

Fear Not!
“Our Coming Savior” – Part IV
Luke 2:8-20
December 24, 2015

⁸ *And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

¹³ *Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

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

¹⁵ *When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”*

¹⁶ *So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ 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 2:8-20 (NIV)

Just imagine this, you’re in downtown Chicago, and instead of the unseasonable warm weather we are experiencing this Christmas Eve, the opposite has happened. Every prediction about the big blizzard has come true. It’s 3:00 a.m., the snow is falling hard and it’s below 0 degrees. In a small break room connected to a giant garage is a group of snowplow drivers. Big guys, rough guys, guys who like to cuss a lot. They are all wearing Carhart coveralls with dirt and oil all over them. The dirtier the better! You know the type of guys I am talking about? They are standing around in a circle near the coffeepot, sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups, swapping stories of all the storms of the past. They each fill their cup and then walk towards the garage where their snow plows and salt trucks are warming up. Suddenly there is a bright light . . .

The angel of the Lord is coming along with the great heavenly host. But they’re not coming for the rich and the famous. They’re not coming to visit President Obama as he vacations in Hawaii. They’re not coming to visit Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton or all the others vying to be the next President of the United States.

No, the angel of the Lord is not coming to the ones we would expect an angel to appear to. Yes, Zechariah and Mary & Joseph, but not these guys. These guys are out in the margins. We don’t even acknowledge they exist until we can’t get out of the driveway because the street is not plowed. These are the ones God wants to be the first to know. What is it going to take to get these guys attention?

Imagine the most emotion-laden event that you have ever experienced, and then multiply it many times over. That volume of emotional fervor just begins to paint the picture of what the shepherds must have been feeling on the night they were not only visited by the angel of the Lord, but they also found themselves in the presence of the multitude of the great heavenly host. What began in the shepherds' minds as just another ordinary night, watching their sheep, soon would unfold into the most extraordinary evening of their lives. This blue collar, minimum wage group of men was about to get front row seats to the Hallelujah chorus along with backstage passes to seek the King.

These men were simply doing their jobs, like they did every day and night. It was neither a glamorous job nor a job that was viewed in high regard. In fact, it was the bluest of blue collar jobs and considered by many to be on one of the lowest rungs on society's ladder in the day. However, it was steady work and somebody had to do it – even if they were considered the social outcasts in that day. But the outcasts would quickly become the insiders on what God was up to. The lowly shepherds went from outsiders to insiders in an instant. Their new insider status filled them with great fear. It says they were “terrified.”

Not only were they in the presence of the angel of the Lord, but they were also standing in the middle of the glory of the Lord, a place where very few people here on earth ever had the opportunity to be. I'm thinking of Moses in the Shekinah glory at Mount Sinai and Peter, James and John at the Transfiguration. The shepherds find themselves in some pretty rare company. Who wouldn't be afraid?

Then the angel of the Lord utters the most repeated command in all the Bible. The same command given to the other characters in the Advent/Christmas story: “Fear not!” “Do not be afraid!”

But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”
Luke 2:10-13 (NIV)

The shepherds, some of the least likely of all people in the day, were the first to receive the news that the Savior had been born. It was not just news, it was “Good News,” “Good News of Great Joy!” The news was so good that the angel's news would quickly replace the emotion of fear with that of great joy!

What is it that makes the “Good News” good? That which makes it good is that we do not have to be afraid anymore. If we didn't have the New Testament and we're not careful, the Old Testament paints a picture of a God who is out to punish us at every misdeed. A God who is ready to destroy us and abandon us in an instant. A God who we need to be afraid of and hide from. A hiding which started with Adam and Eve in the Garden. But is that really an accurate portrayal of who God is? Even from that very first sin in the Garden, God began his redemptive plan of seeking lost sinners and calling them back to Him. “Where are you?” God called out to them. And Adam answered, “I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked, I hid myself.”

That which really is the story of all of our lives here on earth. We hide ourselves. We don't really want people to see what's on the inside. We know we fall short of the glory of God, so we show only what we want to show. We go about our daily lives, raising our families, staying busy at our jobs, doing lots of good things in the community and at church, what better way to hide? But deep down we're all a little fearful? Am I good enough?

