



from the desk of . . .

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**#732**

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**Advent**

## **WHERE'S THE LINE TO SEE JESUS?**

**Luke 2:8-20**

A few years ago, during the month of December, while at the mall with his mother & grandfather, a 4-year-old boy watched as children lined up excitedly to see Santa Claus.

Having been taught as a toddler that Christmas is the holiday when Christians celebrate the birth of God's Son, with the innocence of a child, he asked his Mom ...

"Where's the line to see Jesus? If Christmas is Jesus' birthday, why don't we see Him more?"

Overhearing this, his grandfather was extremely proud that little Spencer understood the true meaning of Christmas at such a tender age.

In fact, both mother & grandfather ... Becky Kelley & Steve Haupt ... were so struck by the profoundness of the little boy's question, & the message inherent within it, that they collaborated together to write & record a song based on that experience.

The title is ... "Where's The Line To See Jesus?"

(X) song ... "Where's The Line To See Jesus?" (Becky Kelley) 3:43

Out of the mouths of babes sometimes come profound truths that many adults cannot understand. Children have a way of honestly looking at situations & evaluating them clearly.

On that 1<sup>st</sup> Christmas morning, the line to see Jesus was made up of a few shepherds, who had come to witness the newborn Messiah ... "lying in a manger."

Luke doesn't tell us much about who they were. In fact, most of our images of these shepherds come from S.S. plays or manger scenes. In the Gospel story, Luke uses no adjectives to describe them ...

"There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields."

So, who were these guys who "lined up to see Jesus"? ... Let's see what Scripture really says about them ... & then, discover what they can teach us.

Listen now to Good News from Luke, to you who have gathered for worship at Community Church.

Within your hearing comes the Word of the Lord ...

There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone over them.

They were terribly afraid, but the angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born - Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger."

Suddenly a great army of heaven's angels appeared with the angel, singing praises to God:

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!"

When the angels went away from them back 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."

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and saw the baby lying in the manger. When the shepherds saw him, they told them what the angel had said about the child. All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said. Mary remembered all these things and thought deeply about them. The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard and seen; it had been just as the angel had told them. (Luke 2:8-20)

**May the Lord grant that we may engage in contemplating the mysteries of His Heavenly wisdom with really increasing devotion, to His glory and to our edification. Amen**

Throughout the history of Israel (X) shepherding was a respected profession. Adam & Eve's son, Abel, was the 1<sup>st</sup> to have the job (Genesis 4:2), followed by Abraham (Genesis 13:2) the "father of the Jewish nation", & then Isaac (Genesis 26:14), & Jacob (Genesis 31:4), & Moses (Exodus 3:1), & of course, David (1 Samuel 16:11).

God even identifies Himself as a shepherd (Ezekiel 34:15), & we're compared to sheep (The Psalms 100:3) ... which, by the way, is anything but a compliment.

I grew up out in the country, & one of our neighbors, Mr. Fenton, had some sheep. I remember him saying that there are 3 levels of stupidity in this world. There's dumb. There's dumber. And then there's sheep. I also remember him saying that if someone says that sheep are as dumb as a brick ...

they're actually insulting the brick!

And, maybe you've heard the old joke ...

"What's dumber than a sheep?" ... 2 sheep!

As I say, it's anything but a compliment for us to be compared to sheep. (The Psalms 95:7)

And that's even seen in the occupation of shepherds. So by the time we get to the 1<sup>st</sup> century, shepherding had lost much of its' luster. Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of lepers.

No one wanted anything to do with them.

In the Talmud, (X) which is a collection of interpretations & insights from the rabbis, we read these words ...

"No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds."

So, in order to understand how unusual it was to have the angels appear to these lowly shepherds, let's learn a little bit about them.

1<sup>st</sup> of all, they were considered ceremonially unclean. That doesn't seem like such a big deal to us ... but back in 1<sup>st</sup> century Israel to have that distinction was horrible.

