

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

(December 13, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

### **Christmas Shepherding**

(Luke 2:8-20)

Study #1

## **Sermon series: Traveling the Road to Faith**

### **Introduction: To ???'s house we go...**

There was a lot of traveling going on around the time that Jesus was born two thousand years ago.

Zacharias and Elizabeth traveled to Jerusalem and then back to their hill country home. Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Shepherds traveled from their fields to some stables. Wise men traveled from Persia to Israel.

Traveling can be fun, and you may enjoy traveling, whether it is for work or for play. But you probably haven't traveled as much recently as you normally do.

In years past, you may have traveled over the river and through the woods to grandmother's house. Maybe not this year. Maybe this December, you travel by Zoom.

Of course, we're all grateful for aids to communication we enjoy that previous generations didn't have. Phones and video conferencing are wonderful and worlds better than nothing.

But we all grieve the absence of in-person greetings. We miss the visits we used to enjoy when we were *actually* with each other.

Due to COVID-19, there won't be as much traveling this Christmas season as there is in most years. You probably won't be hopping a plane to travel or getting in the car for a road trip.

But that isn't to say that you can't travel. In fact, today we'll travel without leaving home.

This Sunday and next, we're going to look at some of the stories that surround the birth of Jesus. Those looks will open the way for each of us to take a trip on the road to faith.

And you can take this trip, regardless of where you are in your spiritual journey right now.

You may have been walking with Jesus for a long time and have already taken thousands of steps with Him. You can take more.

Maybe you've just started walking with Him. Over the next couple of Sundays, you'll have opportunity to move further along.

And it may be that over these two weeks you'll take your first steps on the road to faith, as you learn about Jesus for the first time.

This morning, God invites everyone to take next steps with Jesus as our time in the Bible brings us to one of the most appealing parts of the story of Jesus' birth. Today we read about the shepherds who found their way to the stable where He was born.

We're going to walk through that part of the story in a few minutes. Before getting there, though, I want to set the table by giving us time to think together about the world of shepherding.

### **Shepherds and Shepherding**

#### **Shepherds from the Bible**

##### *Shepherds of sheep*

Tending sheep has a long and respected place in Jewish history. Some of the best-known characters from the Bible were shepherds.

Of the first two sons of Adam and Eve, **Abel** - the righteous son - was a shepherd. (Genesis 4)

**Abraham** the patriarch was a shepherd, as was his son, **Isaac**, and Isaac's son, **Jacob**.

**Jacob's sons** were shepherds, too. And (fun fact) since the ancient Egyptians wouldn't have anything to do with shepherds (they considered shepherds loathsome / unclean) the Hebrews were protected against the ways of the Egyptians when they went to Egypt to escape a worldwide famine.

Four hundred years later, before God chose him to lead the Jews out of Egyptian slavery, **Moses** had been a shepherd. And then after Moses, shepherding continued to be an important occupation for the Jews in the Promised Land.

In general terms, we all know what shepherds do. Shepherds tend to the needs of their sheep. That role with sheep led to a natural use of the term *shepherd* to describe leaders who tended to the needs of those they led.

#### *Human shepherds of people*

Before he became king of Israel, David was a shepherd of sheep. But the Bible calls King David a "**shepherd**" of the nation of Israel. (2 Samuel 5:2) Under David's leadership, Israel was well shepherded.

The Bible tells us, though, that it's scary when the leaders of a people are no good. That's a "**sheep without a shepherd**" (2 Kings 22:17) situation.

God's people are ruined when there are no good shepherds to lead them in the ways of God. And those in shepherding roles who lead people away from God will themselves be ruined. (See Ezekiel 34)

The vocabulary of people shepherding other people makes the jump from Old to New Testament. The Apostle Peter urged elders in churches to "**shepherd**" the flock (i.e. - the church) of God.

Elders are to be [**1 Peter 5:2**] *exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God, and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.*

Then, dignifying the idea of shepherding even further, the Bible often calls God Himself "Shepherd".

#### *God as Shepherd*

David's 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm begins, [**1**] *The Lord is my Shepherd*. Those words make us think about how God cared for and tended to David's needs.

Psalm 80:1 says that God is the ultimate Shepherd of the nation of Israel. Isaiah describes God's tender shepherding ways. (Isaiah 40:11)

To *shepherd* is to take care of a sheep or a person. But let's dig down to the nitty-gritty of what that actually involves. What does a shepherd do?

