes a person's breath away, the thing that causes an angel to burst into song, is sacrificial, humble, love. The glory of Caesar Augustus is fleeting, a flash in the pan, but the glory of God, this oxymoronic, upside-down, love and power that hides itself in humility and will never fade away. God's glory is strange and wonderful, because it comes clothed in the ordinary, the weak and the humble. "Glory to God in the highest!" Indeed!

Once we grasp this upside-down nature of God's love and glory, we begin to understand why it was that he chose the shepherds to be the one who got this message. It's right there in what the angel says to the shepherds, "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people." The truth is that Caesar's good news didn't really benefit all people. Caesars good news was first for the wealthy and the powerful, and maybe some others would benefit. But God shows up to a bunch of no-good, thieving, dirty shepherds to say, loud and clear, this really is good news for anyone. No matter how much of an outcast you are, how much you've screwed up your life with poor choices, God has good news for you. If a bunch of shepherds in a field matter, you matter. I matter.

There's only one more question I had raised left hanging, is Linus right about the meaning of Christmas? What is the meaning of Christmas? I think it's as profound as this: Great love stoops low. God, even though he had the all-powerful nature of God, didn't regard that nature as something to be grasped, but instead emptied himself, gave it all away, humbling himself to become a baby, and then a servant to all mankind, humility and love so profound he would even die for us. Glory to God in the highest, peace and goodwill to all men. That's what we lose sight of in this holiday isn't it? The profound beauty and love of the incarnation, that God became man. That's what the meaning of Christmas is.

What kind of response should we have to this? I think we still have more to learn from the shepherd's story. Let's read on. Luke 2:15-20.

*When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

Last week, Pastor Megan shared about how Mary responded to the news Gabriel gave her about Jesus. She gave us a series of "P" words, does anybody remember them? Proclamation. Perplexity. Proof. And Participation. I'm going to give you one more P word, ripped straight from this passage. Praise! Sometimes, the best and most proper response to what God has done is simply praise. Here, the shepherds have heard the proclamation, have experienced perplexity, have seen the proof, have participated in what God had done by visiting the Savior-Baby Jesus, and what is left to do, but to praise? Notice also, that this is the response of the angels themselves.

And I have to say that this is one more thing I love about this Christmas season. Can you think of any other occasion in our culture in which we sing as much? I'm almost certain that we do this because of the example that the angels give us, and the shepherds in their turn.

Praise, when it's sincere, is done out of a sense of wonder and awe. Perhaps one of the more insidious things that has happened to this holiday season, besides the rampant consumerism, may be the absolutely insane busyness. I think when we are ping-ponging from place to place, buying gifts, going to parties, cooking, whatever it is, we can become so occupied that we don't have a chance to ponder, as Mary did, on what marvelous things the shepherds beheld. This is a challenge any time of the year, but in a time of year that is intended for praise, should we not somehow ponder with Mary, and lead ourselves to a sense of sincere praise for God's incredible love?

Here is my challenge for you: don't be a cynical Christian this year. Find some time to ponder on the story of the shepherds, and the message of the angels. Experience anew the surprise and paradox of the Christmas message. And let that pondering lead you to praise. Don't just sing the songs of this holiday as rote, but hear their beautiful words again. Join in with the angel chorus. Join in with the shepherds in their praise. Glory to God in the highest, peace and goodwill to all men.

This morning/evening, we have that chance to ponder. As a community, we celebrate the love of Jesus by eating a meal together. God's love in becoming a man began in a feeding trough, but it culminated on a cross. That beautiful, strange, upside-down glory is what we remember when we eat this meal. Let's not rush into the meal, but let's take a moment of silence to ponder the meaning of Christ's coming to us this morning/evening.