

Christmas ShepherdsAndTheChild 12-12-16a

This is Sunday, the 16th of December, 2012, and as we did night before last in our Friday study, we'll be departing from our usual course through the miracles of the Lord Jesus, which we will be finishing in the first week or two of the new year and beginning a fresh study. Today, this morning, we're going to be looking at another aspect of the nativity of the Lord Jesus, this being the season that suggests such happy subjects. We looked Friday night at the wise men following the star, and this morning we're going to look at the other end, the reception of the news in Judea.

We'll look at the shepherds and those who welcomed the Lord Jesus into this world. So we'll begin in Luke chapter 2, and as is our custom, we'll take a moment to dedicate this time to the Lord and ensure that our hearts are receptive and amenable to the teaching ministry of God's Holy Spirit. You think that I'm teaching, but I'm not.

It's really God the Holy Spirit. I am the plate on which the spiritual manna gets loaded up and delivered, but the teaching and the understanding and the comprehension so that these things are useful and applicable and make a difference in our lives, that's all in the realm of God's Holy Spirit. And it's important from the moment that we begin our attempt to understand that God's Spirit be involved and at hand, shall we pray? Father, we're grateful for this opportunity to come before you in worship, in fellowship, seeking instruction and edification through the ministry of your Spirit and those gifts that you've distributed to every one of us.

We are so richly blessed when we gather and experience those ministries that come from contact with one another, the encouragement and the shared sense of purpose and recognition of the wonderful things that have been given to us through the Lord Jesus Christ is incomparable and irreplaceable. And we're grateful that you have allowed us to be together on this morning, whether present or at a greater distance, to share in the nurturing grace that comes from your word. We thank you for the Lord Jesus.

We thank you for every aspect of his work on our behalf from the moment that he agreed to fulfill your plan to come into this world, to be born in our flesh and to partake of our weakness and our sufferings, to serve and to live and be tested in all points yet without sin, to take on the form of a servant and to bear our sins and take our place in judgment so that we could bear his righteousness and take his place in your presence. We thank you that we, as his body and bride, will be united with him and with you in the near future. And we pray that in this intervening time, our worship, our instruction, our fellowship will glorify you and bring credit to the Lord Jesus who saved us.

We pray these things in his name. Amen. Well, this is an interesting time of year.

There's all sorts of things you can contemplate if you have a moment to reflect. And I was very fascinated. There's a lot more than we have time to cover, both in our view of the wise men and

the stellar message that they received that enabled them both to start out for Judea, to come to Jerusalem, to seek he who was born King of the Jews.

And then the interesting shift in the nature of that star. The star seems to have been sort of a normal, heavenly type of appearance. It was not remarkable.

It wasn't written up in the astronomical books of the nations. It doesn't come down to us from the Romans or other... If it had been a huge, highly unusual thing, it would have been remarked upon in secular history. It was remarkable enough that the wise men noticed it and recognized it as the oath, the sign of the birth of Messiah.

And they left and came to the land of Israel on the evidence of that star and what they knew about it from the word of God. Once they came and spoke with Herod and emerged, that next night when they looked up and saw that star, it had changed appearance. There was something different because they saw it and they were glad and they rejoiced and they followed it and it was a different kind of star.

And this may have been a much more localized manifestation because they were able to follow it to a particular spot on the ground. And that is something you can't do with something that is up in the planet star firmament. It has to be closer.

But this morning we're going to look at the other recipients of the good news, the good tidings of great joy, and these are the ones who were in Judea. You remember from many previous annual visitations of the Christmas season that we have the shepherds. You have this recorded for us in Luke chapter 2. And beginning in verse 8, the familiar story, Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, Do not be afraid, for look, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior who is Mashiach, Christ the Lord.

By the way, I am highly confident that this angel was speaking Aramaic and not Greek. These shepherds were unlikely to be more than passingly acquainted with Greek. I doubt that they would have been fluent in it, although they would know some because it was the language of business and everybody knew a little bit.

But I would say that the relationship of Greek to Aramaic in the land at this time would be similar to the fluency in English for the Spanish-speaking community in Texas, especially south Texas. They are fluent in Spanish and they know enough English to get by, and the higher up they move in the world of business or contact with others for retail or whatever, then the more English they know. And it would have been roughly analogous.

Their native tongue at this point was Aramaic, so the angel is no doubt speaking Aramaic, which is, of course, derived from Hebrew, a very close cousin, but is slightly different. Different

enough that when in seminary you take these languages, Aramaic is a separate course, and you need a different lexicon and you need different tools when you study the Aramaic portions of the Old Testament. But the angel speaks these words and says in verse 12, this will be the sign to you.