#### **The Role of the Shepherd**

##### *With the sheep they shepherd*

In the world of the Bible, shepherds lived with their sheep.

They stayed out with them in the fields getting dirty, smelly, and messy while leading the sheep to green pasture and to good water.

They fought for their sheep.

As a youth, David, the youngest of eight sons, was shepherd to his father's flocks. He tells us (1 Samuel 17) of two times when he risked his life to protect the sheep.

Once, he killed a mountain lion; another time he killed a bear. Shepherding was risky and the shepherd was there to keep the sheep safe.

Shepherds stayed out in the fields with their sheep in all kinds of weather, spent sleepless nights protecting against predators, rescued wayward sheep, went looking for lost sheep, and gave special attention to the weak sheep.

A shepherd had no “life” outside of shepherding. It was an all-consuming career.

That’s what a literal shepherd did for literal sheep. And that gives us insight into what someone we call a *shepherd* might be expected to do for the people he or she is leading.

### *With the people they shepherd*

When the prophets railed against bad “shepherds”, they were rebuking priests who didn’t nurture people with words from God, didn’t protect people against false ideas about God, didn’t bind up the wounds of damaged people, didn’t get into the messiness of the lives of people who had lost their way.

To be a good shepherd of people was and is to do some of the things that a shepherd of sheep did with his sheep.

To be a shepherd to people is to be willing to endure sleepless nights, risk danger to lead lost, hurting people to safety, and enter into human messiness.

That’s what good shepherds do. That’s what God in His role as Shepherd does.

God leads people to green pastures and beside quiet waters. The Lord restores peoples’ souls and guides them into righteous ways. He walks with people through dark, dangerous valleys. He protects them with His rod and staff.

The shepherd held an honored place in Israel’s past and the imagery of shepherding permeates the Old Testament.

And all of that makes it really difficult to understand why shepherds hung out on the lower rungs of society in Israel at the time of Jesus’ birth.

## Shepherds in Jesus’ Day

Opinions range widely as to how shepherds were viewed in those days.

Some people come to the conclusion that shepherds were a despised class of people, dishonest and unclean. They tell us that shepherds were forbidden to give testimony in a court of law and that they were religious outcasts.<sup>1</sup>

Others believe that shepherds were less vile and evil and more pitiful and poor men.

Because the scholars are somewhat divided, it isn’t completely clear to me what the general view of shepherds was in the first century. But today, I’m going to give shepherds the benefit of the doubt.

I don’t think that they weren’t classed with thieves and notorious sinners. I think that they simply represented the humbler side of society. In the first century world, shepherding was something you did when you couldn’t do much else.

They weren’t regarded as evil. But they were looked down on. And many people did regard them as second-class citizens of the kingdom of God.

And why?

Well, for one thing, they were always with their sheep.

That kept them away from regular involvement with the life of the community and from attendance at synagogue worship. It wasn’t necessarily the case, but it appeared that they weren’t interested in God.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> From an article on the LifeWay website by David Croteau, author of Urban Legends of the New Testament. This article disagrees that this was actually the characterization of shepherds in the first century. He simply reports that this is what some scholars believe, based on research he dismisses.

<sup>2</sup> Not to say that the OT Law would have prohibited them from worship in temple or synagogue.

For another, always being with their sheep and living in the great outdoors, there was an “earthiness” to them, an “air” about them that made it unpleasant to hang with shepherds.

They certainly weren’t highly esteemed. They weren’t welcome in polite company. They weren’t invited to attend services in many Jewish synagogues and they sure weren’t offered front row seats if they showed up.

And yet, the shepherd’s role was deeply embedded in Jewish history and their contribution to society was invaluable.

Yes, their sheep provided wool and meat. But even more, without the sheep the shepherd tended, there would be no sacrifices to offer on the altar in Jerusalem for the forgiveness of the people’s sins.

Fascinating, then, that into the story of the birth of Jesus, God orchestrated the inclusion of shepherds.

### **Shepherds in the Story of Jesus’ Birth (Luke 2)**

#### **Events Leading Up to the Momentous Birth**

The events leading up to the momentous birth of Israel’s Messiah began a full year in advance when the angel, Gabriel, announced to the old priest, Zacharias, that his wife, Elizabeth, would bear him a son - John (the Baptist) - in their old age.