For example ... "the Jews, followed the teaching they received from their ancestors: they do not eat unless they wash their hands in the proper way; nor do they eat anything that comes from the market unless they wash it 1<sup>st</sup>. And they follow many other rules which they have received, such as the proper way to wash cups, pots, copper bowls, & beds." (Mark 7:3-4)

Well, it doesn't take a genius to recognize that shepherds, due of the nature of their work, were unable to follow rules like that. And as a result, they weren't allowed to attend religious services or ceremonies.

For all intents & purposes, they were isolated & forgotten. And because their flocks needed to be constantly on the move to find new grass & fresh water, they never stayed in one place for long.

They were also treated with contempt & mistrust. Shepherds were suspected of stealing from others & would often confuse "thine" with "mine." Their testimony was never allowed in court because they were so unreliable.

Shepherds had the reputation of being brash & crude. Living out in the fields, away from society, made them unappealing to most people, & many of them had foul mouths & were ready to fight at the drop of a hat.

So, are you getting a clear image in your mind of what shepherds were like? ... They probably wouldn't be your 1<sup>st</sup> choice for neighbors,  
or husbands for your daughters.

I don't know how many of you saw it ... but Buckingham Palace released Prince William & Duchess Kate's Christmas card this week. (X) We're fascinated with the royal family. But imagine if you will that when their children, Prince George & Princess Charlotte, were born, that instead of all the media attention & birth announcements to presidents & kings & heads of state, the news of their births was delivered only to dock workers unloading cargo in the middle of the night.

God entrusted the greatest message ever sent from Heaven to a bunch of smelly, dirty, vulgar shepherds.

Actually, we shouldn't be so surprised by that.

God has often worked out His plans through the forgotten, the despised, & the lowly. From the very beginning of His ministry on earth, Jesus befriended those who society looked down on. (Matthew 11:19)

"People who are well do not need a doctor, but only those who are sick. ... I have not come to call respectable people, but outcasts." (Matthew 9:12-13)

Jesus reached out to "sinners" like Zacchaeus & Levi, prostitutes & the demon possessed, strangers & Samaritans. He did in His ministry what the Father did in a borrowed stable when the lowly shepherds "got in line" to look at baby Jesus.

Mary captured this concept in her song of praise ...  
 "He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones,  
 & lifted up the lowly." (Luke 1:52)

The Apostle Paul put it this way ...  
 "Now remember what you were, my friends, when God called you. From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing. God purposely chose what the world considers nonsense in order to shame the wise, & he chose what the world considers weak in order to shame the powerful. He chose what the world looks down on & despises & thinks is nothing, in order to destroy what the world thinks is important. This means that no one can boast in God's promise." (1 Corinthians 1:26-29)

When we read Scripture, sometimes it's as important to see what it doesn't say as well as what it does. Luke doesn't write ... "Now there were in the same region scribes keeping watch over their scrolls."

The Lord came to the lowly, to those who considered themselves undeserving, to the neglected & marginalized, in order to show His power. The shepherds help us understand that God's message is for everyone. Each person matters to God. And here, the announcement of Jesus' birth goes out to a bunch of uneducated outcasts.

So, with that being said, let's look at the shepherds' response; it provides some lessons that we can apply to our own lives as we ponder Jesus' birth.

#1 ... **attentive**. The 1<sup>st</sup> thing we learn about the shepherds is that they were attentive to their jobs. Listen again to what Luke writes about them ...

"There were some shepherds in that part of the country who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks."

They were so committed to their career that they never left their job. They not only worked the 3<sup>rd</sup> shift, they pulled the 1<sup>st</sup> & 2<sup>nd</sup> as well.

This was a 24/7 deal for them.

We also see from this statement that they were faithful ... they were "taking care of their flocks."

It was often the case that several flocks would come together at night, for protection purposes, & all of them would be in the same fold. And one of the shepherds would literally lie across the entrance to make sure none of the sheep would get out & no predators would get in.

And with that thought in mind, let's remember what Jesus said when He told the parable of the Good Shepherd ... "I am the gate. Those who come in by me will be saved; they will come in & go out & find pasture."

(John 10:9)

Notice that God came to those who were attentive to the jobs they were given to do. They weren't slackers ... & God met them right where they were.