The Good News is that we don't need to be afraid. We don't have to be good enough? The Good News of Great Joy would start with the shepherds but it certainly was not intended to end with them. "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all the people.**"

God decided to make a very important statement in selecting who would receive the good news first. The angel of the Lord was sent to shepherds. The good news first went to the outcasts of society on the lowest rung of the ladder who were out in the fields rather than influential people on the top rungs of society's ladder. Yes, the message of Good News in the form of the Savior born in Bethlehem is good news of great joy for all people, including the most privileged in society too, but God started at the bottom and in the margins.

The shepherds occupation and way of life made it impossible for them to meet all the religious requirements that would allow them to worship at the temple.

The coming Savior, he who embodied the Good News, was meant to include the socially despised, the economically depressed, and the religiously shunned in the world. The Good News would extent to **all people** – nobody gets left out of the joyous news of salvation.

It's good news for democrats and republicans. It's good news for blacks and whites, and all colors in between. It's good news for the criminals and the police. It's good news for the people living in the United States as well as all the people living in Iraq, Afghanistan, N. Korea, Israel, everywhere. You see, we like to pick and choose the people we think the good news is for. It doesn't work that way. Either the good news is available to everybody, or it's for nobody. Think of the person you most disagree with on any specific issue, or the person you find their personality to be the most challenging. Don't point to them, after all this is Christmas Eve. The good news is for them too.

Why shepherds? There must have been other occupations on the lower rungs of society's ladder. Well, shepherds playing a pivotal role in God's redemptive plan is found throughout the biblical story. It goes all the way back in the Old Testament to Moses. Then to David. These words from 1 Samuel:

¹¹ Then Samuel asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives." ¹² So he sent for him and had him brought in. .. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

¹³ So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon David. 1 Samuel 16:11-13 (NIV)

In 2 Samuel we find God's instructions to the prophet Nathan, telling him to remind David of where he had come from before ascending to the throne:

⁸ "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. ⁹ I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. . . ¹⁶ Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me¹; your throne will be established forever.'"

2 Samuel 7:8-9, 16 (NIV)

A great king with a messianic lineage that would lead to the birth of the Savior of the world, in the city named for him, Bethlehem – the city of David. But before David would become king, we must not forget that he dwelled with the flocks in the pastures and hills around Bethlehem. There is a reason why Psalm 23, "The Lord is My Shepherd," has held a prominent place in the Scriptures throughout the centuries. It is a psalm which captures the entire salvation story:

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke 2:13-14 (NIV)

Doxa is the Greek word for glory. It's where we get the word "doxology" today. It's important to note the order of the great angelic proclamation: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." First, glory to God in the highest heaven, and then, peace to those on whom his favor rests.

The problem is we try and make peace without God. We try and change the world ourselves, often without God. We try and change the outside without changing the inside. All we need to do is watch the news, look at our nation and the world, and see how that is working out. There is no true, lasting, peace without God in the world, without God in his rightful place.

What the shepherds experienced on that first Christmas night, was the fulfillment of a long awaited prophecy that God had set in motion before the world began:

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

Even though the shepherds clearly heard the message of the angel of the Lord and experienced the heavenly host worshipping at full volume, they still had a choice to make. They could choose to seek out the Messiah, Christ, the Lord or not! They chose to go! They hurried!

And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. And when they saw him, they made known that 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 God and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. Luke 2:16-20

So when the shepherds returned to their jobs, do you think it made shepherding sheep any easier? Sheep are going to be sheep and sheep are going to do what they want to do. But the shepherds were changed forever. They might have gone back to the same old job – the same cold, lonely, messy, stinky, unrewarding job, but they found what they were looking for in Jesus. They still really had no idea what it all meant at the time, but they were put in the position of being the first evangelists in the history of the world. They were ordinary people with an extraordinary message of good news. Good News of great joy for all people! It's the same position that we are put in on this Christmas Eve, 2,000 years later. Are we going to seek him with haste and what are we going to do with him when we find him? Are we going to glorify and praise God and are we going to share the Good News?

Yes, it's okay to be like Mary and ponder it in your heart, at least for a little while, perhaps tonight and tomorrow, maybe even the weekend or to the beginning of the new year, but then do something with it will you? Good News is not meant to be kept to ourselves. Good News is meant to be shared! *“Fear not, I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, Christ, the Lord.”*