Six months later, Gabriel gave news to a young woman, Mary, that she - who at the time was engaged to Joseph - would bear a Son begotten by God and would name Him Jesus (i.e. - Savior).

Mary journeyed to the hill country home of Elizabeth and Zacharias to spend the first three months of her pregnancy with them.

When it was time for Elizabeth to give birth, Mary went back home to Nazareth to live with Joseph, who now knew because of a dream that God gave him that Mary’s story about her pregnancy was true. She hadn’t been unfaithful to him.

As the time drew near for Mary to give birth, Rome required Joseph to travel the nearly one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register for Caesar’s census.

Mary accompanied Joseph on that trip south, and as they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary was on the verge of delivering.

While Joseph was searching Bethlehem for a suitable place for Mary to give birth, God was arranging everything to be “just so” for His Son’s arrival.

#### **Not Quite What We Expected...**

But, based on how we would have expected the birth of Messiah to play out, everything about this scene we’re about to see is just wrong.

The place is wrong. This is earth’s the most important arrival, ever. It should be playing out on the biggest stage, ever. It would have made sense for the birth to be in Jerusalem; maybe even more so for it to have been Rome.

But that’s not where God orchestrated His Son’s birth to take place. It’s in Bethlehem, a small village. Think Pipe Creek or Medina.

And the setting is wrong. The Messiah’s birth should have been in a place of splendor. A palace or a fine home would have worked well.

But Jesus wasn’t born in even a humble home or in a lodging place for travelers. The only place available in Bethlehem was a stable. His first bed wasn’t a luxurious crib, but an animal’s feeding trough.

And, of course, the entourage was all wrong.

Who would we expect should be present for the birth of a Messiah whose arrival had been predicted by Jewish prophets for hundreds of years?

If it had been up to us, we would have gathered royalty, religious leaders, civic leaders, movers and shakers, the wealthy, and the influential. None of those people were invited to the birth party.

Deep into the night, there has been a birth, Joseph is standing guard. Mary is exhausted. Jesus is lying in a manger.

And angels have been sent by God to some nearby fields to invite the guests of honor to come to the stables to see their Savior.

### **There Were Shepherds in the Region...**

*Shepherds were out watching over their flock (v. 8)*

***[8] In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night.<sup>3</sup>***

It was a quiet night on the hillsides around Bethlehem. Everything was as it always was. On a winter's night, there might have been fires lit for warmth. But it was quiet.

Most scholars think that the sheep these shepherds were tending were "temple sheep". These sheep would be offered in the nearby Jerusalem temple.

But if the flocks were special, the shepherds were simply shepherds. Poor. Underappreciated. Dirty and earthy.

*Shepherds were frightened by the appearance of an angel (v. 9)*

***[9] And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.***

Nothing Hollywood could portray would represent the glory and the overwhelming majesty of what the shepherds heard and saw that night.

It was an out-of-this-world experience. Of course the shepherds were afraid. Literally, "they were frightened with a great fear"!

The angel spoke to their fear.

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<sup>3</sup> The shepherds aren't mentioned in Matthew's Gospel. Only here in Luke's account.

*An angel announced the birth of Jesus (vv. 10-12)*

***[10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which shall be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."***

So, this angel wasn't bringing a scary message of judgment. It was a gospel visit. It was to deliver a message of good news.

The angels report a birth. What had just happened in Bethlehem - the city where King David had been born a thousand years earlier! - had been the dream of every devout Jew for centuries.

And notice the jarringly incongruous message, "You'll find your Savior, the Anointed One, Messiah, the Lord IN A FEEDING TROUGH (!)."

And with that, all heaven broke loose!

*An angel choir praised God (vv. 13-14)*

***[13] And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."***

I suspect that the shepherds might have needed a second, "Do not be afraid" after this display from the angel choir. But the host of angels had been shouting to God, not to the shepherds.

They didn't say, "Do not be afraid!" or even "Good-bye". They just disappeared, leaving the discombobulated shepherds to process, to collect themselves, and to respond.

*The shepherds hurried to the stables (vv. 15-16)*

***[15] When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us."***

**[16] So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.**

Watch. Grown men, maybe old men, ran as fast as they could the distance from their fields to the village.

They found the birthing room / stables, crashed in on a very private scene, and found everything just as the angels said it would be.

*The shepherds told the angel's message to everyone (vv. 17-18)*

They stayed at the stables long enough to take it all in; it was probably daylight by the time they left the stables. Then, they left to go to Bethlehem to let everybody they saw know.