You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace toward men of good will. So it was when the angels had gone away from them into heaven that the shepherds said to one another, Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.

Let us go and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us. Notice there is communication of the word of God and there is application of the word of God. And in between the hearing and the doing there is faith, they believe what the angels have told them.

They don't decide it was a mass hallucination or some strange weed got into the stew that evening. They believe what they have seen and heard. And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen him, this is, by the way, that's usually where the Christmas story breaks off, that's where the hymns break off, that's where the, you know, you don't see what happens next unless you pay attention to the text. When they had seen him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. Widely known where? Where do these men live? They live in the environs of Bethlehem, right? Bethlehem, the city of David.

Where did they go to find the babe? Bethlehem. Are Mary and Joseph out walking the streets saying, hey, guess what? The Messiah has just been born. No, they're somewhat occupied with their first child, newborn.

So who delivers the message and where is it delivered? It is delivered by shepherds in the city of the most famous shepherd in Israel who have been doing the shepherd's work that David was doing when he was called by God, when he was anointed to be the Mashiach of Israel, when the anointing oil trickled down his head and neck, he was in this very town, this very place, which is a sort of a city state. It's like the medieval times when there would be a city and then there would be a surrounding community. People would flee to the city for protection, get inside the walls.

I don't think Bethlehem was a walled city, but people considered themselves to be citizens of that town if they lived near it or around it. These were sort of county seats and the county took the name of the town. So the shepherds had seen it and they made widely known.

This is the third element. They hear the word of God, they respond in faith to the word of God, and in obedience they go and look and find what the angel described to them, and then they

communicate to others. Who do you think the shepherds would go tell? Do they know anybody in this town or are they just complete strangers? Nobody knows the shepherds.

Family, relations, those that they worship with in particular because these are no ordinary shepherds. These are shepherds who know their heritage. They know where they live in Israel.

They know what these words mean. This, as I said, Friday night wasn't a random drawing of who's going to get the word. These men were selected because they were expectant, and we're going to see a reflection of that again this morning, and they made it widely known.

How many shepherds? We don't know, just like we don't know how many wise men, but we know that there were several. And they went through the city rattling doors, friends, relatives, other interested parties that came out, and they said, this is what has happened. We were minding our own business out in the fields.

We've been so familiar with this, we don't find it all that remarkable, but if you think about it, a day like any day, a week like any week, another season, another month, shepherds in the field, business as usual, no one knows anything, and suddenly into town come these shepherds, and they're running through the streets, and they're waking up their friends and relations, and they're saying, we have seen the angels, and the angels told us that the Messiah is here. He has been born. We just saw him.

They told us there would be a sign that he'd be lying in a manger. We came in. Here's this child lying in a manger, and we instantly knew this is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy that we've heard about in synagogue all our lives.

Our fathers and grandfathers have told it to us. It's here. We've seen it with our own eyes.

They're rushing through the streets, and there's excitement, and there's great remark made of this, you know, what's the matter with these shepherds? But many people believe them. Why? They know these men. Old shepherds, young shepherds, middle-aged shepherds, all of these people have families.

They've got friends. They're in this community. You know how a small town is if you've ever lived in one.

Everybody knows everybody, and they know these guys are not wild-eyed crackpots. These aren't strangers coming in. This is not the wise men running through the streets, waving gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and saying, hey, the Messiah's here.

They know these. They know these men, and it creates a decision point. What are you going to think? I didn't see it.

It's amazing. We say, well, you know, skeptics and atheists say, you know, if God would just show me a sign, if he'd really, you know, give me something tangible, then I could believe. From

the very outset, the very first people to hear this message weren't eyewitnesses.

Well, you're a shepherd. You say you saw an angel. You say you saw a baby.

Well, that's kind of unusual, but who says that's a heavenly sign? I didn't read about that in Zechariah or Isaiah. I don't remember anything about mangers and shepherds in there, so who are you to tell me that you've seen an angel? Is this something you've cooked up, and pretty soon you'll be asking me for a donation? I mean, people had to make a decision. It's just, it's out of the blue.

But look at verse 18, and all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds. It doesn't say they believed, but that's unusual. We get news.

Hardly a week goes by you don't have startling news or depressing news or shocking news. We've had another episode this past week where somebody ran amok and shot people, and it ripples through the community and through the nation now and around the world because of media, and everybody knows instantly, and they marvel. They have all kinds of opinions about it, all kinds of reactions and responses to it, but everybody marvels, and that's what happened on this night.

This sent an electric shock through the whole community. This just doesn't happen. But Mary kept all these things and pondered in her heart.

