

## 99-12-20a

As we continue our worship this morning, this is the point where we have our scripture reading, but I want to precede our scripture reading with something that I think will enhance our appreciation of it, because we're actually going to march, as it says in the CEF song, we're going to strive manfully onward in Genesis this morning, but we are going to spend a little bit of time, because this is our last Sunday morning service in anticipation of Christmas, and we saw that recently in our Luke study on Friday nights. We went through the nativity and the extended account that Luke gives of the events that lead up to that, and one of the most interesting parts of that story, of course it's all fascinating, but if you will turn with me just briefly back to Luke chapter 2. Luke chapter 2. We are steeped in tradition, we've known the story of Jesus' birth from the time that we were children, and it is sometimes necessary for us to kind of shake loose and take a fresh look and pretend like we don't know this story, and immerse ourselves, rather than in the tradition, immerse ourselves in the culture of that day and in the normalcy that would have pertained at this time. Of course they didn't look forward all year to the season when Jesus was born, they didn't start hanging lights and having to store displays and so forth.

It was a fairly normal time of year, there wasn't anything special going on, they hadn't seen a star in the east at that time or anything. So you can imagine business as usual, there is an influx of people into Bethlehem as there was to many other towns in that region because of the decree that people had to go pay their taxes. And it always makes me chuckle because when you think of the picture of Mary being heavy laden with child and on the donkey and Joseph and they travel all the way down from Galilee to Bethlehem, which is quite a distance, and when they get there and there is no room at the inn, and so people have said, now see even Jesus was a homeless person and Mary and Joseph were homeless, and this is a great picture of being homeless in the Bible.

And some wag made a remark the other day that, you know, Mary and Joseph were not homeless, the reason they were in that condition is the government drove them out of their home and made them go to a far off place and that's why they were in that state. It was the government making them go down to pay their taxes, which is true. But it's interesting because they came down to Bethlehem and that's where they were staying.

They were on this trip. Many times we've had this occur in our lives where perhaps sometimes people need an operation that is done at a certain hospital. My father-in-law came down here to Dallas once to have a bypass operation at the Veterans Hospital.

They don't happen to have one up in rural Arkansas, so he made a trip down here for that purpose and stayed a while. And various things will call us away in an unusual fashion, and so Mary and Joseph and many others were certainly in a displaced condition at that time, but it wasn't a holiday season like we surround ourselves with. And people

were going about their business.

There were people who knew that there was going to be an influx, and so there were additional stalls in the marketplace and in the bazaars, and there were more opportunities to sell and to make money from the travelers who had come in and so on. But there were other people going about their normal business. The flocks and herds still had to be tended.

The agriculture still had to be maintained and so on. And after the first seven verses of Luke 2 where it recounts the actual birth of Jesus Christ, it ought to really be striking to us what happens in verse 8 and following. Because it says, There were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

This is a normal thing. The flocks require care night and day. This is why David and other shepherds lived out in the fields.

And this is a night like any other night as far as they are concerned. But, in verse 9, Behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. Of course, the thing that we remember now, having been through this a few months back in Luke, is that in the reenactments or the cartoon presentations of this story, or if you see a painting or a picture, a lot of our greeting cards might have this on the front.

We always picture the angel being up in the heavens and the glow shining down like a searchlight and the shepherds with their forearms raised above their brow and so on. But, Luke says specifically, the angel of the Lord stood before them. So, he's standing on the ground.

And they're out there in the wilderness. It's just them and the sheep. There's probably several of them.

There would usually be four or five, we would guess. And suddenly, there's another person there. And this glory, and it apparently is some sort of brightness in this case, the angelic messengers to people are not always surrounded by this glory.

But sometimes they are. We know the man that Jacob wrestled with all night didn't appear to have this glory because he couldn't see. It was dark.

But, God chose on this case to surround this messenger with glory. He stands before them. And, of course, they're greatly afraid.

And if you just picture yourself, you're a shepherd. You've been out there maybe for months. You might have been doing this for years.

Some of these shepherds could have been 40, 50 years old perhaps. Done this for a

living. Thousands of times been out there.

Suddenly, there's this man standing there that wasn't there before. The glory of God is shining around. And you think, what on earth? What could possibly be the occasion? And we ought to ask ourselves that question.

It's like Humphrey Bogart. You know, of all the gin joints and all the... You know, of all the places where God could have sent a messenger to announce the most important happening in human history, he picks this little group of men out there with the sheep. Why? This is astonishing.