Likewise, whatever God has called you & me to do, we need to be attentive to it & do it with excellence. (X)

"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord & not for people."

(Colossians 3:23)

Do you understand what that means? ... It means that every person & every task is significant to Immanuel. It also means that God will meet us right where we are. Even if we're dirty ... even if we're smelly ...  
even when we least expect it.

2<sup>ndly</sup>, they were **awed**. While they were being attentive to the responsibilities they were given, they're suddenly awed by an angelic announcement ...

"An angel of the Lord appeared to them, & the glory of the Lord shone over them. They were terribly afraid."

God meets us where we are ...

but then He brings us to our knees.

God's glory lights up the sky & causes the shepherds to shake in their sandals. Whenever we come face-to-face with God's holiness ...

we become painfully aware of our own sinfulness.

That was Peter's response when he recognized who Jesus really was ...

"Go away from me, Lord! I am a sinful man." (Luke 5:8)

I can imagine all kinds of reasons why the shepherds "were terribly afraid" when they saw the angel. They'd be familiar with the story of Sodom & Gomorrah, & how the 2 angels visited those cities & destroyed them because of their wickedness. (Genesis 19:13)

So, this might have been a "judgment" angel who God had sent because of their raunchy jokes, bad language, & sticky fingers. Maybe their sins were catching up with them & now they would be burnt up like the citizens of Sodom & Gomorrah.

But that initial fear was immediately dealt with through the angel's reassuring words ...

"Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people."

And at that point they were in awe. Have you ever been in awe? ... (We'll talk about this in S.S.) ... Have you ever been in awe when it comes to the Messiah? When it comes to Jesus? Have you ever been driven to your knees, as it were, before Him? ...

So, the "attentive" shepherds were filled with "awe." Let's come up with another "a" word to describe what's taking place. They **accepted** the "good news" with "great joy."

"The angel said to them, 'Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Savior was born - Christ the Lord! And this is what will prove it to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths & lying in a manger.'"

The angel calms them down, telling them that he's bringing good news of acceptance, forgiveness, & hope.

This is literally the word from which we get "evangelize." This is good news of great joy. The Greek word here is *μεγαλην*, which means exceedingly grand, splendid, enormous, loud, massive, colossal, mighty.

It's a superlative of the greatest degree.

One Bible scholar translates it this way ...

"I evangelize to you with monumental joy."

That means ... a **joyless faith** is a contradiction in terms!

What did we sing a few moments ago? ...

"How Great Our Joy!" ... "Joy To The World!" ...

"Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You"

Joy is a result of our faith. Paul writes ...

"The Spirit produces love, joy ..." (Galatians 5:22) ...

& then he goes on to list 7 other qualities ...

but "joy" is 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Now the angel said that his message is for "all the people" ... but I want you also to notice the word "you" as well. ... "I am here with good news for you."

It's for the whole world ...

but it must also become deeply personal.

After a few more specifics, "a great army" of rejoicing angels fills the sky, praising God & singing ...

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
& peace on earth to those with whom he is pleased!"

Now we know that the shepherds accepted the angels' message because of their response ...

"Let's go to Bethlehem & see this thing that has happened which the Lord has told us."

I can almost feel their hearts pounding. What an exciting moment! Try to put yourself in their place. The adrenaline must have been pumping. But those shepherds didn't just accept the message they received,  
they **acted** upon it.

"So they hurried off & found Mary & Joseph & saw the baby lying in the manger."

The word "hurried off" (σπευσαντες) means they left in haste. The idea is ... "come on, hurry up, let's go!"

This is pretty amazing in itself because shepherds normally did nothing quickly. They were patient men, accustomed to moving slowly through the pastures.

If they did things quickly it would frighten the sheep.

Scripture is clear that acceptance must lead to action. (X)

"Faith, if it is alone & includes no actions, then it is dead." (James 2:17)

The shepherds could have doubted or delayed, but instead they decided to act & they moved immediately.

So they hurried off to Bethlehem to find the manger. They wanted to see the baby with their own eyes. A baby born in a smelly stable wouldn't have been a problem to men who were used to the scent of sheep.