Who do you think is the most spiritually mature woman in Israel at this time? Who do you think knows more of the Word of God? Who do you think is further along than any other young woman in Israel? It's Mary. She is at the top of the class. That's why she's the Lord's human mother.

What does she do? There are people who talk and people who marvel. She contemplates. She ponders.

She's working things out. She's comparing it. All you have to do is read her song of praise, what they call the Magnificat.

That's what the Catholics call it, a nice Latin word, to recognize. And we've studied that thing in detail, how much she knew about what was happening. But she was a thoughtful young lady.

And this is the mark of a mature believer. Don't react. Don't fly off the first handle.

Be thoughtful. Take your time. Think it out.

Pray about it. Take these things and keep them. She kept all these things.

You can't ponder what you don't keep. This is why we take notes. This is why we make some effort to remember.

You don't have to take notes. But if you take notice of something, ask yourself, we're having a class this morning. Hopefully, there will be a few good points in it.

So sometime this afternoon, maybe at halftime, think, what can I remember? I just had Bible class. Had two sessions today, conveniently back to back so that I didn't have to go back in the evening like most churches. Didn't have to waste the gasoline driving twice when I could go once.

What do I remember? We had two Bible classes back to back. Had great music that was suggestive and memorable and brings to mind spiritual truths. Heard songs, beautifully performed.

Participated in songs, beautifully performed. What do I remember? Am I keeping anything out of Bible class? Here's a stretch. How about tomorrow? Can I dig back with all of the, we live crowded lives and we're in the information age where trying to retain any one fact or thought in the blizzard that is fire hosed at us through every possible means, whether you talk to people, you know, oh, have you heard, you know, or whether you try to look for something on the internet, then here's your homepage and here's the news and here's, oh, look, you know, some Hollywood star is having a baby or, you know, it's just, can we retain it? What's important information and what isn't? I set all of my many computers to a homepage that has nothing but a search box in the middle and one colorful word right above it.

And I look, I manage information. You have to, if my suggestion, this is a little off topic. My suggestion, if you want to be a person of contemplation, if you want to be a person in control of their thoughts, don't let others tell you what to think.

Don't let others tell you what to think about. Don't let others try to spark a reaction or hook your interest with a teaser. You know, vanish wrinkles with this weird old trick.

How many, you know, they always want to call it a weird trick. It's a weird, it's a little insight. It's all over the internet, but it's a weird secret.

And if you click this link, you'll find out. My suggestion, just it's unbiblical, uninspired. My suggestion is don't put anything with a lot of links and information on your page.

If you're going to go to the internet, the holiest and unholy of places, keep it simple. Get yourself something simple. Don't be controlled.

Everybody wants to control your thinking. Everybody wants to get you to click a link. Everybody wants you to go somewhere and think about something else.

Be the master of your own fate, captain of your own ship. You've got control. You decide what you're going to look at.

You decide what you're interested in. Don't be blown about by every wind of internet

information. That's my little aphorism for the day.

Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. She kept these things and pondered them. This is what was important.

And by the way, this is why she was selected to be the mother of the Lord, because she was thoughtful and she was in control of her thoughts. By the way, people can say a thing. People can do or fail to do.

Holidays are a wonderful time, but it's also a time where if you're sensitive or hypersensitive, you say, well, you know, let's compare. I wonder how much they spent on this versus how much they spent on that. And I got that and they got this.

And, you know, you cannot afford to be hypersensitive at the holidays. It's, they say, well, it's the thought that counts. Well, they say, well, that didn't seem very thoughtful.

I mean, a gift card? Come on, don't they know me well enough to actually get me a gift? And hypersensitive people, you know, there's a lot of rocks and shoals to navigate in the holidays. Did I cover everybody? Did I leave anybody out? What did I put in the stocking? You know, don't worry about that. Ponder these things.

This is what's important. It isn't the material side of it. It isn't the personal side of it.

Who gave what to whom and how much did they spend? You know, it's a sad thing, but it's reality. And, you know, the corners of your mind start getting nibbled away by these things. Mary kept these things in her heart and pondered them.

Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen as it was told them. This is one of the more neglected verses in the Bible. Look at verse 20 again.

Have you ever thought about this verse? Then the shepherds returned. Returned where? Returned where? To the lowliest job in Israel. They didn't get on the entertainment circuit.

They didn't hire an agent and get some speaking engagements. You know, you've probably never seen someone that's seen an angel. Well, let me tell you what angels are like.

Let me describe their appearance. Let me make a celebrity of myself. You know, we've told people in Bethlehem, you know, we could start kind of a traveling act here.

We could go around to every village in Israel. We've seen the Messiah. You know what? We've seen angels.