**[17] When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.**

They told about the angel and the angel choir. They told anybody who would listen AND those who wouldn't about the Baby, who was, according to the angel **"a savior, Christ, the Lord."**

And I believe that the people they told weren't *scandalized* or *offended* that sinful shepherds were talking about God.

**[18] And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.**

No, they were *marveling* at the news that the shepherds brought. They believed every word of it.

But they *wondered* at the irony of shepherds - of all people, poor, stinky, shepherds! - being the first to see this **"savior, Christ, the Lord."**

We leave Mary, who hadn't known a thing about the angel's announcement or the angel choir before they told her, thinking about all of it and what it all meant and where this would all go.

And we watch the shepherds as they make their way back to their sheep.

*As Mary pondered, the shepherds worshiped (vv. 19-20)*

**[19] But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.**

That's what they did. And WORSHIP is exactly what you would have done if you had been in their sandals.

As we wrap up today, let's be sure we don't miss three key truths that shout at us from the story of the Christmas-time shepherds.

### **Conclusion: Our Good Shepherd**

*God loves the least, the last, and the lost...*

First, it isn't surprising and it only makes sense that God would honored shepherds by choosing them to be the welcoming committee at His Son's birth.

God has always had a special soft spot in His heart for the least and the last and the lost.

Thumb through the pages of the Bible and you'll find that the list of people God saved and used to be overwhelmingly comprised of those "together" people wouldn't deem worthy.

Abraham the idolator, Jacob the deceiver, Rahab the harlot, Ruth the Moabite, David the murderer, Simon Peter the impetuous, Thomas the doubter, Paul the persecutor.

No wonder Paul, in writing to the Corinthians, told them that among them were not many wise or mighty or noble.

He told them that God chooses to save and to use the foolish and the weak and the despised because when such people have stunning victories and do great exploits, everybody knows that it wasn't them who were responsible. It was God. (1 Corinthians 1:26-31)

That's you. That is the church. A fellowship of the least, the last, and the lost following the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

*God calls us to incarnational living...*

Second, if we are to follow Jesus as He calls us to follow Him, it will require that we intentionally imitate the lessons of His Christmas-time arrival.

The birth of Jesus - often referred to as His “incarnation” (in-the-flesh) - involved self-humbling on a cosmic scale.

He left heaven to come to earth. And if heaven is anything, it is glorious beyond our wildest imaginings. To come from heaven to glorious earthly kingship or to come from heaven to Jeff Bezos-like wealth would be a giant step down.

But Jesus didn’t come from the glories of heaven to a glorious earthly life. He landed in a feeding trough in the Bethlehem’s stables.

In His incarnation, He descended as far as it was possible to go. His descent was embarrassingly low, humiliatingly low.

In His incarnation, He took on shepherd-like status because He knew that people can’t be cared for / shepherded from a distance. Shepherding happens up close and personal or it doesn’t happen at all.

You and I can no more love people well from a distance than a shepherd could tend his sheep from a palace.

So, be fully present when your friend tells you her story. Listen carefully as he opens up to you. Be willing to climb into the messiness of your friend’s life.

Real impact comes as we interact life-on-life. Incarnationally. Just the way Jesus did it.

*Jesus is a very good Shepherd...*

Finally, see what a good Shepherd Jesus is.

When the shepherds who had heard the news that “**a savior, Christ, the Lord**” was lying in a manger in Bethlehem’s stables, they, of all people, would have understood the message we celebrate today.

They wouldn’t have been surprised if you had told them, “*This Baby is going to grow up in a very poor family in a very poor village.*”

*“He will spend His last years serving the poor and the poor in spirit. He’ll touch lepers and put broken people back together, give sight to the blind, and make the lame walk. He’ll lead lost people into green pastures and beside quiet waters. He’ll give them rest.”*

And they wouldn’t have been surprised if you had also told them, “*This Baby will grow to be a Man who will die to bring people to God. He will lay down His life to give life to others.*”

They would have expected that, because that’s what a shepherd does. At its essence, Christmas means that God doesn’t keep His distance. He comes near. That’s what “Emmanuel” - God with us - is all about.

This Christmas, I hope that you will join the shepherds in worshipping a Jesus who proved to be the Shepherd you need. He laid down His life for you, so that you, believing in Him, would have life, eternal and abundant.