A lot of people say, well, the Jews invented the Old Testament. The early Christians invented the New Testament. You know, we could do better than this.

From a human point of view, there should have been... Suddenly, a star came and stood over the temple in Jerusalem. And the high priest came out and said, Lord God, what do you have to tell us? And the high priest would come and dispense this out to the people. Human minds would never conceive of the biggest announcement in history going to these low-life, nondescript, low-caste individuals out in the middle of nowhere.

You know, we think media. We think exposure. We think numbers.

And here's four, five, maybe six. My nativity scene only has four. So that's what I think.

I think there's probably four. But the angel of the Lord speaks in verse 10 and says to them, Do not be afraid, for behold... And this behold thing, we're so used to it. But in English, when people come up and say, Look, don't be afraid.

That's what we say. We say, look. And that's what it means in Greek and in Hebrew.

It means, look. Pay attention. Look, don't be afraid.

I'm bringing you good news. I'm bringing you good tidings of great joy, which will be to all people. And this is the amazing thing to me.

If this is good news for all people, these guys are the... Why would you deliver it to them? And they're the only ones that get it. We have no other record of any angelic appearances. A high priest didn't awaken and see an angel in his room.

Annas, Simeon, Anna, the lady that dwelt day and night in the temple. And Simeon, the faithful man whose eyes wouldn't go dim. He would be blessed to see the redemption of Israel before he departed this life.

They didn't get an angelic messenger either. Just these shepherds of all the people in Israel. He says, don't be afraid.

Look, I'm bringing you good news. It's going to be great joy. It's going to be to all people.

And it's a very interesting phrase. I could parse it all out for you in Greek. But it says it's coming to all people.

It doesn't say it's going to benefit all people. It doesn't say all people are going to accept it. But it's going to be an issue for all people.

They're going to be aware of it. Everybody is going to know this piece of news at some point. Because, in verse 11, there is born to you.

And normally, you'd be talking to a woman. Like when Gabriel comes to Mary and you're going to have a child. But the messenger from God says, you shepherds, there's a child been born to you.

Some of them might say, you know, I've been a shepherd all my life. We don't meet many women out here. I'm not even married.

And how could I have a child? Or in what sense would this child be born to me? Why does it say born to you? Why didn't it just say, for there is born this day in the city of David. He says this good news is going to be to all people. This child is born to you.

And that's the second person pronoun directed at these shepherds. Born to you. And, of course, they're a representation of somebody.

Jesus didn't come just to those four or five shepherds. So they represent a class or a group. Who do they represent? Well, they're Israelites.

And God sent his son to be the Messiah. He is the anointed one. He is the son of David.

And this is the birth of a king. This is the announcement of the birth of the king. The news is going to be to all people.

But the child, the king, is born to Israel. So who is representing Israel? Who are sort of the ambassadors for Israel on this occasion? It's the shepherds. It's probably the lowliest people you could find on the totem pole.

We see them out there. And he says there is born to you this day in the city of David. Do these men know what the city of David is? They do because they're in Judea.

Everybody knows Bethlehem is the city of David. A deliverer, a Yeshua, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Of course, in Greek here, this is from the Sozo word group to save.

In the Aramaic, I strongly suspect that this messenger was actually speaking Aramaic when he delivered this message. Shepherds had very little use for Greek. They grew up speaking Aramaic.

So it is interesting to reconstruct what was probably actually said because he would have probably said, born in the city of David, a Yeshua, who is Mashiach Adonai, the Messiah, the Lord. Verse 12, this will be a sign to you. He doesn't say, get thee up and go thou to the city of Bethlehem, does he? The messenger already knows that as soon as they get this news, these men are going to want to go see.

There are lots of people in Israel who would have wiped their brow and looked at one another and said, did you see what I saw and what was that all about? Probably would not have made the trip. One thing we know about these men is they were chosen because God knew that they were interested. They were in that group of people who were looking for the redemption of Israel.

The angel knows they are going to go. He doesn't have to tell them to go and see. He says, this will be the sign.

I know you are going to try to go to Bethlehem. This is how you will know that you have found the spot. You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.

Once again, we think it is quaint to have the manger and the straw and the animals around. This is a shocking thing for the birth of a king. It is announced to shepherds.

He is not going to be down there at the Hilton. He is not going to be in a swanky residence of which they had some in Bethlehem. If you have ever seen the excavations of the old part of the city.

He is going to be in a manger. A manger is in a place where you keep livestock. These are men who keep livestock, who watch sheep.

Some of them may have even been through Bethlehem. They know where the stables and where the caves are where they quarter livestock. Where they feed them and water them and so on.

