

Joy at Christmas

Luke 2: 8-20

I want to take you on a journey this morning, following the path of the shepherds who are an integral part of the Christmas story. We want to follow their journey because it is one that takes us from **where we are to the place of joy**. This Christmas season, despite all the songs and lights and gatherings there are many people who still do not have joy. If we can follow the shepherds and see how they discovered joy, maybe we too can join in the joyous chorus...

It is best we start by reading the story once again from the scripture, for God tells His own story best. We read from Luke 2:8-20:

1. The Starting Place

My neighbour raises sheep. A modern shepherd – but unlike the shepherds of the Christmas story he does not live in the fields watching over his flocks at night. He has a little house in the yard right next to mine. One day we met on the side of the road about a block from my house and we started talking. He was wearing his rubber boots, suspenders to hold up his baggy jeans and on his head was a well worn ball cap. He certainly had no interest in making a fashion statement!

We talked about family – mainly mine – and plans for Christmas. He was curious to know about our services and our church banquet (you can tell this took place a few years back). He said he used to attend church but since his wife was a member of a difference church, he did not get out very often. His wife did not attend at all... We were enjoying our little chat when his wife appeared down the road, stomping towards us in her rubber boots and cursing up a storm. When she got to me she paused a moment to look me over, and said, “Sorry, thought you were my husband” and then continued her tirade against him. I decided it was time to slip away home before she started to set me straight...

Maybe my neighbour’s situation is not too different from that of the shepherds. His life was nothing special, just raising sheep to make a living, and trying to keep the Mrs. happy. The shepherds we read about were no one special, just men doing what they knew best – looking after sheep. Most likely these sheep, raised on the hills around Bethlehem, were to be used for the temple sacrifices. This meant the shepherds had a few thoughts about God and the temple – but just a few. They would not be attending the temple because they were not very welcome. They wore rough, dirty, smelly clothes and were classified as unclean. No, they would not be present at the next service...

They were contented with life, and managed to scrape by okay, but the extra wineskin that always seem to be passed around and the lack of laughter around the fires betrayed the fact that joyful would not be a word that described their lives.

God saw where they were, and God had not forgotten them...

2. The Angels Appear

Suddenly a brilliant light pierced the blackness of the night, and in the midst of the light the shepherds saw an angel. If they could find a place to hide they would have, for this scene terrified them. But there is no place to hide in a sheep pasture. Now the angel was speaking to them...

“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

For the first time in the dreary lives of these shepherds, someone was talking about joy. And it was an angel...

The angel spoke of someone born from the family of David, which everyone knew was the family the Messiah would come from. And the angel called this one to be born a Saviour. Now they were not too sure about what all that meant, but they knew they needed to be saved from those terrible Romans. Could there be something more people needed to be saved from?

I can imagine God suddenly putting into their minds the images of the lambs being killed for the daily sacrifices in the Temple. These sacrifices were necessary because of the sins of the people. Why would God remind them of this scene? Unless the Savior was somehow able to deal with the sin problem... but how?

Suddenly the angel was joined by a whole choir of angels who sang out into that night sky:

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

These shepherds were curious. God really had their attention now. Something special was happening that night in Bethlehem. Somehow the birth of a baby was the heart of the good news the angels proclaimed. It shouldn't be too hard to find the baby because he will be sleeping in a manger instead of a nice warm bed. He will be in a barn, a place where even dirty shepherds are welcome...

Could it be God had not forgotten them, and it was God Himself who was drawing them to Bethlehem that night? They were curious, but they still did not have joy...

Millions of people have watched the Jesus film. It is translated in more languages than any other film, and taken to the most remote areas of the world. It is the story of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke, and it walks the viewer through the life of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection. Countless people become curious about this Jesus portrayed there, saddened by the terrible way he is treated, happy about his victory over death. They are curious, but watching

the film does not bring them to a place of joy. They need to take a step further, and thankfully the teams have made it clear that **a decision must be made** about what to do with Jesus. You can accept Him as Lord and Saviour of your life, or turn your back on him, like the people who killed him. Curiosity will not get anyone into heaven – nor bring them the joy of the Lord. However, it does take a person one step closer to where a person must be to experience true joy in his/her life...