Who in this generation has seen an angel? Well, you've got Mary and Joseph and Zacharias. There are only three people that have seen an angel. And look at us.

We're celebrities. Let's write a book. Let's make some money off of this.

Let's just get some fame. Let's go to Jerusalem. Let's introduce ourselves to the Pharisees and the Sanhedrin.

I mean, apparently they didn't see an angel and we did. I think we could kind of one-up them here. What did they do? Why did God give the news to these men? Because they've got great priorities.

They come and they see. They celebrate. They communicate.

And then they return and they do their job. They glorify God. They praise God for the things that they had heard and seen as it was told to them.

Heard and seen as it was told to them. Why that last little phrase? Why didn't they just say they glorified God for all the things they had heard and seen? You think about it. Even these men who had the angel come and then the company of angels appear and speak to them.

And then they go and they see the foretold child. The child doesn't glow in the dark. The child doesn't have stigmata.

There's not an angel constantly hovering around his presence. He doesn't have a giant gold plate stuck to the back of his head. There's not a golden circlet that follows him around and Mary and Joseph.

Seriously now, when they come and they go to this place where animals are kept and they see this child lying on straw in a feed trough, why are they celebrating and glorifying God? The angel thing, wow. Wow. That's going to be memorable.

That's something to tell the grandkids. I have seen a heavenly messenger and then I saw a whole innumerable company of them and I heard them. I saw and I heard.

But you know what they're really excited about? That very last phrase. It was told them. They can't see that he's the Messiah.

They can't see the saviorhood, the cross, the atonement, the fulfillment, the deity, the God-man. They celebrate what was told them and just like the rest of us, they couldn't see that. Now they've got a powerful witness and witnesses with that company of angels and no doubt there was some conversation, you know, excuse me, Joseph, Mary, we were told by angels that this is the Christ and they would say, well, you know, we were told that as well.

We have also seen an angel. There would have been some conversation that's not recorded here, which is further confirmation in the mouths of two or three witnesses, a thing is established and what are the odds? How did they know that this was the child and there's not another child in a manger somewhere else in the town? It's very crowded. You know, a lot of people are there.

Well, they get confirmation from the parents. We were told the same thing. This is one of the values of fellowship.

We arrive at a conclusion. We come to the acknowledgement and perception of a truth and when we speak the truth to one another in love, there are others that say, you know, that's right. That's what I see in that passage as well.

That makes sense to me and here's why. Maybe they've connected it to passages we hadn't thought of and we've connected it to things they haven't thought of, but the Holy Spirit in our heart can be a witness confirming the Holy Spirit in someone else's heart. It's a wonderful privilege and benefit of fellowship.

They were glorifying and praising God, not only for the things that they had heard and seen, but as it was told them. It's not just the experience of the here and now. The significance is what's going to come three decades later.

The fulfillment is 33 years away, but they're excited ahead of time because of what was told them. Well, we hope that you and I are excited and that we glorify and praise God for the things that we see and hear in our lives. The immediate experiences we have of God's grace, God's provision, God's blessing, God's revelation to us and the fellowship that we share because we are people who are enthusiastic and of like mind on these things.

But we have been told great things about the future, about the deliverance of the Lord Jesus. For these men, it was the inception of the kingdom. The Mashiach is a king who has a kingdom, and they're excited about that.

We have a Savior who is coming back for us, and it's an occasion for great celebration. But we still return. We still go back and we do our jobs.

We take these things, and hopefully we are of the same fabric cut from the same cloth as Mary, and we keep these things and we ponder them. We work on them in our soul. We work out how should we then live.

What difference does this make? This is what separates you when you go out in public, when you go to a workplace, when you go to a class, when you go to any sort of gathering. Chances are you are going to be the only one or one of only a few who have this knowledge, this privilege, this opportunity to keep these things and ponder them and be changed by them and be the shepherd that looks for those who are interested and shares this good news, talks about it, is excited about it, and still, at the end of the day, the shepherds returned. Well, it's a great opportunity for us.

We have a similarly great revelation given to us by a host of messengers who, like the angels, praise God and say, Glory to God in the highest. And on earth, toward men of good will, men of good response, men who make the right choice, people who respond in faith, peace. That's the real peace.

We're going to pause there and take our break. When we come back, we are going to continue in Luke chapter 2 and look at others who receive this news. What kind of people were they? Why are they recorded in scripture for all time and for all eternity? What is the significance of these? There were others who were told in Bethlehem, we're not told their response or their reaction or what they said, but there are some who are.

They're in the eternal pages of God's word. Why? Well, we'll try to answer that question when we come back.