

“The Shepherds’ Surprise”
Sermon Series – For Unto Us a Child is Born
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First Presbyterian Church Winston-Salem, NC
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(Luke 2:8-20)

Introduction.

What is the biggest surprise you’ve ever experienced at Christmas? Was it an unexpected gift? The visit of a child who came home for the holidays? A Christmas bonus from your boss that came out of the blue?

The biggest surprise I ever experienced at Christmas was the birth of my youngest son David in December 1987. It wasn’t that his birth was completely unexpected – duh, we had been waiting nearly nine months. The surprise was that he came three weeks early when both of his older brothers had arrived about two weeks late after their due date. David came so early I was even out of town and didn’t get to the hospital until after he had been born. The doctor told us Lorie wasn’t even close to delivering and I would be fine going on a short church-related business trip for the weekend. But doctors don’t always know, do they? David’s arrival was a surprise to us all, but what a wonderful surprise it was! From then on Lorie liked to tease me that she didn’t really need me to have a baby.

The shepherds in the story of Jesus’ birth experienced their own Christmas surprise, and we read about it in Luke 2. As we consider the Shepherds’ surprise this morning, I want you to think about a surprising announcement, a reaction of fear, and a response of praise.

I. A Surprising Announcement.

People have come up with very creative ways to announce the birth of a baby these days. Usually, a couple will send out a card to friends and family or post something on social media that has a picture of the baby and includes the name, birth date, the weight and length of the baby, and the parents’ names. Here are a couple of birth announcements I recently saw that are very cute.

Now, imagine for a moment you don’t know the Christmas story, and I told you that God wanted to announce the birth of the Messiah, the new king of the Jews, to the world. Who do you think God would send an announcement to? Who would make the cut? People who were politically powerful, like Caesar or Herod? The religious elite, like the Jewish High Priest? Maybe the Mayor of Bethlehem – “Organize a parade, Mr. Mayor, I’ve got some good news to share!” All of these people might be logical recipients of God’s birth announcement to the world.

However, as you know, the news isn’t sent to the palace. The Temple doesn’t hear. And most of the people in Bethlehem slept the night away. The announcement of the birth of Jesus was sent to a group of anonymous sheep herders on the outskirts of Bethlehem who were simply watching their flocks at night. We might picture them in our mind’s eye with their shepherd’s crooks and flowing robes, and we imagine them because of the nativity sets we have in our homes, the art we’ve seen, and the Christmas pageants we’ve watched. But do they really belong at the birthplace of a king?

The world at the time of Jesus would have said, “No way. Not in a million years.” The reason is in the ancient world shepherds were considered outcasts. They were religious outcasts because according to Jewish law shepherds were considered “unclean” and “unacceptable” because of the nature of their work. Living out in the fields, they weren’t able to keep the Jewish ceremonial laws of cleanliness, and their work with sheep defiled them. As a result, they couldn’t gather with the people of God in worship

in the synagogue or at the Temple. In addition, their work was a 24-7 kind of job which prevented them from participating in the Jewish festivals and the holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. A modern-day equivalent might be a truck driver, a shift worker, or an ICU nurse whose occupation prevents them from being able to attend worship on a regular basis.

Not only were shepherds' religious outcasts, but they were also social outcasts too. Shepherds were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, and as a result they were looked upon with suspicion as shifty nomads. They also didn't mind grazing their sheep on your property. Back in the first century people looked at shepherds the way we might look at gypsies or carnival workers today. People thought of them as shady characters, and shepherds were often accused of being thieves. If something went missing, people naturally thought, "It must have been those shepherds." They had a reputation of confusing "thine" with "mine." Shepherds weren't even allowed to give testimony in a legal proceeding because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

On top of all this, shepherds slept outside under the stars, often in the sheep pen, to guard their flocks from predators and thieves. The result was that shepherds didn't exactly smell like fresh holly and Christmas cookies. By profession and by their religious and cultural status, shepherds were outsiders, and they lived near the bottom of the social ladder. Do you see why it's surprising that God would announce Jesus' birth to shepherds and that they would be the ones who were invited to the crib of the newborn king?

Why in the world did God send His angels to announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds? Everyone in the local synagogue had told them they weren't welcome, they didn't belong, and that God didn't care about their smelly existence. But the fact of the matter is that God did care, and surprisingly, He invited them to Jesus' birthday party.

This reminds us that God cares about people who feel like outcasts in the world. No one is too messy for the Lord, and no one is too far from the reach of His love. And you don't have to clean yourself up before you come to God. He loves you as you are, and He'll meet you wherever you may be. That's the surprising thing about the love of God and the surprising announcement to the shepherds.

II. A Reaction of Fear.

Sometimes when we're surprised, our reaction is fear. Can you think of a time when you were surprised, and it frightened you? My friend Jim Singleton likes to scare people by jumping out from a hiding place and saying, "Boo!" Once we were attending a conference together in Atlanta, and we decided to room together at the hotel. He arrived before I did and checked into the hotel, and he decided to take a shower and get cleaned up from the day of travel.

As he was toweling off in the bathroom, he heard the door to the hotel room open, and he assumed that it was me arriving. So he jumped out of the bathroom wrapped only in a towel with his big white pasty body and yelled, "Boo!"...only to discover it was a bell hop who was delivering towels to the hotel room. I wish you and I could have seen this man's reaction. Jim said the bell hop's eyes got as big as saucers, and he said, "Don't dooooo that ever again!" When I finally arrived at the hotel about 15 minutes later, Jim was still rolling on the bed laughing about what had just happened.