This tells them, don't even bother. Don't get the rebuke you are going to get if you go knocking on doors at some of the swanky places. Look for a stable and look for a manger.

That is how you will know. These men, after the angel departs, they don't say, that can't be right. The Messiah, the anointed one, the son of David is going to be a baby laying in a feed trough.

That is what we would call it today. I used to put the rolled oats and sweet feed in a trough. Animals, when they eat out of a trough, that is not the most sanitary.

It is not the first place I would think of to put a baby. You definitely would have to line it with some fresh straw and put some blankets over it and so on. Then it would become

more like a straw tick that people used to sleep on.

We had to line our troughs with roofing tin. Animals are chewing and gnawing around trying to get that last grain of oats. Splinters come up and they are not using a napkin or anything when they eat.

It is not all that great. This is where the baby is going to be. Christ the Lord, the Messiah to Israel is going to be in this condition.

Then it says in verse 13, suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host. Ever since I was a tiny child, I have pictured a great expanse, the heavenly choir ranged up in the air. It says they are with the first guy, they are with the first angel.

He is standing on the ground. They are all standing on the ground. They are ranged around.

It might have been like a battalion formation. It might have been like the vocal majority. They might have ranged themselves out in a nice little semi-circle so you could get the maximum effect.

But they are praising God and saying. How are they praising God? They are saying this phrase. It is a chant.

It is something that they are repeating. I find no reference to singing here. It is a terrible disappointment.

But it doesn't say they sang the praises. It says they were praising God saying. They were praising God by saying.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace and good will to men. This is another one of many episodes. I hope when we get to the Millennial Kingdom, God will rerun for us so that I can see it.

I want to see the shepherds when the first messenger shows up and they are really afraid. And then if that wasn't enough, now there is this entire battalion. It is sort of like the light comes up a little bit.

You see this entire huge group of angelic messengers. They are all saying this. I wouldn't think they would all just be babbling it independently.

They are probably saying this in unison. It is kind of like responsive reading we have in church sometimes. But they are saying this together.

I am sure their voices blended very well. They probably repeated this several times. You just get the idea that this was quite a thing to hear.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace toward men of good will. I am sure you have probably straightened that translation out sometime in the past. It is amazing to me that it ever got messed up in the first place.

Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace toward men of good will. This once again is a reminder to us that the message is going to be to all. But the peace that the message brings is going to be toward those who have a response.

Who receive that message with good will. Who recognize it, who appreciate it, and who respond to it. So it was when the angels had gone away from them into heaven.

Now you do get... Apparently the lights just didn't go back down and they faded out. They went into heaven. So there must have been sort of an ascension scene there.

And that would be very impressive to see as well. Perhaps they were still saying the glory to God as they raised. There has been a time or two when you are in a large group and they are doing Handel's Messiah.

And they get to the Hallelujah Chorus. Sometimes you feel like you are going to just go right up and join them. You are just going to lift right off your feet.

But the angels had gone away from them into heaven. The shepherds said to one another, Did you see what I saw? That can't be right. Why Bethlehem? He ought to be in Jerusalem.

That's not what they said to each other, is it? They said, let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass. To them it's a fact. There is no doubt in their mind.

They don't even question it. There is no second thought, no second guessing. Which the Lord has made known to us.

And so they hear it. They respond and they go. They make arrangements.

I guess some unlucky soul had to stay back there with the sheep. So the rest of them could go. They came with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

So they were not far away. It told us earlier they were in the same country, in the same area. So this was a fairly short trip for them.

When they had seen him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this child. And this is an interesting part to me as well. Because if you're in Israel and you're going along, you know the law of Moses, you know the prophets, you know that the Messiah is predicted to come, you know about Daniel's prophecy of weeks, and Messiah the Prince is supposed to come sometime in your lifetime perhaps.

And here come some rag-tag shepherds and say, We saw the angels. The angels came and spoke to us and we went and we saw a baby. Who are you? What rich people do you keep sheep for? Oh, we own our own sheep.

We were just out there on our little 12-acre patch of Judea there. And where did you see this baby? Well, it was out back. It was in the stable.

It was out there laying in a feed trough. And people say, now tell me this one more time. You're a shepherd.

You saw angels. They spoke to you. And you went and you found the Messiah of Israel in a feed trough.

Yes, it was great. It was amazing. We saw the glory of the Lord.

Why did God choose such unlikely messengers? An angel could have perched on the pinnacle of the temple. It could have been in the square with all of the milling throngs during the day when you have maximum exposure. It's at night.