Curiosity prompted the shepherds to say:

“Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

3. Finding the Baby

Scripture tells us that they hurried to Bethlehem and there they found Mary, and Joseph and baby Jesus, who was lying in a manger. Curiosity got them out of the fields and into town. It took them out of their comfort zone and to the place where God could be found. God had led them to the feet of Jesus – as small as those feet were...

What will move us out of our places of comfort to seek the manger – the place where Jesus will be found? Some people are comfortable in their misery – it is like an old friend that has been with them for far too long. What will move them away from that place of misery?

What will get you to take the next step towards Jesus? Sometimes it is suffering and pain, and in our desperation to get past the pain we cry out, and God is there to hear our cry. For others it is conviction – that overwhelming feeling that we are in the wrong and we need forgiveness or else we will face the wrath of God. No one has to tell us that we are sinners – we did not need Romans 3:23 to say that “All have sinned...” because we know we have. And it is that sense of shame and guilt that drives us to the feet of Jesus...

Lise tells of how she came to Christ. Like the shepherds, she was curious because her roommate had told her about Jesus, and how a person must invite Jesus into their lives to be saved. Though Lise had attended church all her life, she had never understood that message. Now she was curious, and that led her to a church service where the pastor shared the good news of how Jesus died to take upon himself our sin so that we might be forgiven. All we must do is receive the gift of forgiveness by faith...

God had Lise’ full attention. She felt convicted of her sin and her need of a Savior. She was ready to come to Jesus... but she was sitting in the middle seat in a wide pew. She would have to crawl over people to get out no matter which direction she went. And Lise was very shy, and a newcomer to the church, and...

... and she was ready to meet Jesus. She made her way to that altar where a dear couple helped her pray to invite Jesus into her life. And that was the moment joy entered her life. The moment she bowed before Jesus and made him her personal Saviour and Lord and worshipped him, her life was filled with joy!

That is what happened to the Shepherds. They knelt before Jesus, and accepted the truth the angels proclaimed to them – this was the Saviour. This baby was their deliverer. This Jesus was worthy of their worship...

And when the worship service was complete, what does it say about the shepherds?

... the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, (vs. 20)

There was a praise party that night. It started as a parade through the streets of Bethlehem and ended up around a campfire in the fields where the shepherds could watch their flocks by night...

Joy filled these shepherds to overflowing – not because they got a new job (which, by the way was exactly what was happening as Jesus came to do away with the need for sacrificial lambs), nor because they got a raise, or even because they had seen an angel. It was the message from God that brought hope, and calm and most important, joy! God is always the source of joy!

It is in the presence of God that we will find joy. So seek him. Find ways to enter his presence. He gave you the Bible so you could study it and in doing so enter his presence. He gave you prayer so you might enter his presence and there find joy. He gave you worship so that you can enter his presence and there find joy. He gave us his table, and said he would meet us here each time we eat the bread and drink the cup... and there we will find joy.

Joy is not the same as happiness. Happiness depends on your circumstances. You can have no money, no presents, no tree, no turkey this Christmas and still have joy – for joy is that deep sense that all is well – because God is here and I am in his care. It is okay...

Joy may cause you to sing – or it may not. It will cause you to have peacefulness about you. Joy starts from deep within – that place where Jesus dwells and says, "It is well, it is well, with my soul."

This morning I invite you to come with me to meet Jesus – not in a manger this time, but at his table. It is a table prepared at a great cost – Jesus' own death on a cross. But is a table of grace – where all are welcome, and where we all by faith can come into the very presence of Jesus.

And it is there you will find joy -