Fear is sometimes a natural reaction when we're surprised, and the shepherds had that reaction when they were surprised by the appearance of the angel that first Christmas. Have you ever noticed that whenever an angel shows up in the Bible, the first thing they say is, "Fear not!"? It happened when Gabriel appeared to Mary. It happened in the dream when an angel appeared to Joseph. It also happened when the angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist. And it happens here again when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the field. Throughout the story of the birth of Jesus, right and left we hear angels sayin, "Fear not!" Now why in the world would these angels say, "Fear not!" unless that was the primary reaction whenever someone encounters an angel of the Lord?

What fears are you battling this Christmas? In what ways are you fearful this morning? Perhaps it is a fear of failure, or a fear of abandonment. Maybe you're afraid of getting laid off at work, or that your son or daughter is heading down the wrong path. You might be fearful that you or someone you love is going to get Covid-19. Perhaps you are fearful that if you really give your life over to Jesus, He might take it in a whole different direction, and you're afraid to trust Him.

Whenever God shows up our natural reaction is often fear. We assume that things are going to change. And they usually do when God shows up. Life is never the same again. However, God brought words of comfort and reassurance to calm the fears of these shepherds and to bring hope to their hearts, and they discovered that they were being asked to step out in courageous faith and to trust God and do He asked them to do. Is God asking you to trust Him with something this Christmas?

Did you know that there are 365 times when the Bible says, "Fear not!"? That's one for every day of the year. Hear the Lord today when He says to you, "Fear not!"

III. A Response of Praise.

The shepherds did as the angel encouraged them, and they traveled to Bethlehem and found the baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths just like the angel said. The Bible tells us that the **shepherds responded in faith** to the message of the angels, and they seized the opportunity to see for themselves the amazing events of that night. They could have written off the experience as an illusion or attributed it to some bad wine they had to drink. They could have complained about fatigue and reasoned that they needed their sleep. Instead, they responded in faith and went to Bethlehem at once. Their faith led them to drop what they were doing and share in an experience which would change their lives forever. How might God be calling you to drop the excuses and drop what you're doing to respond in faith to Jesus this Christmas?

The shepherds also responded with witness. Our passage says that they told everyone they met about the amazing things that had happened that night. When you've got good news to share you can't keep it to yourself.

When my oldest son Nate was very young, he and my first wife Lorie, who has passed away a few years ago, went shopping for me one Christmas. They had just finished their trip, and one of the things they had purchase for me were some new tennis shoes I wanted for Christmas. As they drove up the driveway, Lorie turned to Nate and said, "Now, honey, don't tell Daddy what we bought him for Christmas. It's a secret." As they walked in the house, I knew they had been shopping for a present for me, and I said out loud, "Well, I wonder what you got for me for Christmas." Nate tried to hold it in with all his might, but he was bursting with so much excitement he blurted out, "Shoooooes!" When you've got good news to share, you can't keep it in. The shepherds shared the good news with everyone they met.

Finally, the shepherds responded with praise. The text tells us, "*The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told*" (2:20). Praise is the only appropriate response when we are apprehended by the love of God and see Him do amazing things in our lives. Is praise a mark of your celebration of Christmas this year? Or are you like Scrooge, grumping around saying, "Bah, humbug" because of the pandemic? Take time today to praise God for His gifts, and glory in the miracle of the Incarnation as if you were experiencing it for the first time.

Did it ever notice that as the biblical record of the birth of Jesus unfolded, everyone who ended their journey at the manger did so on their knees? Each person felt an emotion of awe and wonder. God, the creator of the universe, identified in love with our humanity through a helpless little baby. He entered history to reach us, finally and fully. If the meaning of Christmas is ever to be truly understood, it must be received with wonder and praise. And the only adequate response to His coming is on our knees.

Conclusion.

I have always been struck by the fact that the angels appeared to the shepherds when they were just doing their jobs. It wasn't like when Isaiah was in the Temple worshipping God or when the disciples were in the Upper Room on the Day of Pentecost gathered in prayer and the Holy Spirit came on them. No, the shepherds were just tending their flocks out in the night under the stars. There was nothing special about that night. It was just an ordinary evening as far as they knew. But God broke in and He put an extra on the front end of their ordinary, and their lives were never the same again. How does God want to show up in your ordinary life this Christmas?

Did you know that the Bible talks about sheep more than any other animal? It talks about cattle 131 times, it talks about dogs 41 times, and eagles 26 times. Do you know how many times the Bible mentions cats? Zero! I'm just sayin'. But sheep and shepherds are in the Bible about 500 times, like right here in our passage today about the birth of Jesus.

Later, when Jesus was a grown man, He was called the Good Shepherd. I wonder if Mary and Joseph told Jesus the story of His birth and about the visit of the shepherds. I wonder if the amazing events of that night shaped and influenced how He saw Himself and how He thought about His ministry. Jesus certainly knew the history of David, the great king of Israel and how he had once been a shepherd. The amazing truth of it all is that in David God made a shepherd into a king, but in Jesus God made a king into a shepherd who would later become a sacrificial lamb. And it is the death of Jesus on the cross of Calvary that reveals the greatest surprise of all. Thanks be to God for His surprising love in Jesus Christ this Christmas. Amen.