It's to shepherds. Because only people who have an ear to hear, who know God and know that He delights in doing the unexpected, the wisdom of the wise is foolish. God uses the weak and the despised things of this world.

People who know God will recognize His handiwork when they see this. And they'll think, David, a shepherd, who better? How appropriate. That's the God I know.

And the message of genuine faith is humility. And God, His Son isn't going to put on airs and come marching surrounded by Pharisees on a golden bier, being borne by six or eight guys. That is going to communicate and be received by people who are tuned in and have an ear to hear and understand the things of God.

That's the thing that we want to remember at the season of the year. It's even more difficult for us when we're surrounded by tinsel and all of the usual things that happen at Christmas, is to remember that there really is a message to be heard if we sit and think and remember what God is like and the typical way that He communicates and the typical way that He works. We think, well, we're not in a large church.

We're not in a ministry where we have wide opportunities. We're just ordinary people doing ordinary things. We are living our life with its usual circumstances.

That is the place where God delights to work. That's the place where He delights to speak. And the qualification that these shepherds had is they knew God, and they knew the Word of God when they heard it, and they didn't even think twice.

When they heard it, they responded. The angel doesn't even make a suggestion. He says, this is how you'll know when you get there, because he knows they're going to go.

We want to be that kind of people. We want to be those who are leaning forward when it comes time to hear the Word of God, and we're going to find it in the most unlikely places. God works in unlikely places.

He uses the weak and the foolish things of this world to confound the wise. I don't have to look very far to see weakness and foolishness in my own soul, but it's a great place of opportunity for God to work, and I suspect that it's that way for all of us. In connection with this, I have recommended to you before the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.

There are two editions of this. This is the old one that came out circa 1910 or 1912. There's a newer edition, which, honestly, I haven't got yet.

I probably will, but I like the old one so well, I almost don't want to look at the new one. But it does have a lot of updated scholarship and so forth. But I want to read you just as an example of what a great resource this is.

It's four volumes, but I want to read you the article on shepherd. Shepherd, and it gives the Hebrew roeh, r-o-e-h. In Greek, it is poimane.

You may remember poimane, kai to das galas. We've heard a lot about pastor and teacher, the Granville Sharp rule and so forth. But poimane, and those both translate, poimane literally means a feeder, one who feeds, because this was the primary duty of a shepherd.

The sheep owner frequently tends the flock himself, it says. And it gives some scripture references, such as Genesis 4.4, which, of course, is Abel. Genesis 30, 40, and we're right in that region in Genesis, talking about Jacob tending his flocks.

It also mentions Ezekiel 34.12. But more often, he delegates the work to his children. He gives several references, and you can think of those yourself. David, of course, is an outstanding case in 1 Samuel 16.

Also in Genesis 29.9, and other places. Or relatives, and it mentions Genesis 31.6. And this, of course, is Laban having his nephew take care of his flocks. In such cases, the sheep have good care, because the keepers have a personal interest in the well-being of the animals.

But when they are attended by a hireling, 1 Samuel 17.20, the flocks may be neglected or abused. And you remember, God uses that over in Isaiah 56 as an illustration. He says the shepherds act like hirelings, and they run away and don't tend the flock.

Also mentions Ezekiel 34, and Zechariah 11, and John 10 in that regard. The chief care of the shepherd is to see that the sheep find plenty to eat and drink. The flocks are not fed in pens or folds, but summer and winter must depend upon foraging for their

sustenance.

Psalm 23.2 In the winter of 1910 and 1911, an unprecedented storm ravaged northern Syria. It was accompanied by a snowfall of more than three feet, which covered the ground for weeks. During that time, hundreds of thousands of sheep and goats perished, not so much from the cold as from the fact that they could get no food.

Goats hunt out the best feeding grounds, but sheep are more helpless and have to be led to their food. And it refers us here to Numbers 27.16 and 17. Nor do they possess the instinct of many other animals for finding their way home.

And it says, see Ezekiel 34.6-8. Flocks should be watered at least once a day. Where there are springs or streams, this is an easy matter. Frequently, the nearest water is hours away.

One needs to travel in the dry places in Syria or Palestine, and then enter the watered valleys like those in Edom, where the flocks are constantly being led for water. To appreciate the psalmist's words, he leadeth me beside still waters. Sometimes water can be obtained by digging shallow wells.