If we stop to think about it ... it's kind of ironic. Unclean shepherds came to a smelly stable to see the Holy of Holies lying on a bed of hay.

Some Bible scholars point out the possibility that these shepherds were taking care of sheep that were going to be sacrificed in Jerusalem's Temple.

If that's the case, it's no accident that they leave their sheep behind to go see the Lamb of God.

A millennium earlier, David kept watch over his father's sheep in this same pasture ...

& now they see the Son of David born in David's town.

It's interesting that when they get there that they don't pull up a bale of straw & make themselves comfortable. They didn't hang around the manger because they were so excited that they could hardly wait to go out & tell what they had seen.

And notice that the message they shared had nothing to do with seeing the amazing angels, & there's no reference to Mary's magnificence or Joseph's job. They came to see Jesus, & now they go,  
talking excitedly about Him.

It's not enough to just say we have faith, or to feel good about something; there comes a time that after seeing, we must be involved in sharing.

5<sup>th</sup>, the shepherds **adored**. What's neat here is that the shepherds went back to their same "boring" jobs ... but they weren't the same on the inside. They returned to where they started & were attentive again.

Notice that they didn't write a book or go on a speaking tour or launch a ministry called ...

"A Shepherd's Story."

After Christmas we have to go back to the same routine ... but now we can go "singing praises to God for all we have experienced." We are to **rejoice** right where we are. You see, it's possible to have joy in our life experiences, even if they're junky.

"The shepherds went back, singing praises to God for all they had heard & seen;  
it had been just as the angel had told them."

They didn't just **wonder** about what they saw,  
they **worshiped** Him who they saw.

A clear evidence that someone has come to faith is always adoration. When a person genuinely enters into a relationship with Jesus he or she will praise God.

Allow yourself this Advent Season to adore Immanuel as you glorify & praise Him for all you have seen & heard. You can return to the same place tomorrow ... but not as the same person.

I have a favorite story that comes out of "Chicken Soup For The Soul" (X) entitled ... "Puppies For Sale."

A little boy appeared under the store owner's sign, "Puppies For Sale." "How much are you going to sell the puppies for?" he asked. The store owner replied, "Anywhere from \$30 to \$50." "I have \$2.37," the little boy said, "can I please look at them?"

The store owner smiled & whistled, & out of the kennel came 5 teeny, tiny balls of fur. One puppy was lagging considerably behind. Immediately, the little boy singled out the lagging, limping puppy & asked,

"What's wrong with that little dog?"

The owner explained that it had no hip socket; it would always be lame. The little boy became excited. "That's the little puppy that I want to buy." The store owner said, "No, you don't want to buy that little dog.

If you really want him, I'll just give him to you."

The little boy got quite upset. He looked straight into the store owner's eyes, pointing his finger, & said, "I don't want you to give him to me. That little dog is worth every bit as much as all the other dogs & I'll pay the full price. In fact, I'll give you \$2.37 now,

& 50 cents a month until I have him paid for."

The store owner countered, "You really don't want to buy this little dog. He's never going to be able to run & jump & play with you like the other puppies."

To this, the little boy reached down & rolled up his pant leg to reveal a badly twisted, crippled left leg supported by a big metal brace. He looked up at the store owner & softly replied,

"Well, I don't run so well myself,

& the little puppy will need someone who understands!"

The announcement went 1<sup>st</sup> to the shepherds. They never questioned God if He was sure He knew what He was doing.

Had the angel gone to the theologians, they would have 1<sup>st</sup> consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching. Had he gone to the successful, they would have 1<sup>st</sup> looked at their calendars.

So the angel went to the shepherds ...

- Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb
- Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep & that Messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags & sleeping in a feed trough
- But most of all ... they were men who could focus their attention that night on Christ

The shepherds have much to teach us, especially what the proper response to Christmas should be. So ...

- Let's be attentive to what God has called us to do
- Let's be awed by God's message to us
- Let's accept the gift of good news
- Let's act on what we know to be true
- Let's adore Immanuel 24/7

Let's get in the line to see Jesus this year.

**MARANA THA**