And it refers us to Genesis 26. Remember when Isaac had to keep digging those wells as the Philistines moved him out? The shepherd frequently carries with him a pail from which the sheep can drink when the water is not accessible to them. On the mountaintops, the melting snows supply needed water.

In other districts, it is drawn from deep wells. Genesis 29.2, John 4.6. Of course, John 4 is the woman at the well when Jesus travels through Samaria. After drinking, the animals lie down or huddle together in the shade of a rock while the shepherd sleeps.

This is right after noon, by the way. The siesta that they have in Mexico is echoed over in the Middle East, where in the heat of the day, it's silly to be out there, so they'll take a powder during that time. At the first sound of his call, which is usually a peculiar guttural sound, hard to imitate, the flock will follow off to new feeding grounds.

Even should two shepherds call their flocks at the same time and the sheep be intermingled, they never mistake their owner's voice. And that, of course, is John 10.3-5. My sheep know my voice. The shepherd's equipment is simple.

His chief garment is a cloak woven from wool or made from sheepskins. This is sleeveless and so made that it hangs like a cloak on his shoulders. When he sleeps, he curls up under it, head and all.

During the summer, a lighter short-sleeved abba, or coat, is worn. He carries a staff or club. They refer you to their article on the staff.

They've got a whole separate thing on that. And a characteristic attitude is to make a rest for his arms by placing his staff on his shoulders against the back of his neck. When an especially productive spot is found, the shepherd may pass the time while the animals are grazing by playing on his pipe.

Judges 5.16. He sometimes carries a sling, keelah, of goat's hair. This is referred to in 1 Samuel 17.40. His chief belongings are kept in a skin pouch or bag. Also mentioned in that same verse.

This bag is usually a whole tawed skin turned wrong side out with the legs tied up and the neck forming the opening. He's usually aided in the keeping and the defending of the sheep by a dog. This is Job 30.1. In Syria, the Kurdish dogs make the best protectors of the sheep as unlike the cowardly city dogs, they are fearless and will drive away the wild beasts.

The shepherd is often called upon to aid the dogs in defending the sheep. And it gives quite a few references for that including Jeremiah 5.6 and Amos 3.12. Then figurative. The frequent use of the word shepherd to indicate a spiritual overseer is familiar to Bible readers.

And it gives quite a number beginning with Psalm 23. We still use the term pastor which is literally a shepherd. Leaders in temporal affairs were also called shepherds.

Genesis 47.17, Isaiah 44 and Isaiah 63. Sheep without a shepherd typified individuals or nations who had forgotten Jehovah. And it gives several references for that.

Jesus is spoken of as the good shepherd in John 10.14. The chief shepherd in 1 Peter 5.4. The great shepherd Hebrews 13.20. The one shepherd in John 10.16. He will feed his flock like a shepherd. He will gather the lambs in his arm and carry them in his bosom and will gently lead those that have their young. Isaiah 40.11. This is a picture drawn from pastoral life of Jehovah's care over his children.

A strong sympathy for helpless animals, though sometimes misdirected, is a marked characteristic of the people of Bible lands. The birth of offspring in a flock often occurs far off on the mountainside. The shepherd solicitously guards the mother during her helpless moments and picks up the lamb and carries it to the fold.

For a few days until it is able to walk, he may carry it in his arms or in the loose folds of his coat above his girdle. See also sheep. That article was by James A. Patch.

Wonderful information. The great thing is because this was written back around the turn of the century, many scholars note the fact that life in Palestine was virtually unchanged all the way up until this century. The customs and the observations that these gentlemen make in their articles about cultural life and the way people engage in their occupations was largely unchanged over hundreds of years.

So it's a real great picture of the shepherd. So I think it is great at this season of the year to remember that God has his eye on us no matter how lowly our station or no matter how insignificant we think our opportunities are or our place in life is. Those are the places where God does some of his greatest work.

So rather than underestimating ourselves, which is really to underestimate the Lord, we should be alert and watchful so that when the word of God comes to us, like the shepherds, we will be ready, willing, and able to respond. And when we do that, just like those shepherds, we can see some of the greatest things that God has to show us in this life. The shepherds got to see the Christ child.

They were the first. They beat out the wise men. They beat out Simeon and Anna and Zechariah and Elizabeth and everybody else.

They were the first beside Mary and Joseph to see the Christ child because when they heard the word from God's messenger, they recognized it, they understood it, and they responded. And that, of course, is our task as well. Well, I've used up a good portion of our time on our Scripture reading this morning, and I think we'll go ahead and pause and take our break.

And when we come back, we'll resume our study of the life of Jacob in Genesis 33.