



“Angels in the Outskirts”

a sermon by

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Luke 2

Today we will take up the final text in our exploration into the cast of characters behind the Advent season. Specifically we have been taking a closer look at those who gather around the manger - beginning with those invisible souls of generations past in the genealogy of Jesus and ending today with the infamous shepherds and angel choruses. Our text today is Luke's poetic account of the birth of our Lord, one that deserves to be heard more than once a year and in its entirety. So I will actually begin with the first verse of Luke, chapter 2. Listen now not just to the text from your favorite scene in the Charlie Brown Christmas Special, but to the Word of the Lord.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about the child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

“The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen ...” We don't think much of it today - that word, 'glorify.' *Doxazo* in the Greek. We talk a lot about praising God, but that word 'glorify' doesn't get much of a showing these days though it is embedded deep in the historical memory of the church. In this case the shepherds did both as they returned from their visit to the holy child in what I can only imagine was a state of euphoria. And so they glorified God. That word is familiar from a few other stories in scripture, isn't it? That joyful response? In the Gospel of Luke alone it is the same word used when the paralytic is healed by Jesus and he and those who witnessed his healing glorified God.¹ When Christ told the dead son of the widow at Nain to rise and live and he actually did, this led the crowd to glorify

¹Luke 5:25-26

God.² And the crippled woman,³ and the Samaritan leper,⁴ and the blind beggar in Jericho⁵, all of them glorified God when they were healed. And when the Centurion standing at the foot of the cross witnessed Jesus' death, he too glorified God.⁶ It is the spontaneous response, it seems, of those whose souls have been illuminated and uplifted by God because their lives have been miraculously healed or they have witnessed a miracle. In the case of our shepherds, it would seem that they had experienced both. That they had witnessed a miracle is obvious - being surrounded by heavenly hosts and led to the infant Messiah. But in glorifying God they join the chorus of those who were once blind but now see, diseased and outcast and now made whole, disbelieving and now full of faith, and so I cannot help but wonder if something else happened to them that hardly silent, holy night. Something perhaps beyond the obvious that moved their souls and voices to glorify God for all they had heard and seen.

The shepherds are among the most straightforward characters in our nativity scene. There is nothing too fancy about them, in fact quite the contrary. In just a few days the front of our sanctuary will be filled with about 30 of them for our Children's Christmas pageant - all under 5 feet tall and wearing flannel bathrobes and flanked by about 100 other children, with about 700 parents, grandparents, and siblings in tow where you sit today. And while the songs of the season conjure up sweeping pastoral scenes of kind men with full beards and a watchful eye, when I think of the shepherds I cannot help but think of a comment the cameraman recording the service made last year. Determined to do a slow and sweeping pan of the holy scene while taping, he moved to the shepherds only to find that the child he'd landed on looked great in his costume but had his finger shoved up his nose. He quickly moved to the next little boy but found the same thing, and even the same with next so he quickly abandoned the sweep and cut back to the angels.

The shepherds weren't folks that anyone wanted to spend much time on. If some heavenly cameramen had been taping this text for today, you can believe that the shepherds would only have made it into the frame for a few moments. There is a reason Shepherds lived in the fields - not just worked, but lived in them. They had the reputation of being shiftless people who grazed the flocks on other people's lands.⁷ Illiterate hirelings who Jews despised so much they lumped them together with the 'godless' in their society and restricted them to the outermost courtyards of the temple⁸ far from anything that could be considered holy. And on top of that

²Luke 7:16

³Luke 13:13

⁴Luke 17:15

⁵Luke 18:43

⁶Luke 23:47

⁷*NIB*

⁸Philip Yancy, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 37.

they carried the thick stench of lanolin on their clothes and skin and in their hair wherever they went. I feel particularly well acquainted with this point - my roommate in college was an animal science major and worked with sheep a great deal. She bathed every day, sometimes twice, and, let me tell you, she stunk. I mean stunk, bless her heart. But these folks would live out in the fields with these animals for weeks at a time. They offended on so many levels so everyone was quite content that they reside in the outskirts of town. They were about as raw and real as you can get so is it any wonder that when the glory of the Lord shown around them they were terrified. Because in the sin and squalor of the world they inhabited they were not accustomed to heavenly hosts filling the night sky with light. Their eyes had adjusted to the darkness around them and they were perhaps content to believe that it would always only be so. And is it any wonder then that the shepherds also went out with haste and returned glorifying God for all they had seen and heard because suddenly, perhaps for the first time in their lives, in the mire and the dirt and the ignorance and the sin they could say Emmanuel - God with us.

Several years ago the congregation of Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York became embattled with the city over their front steps. Many of the city's homeless had taken to sleeping on the steps of the massive structure because the stairs climbed into a deep and ornate arch that covered the church's entryway, providing shelter from the wind and the rain. Of course, for those desiring to preserve the commercial integrity of the strip of high-end retailers and department stores, this was less than desirable and the police began chasing people off in the middle of the night. The church made a strong case defending the steps and those that used them and ultimately won the right in court to use their steps as they pleased. They determined to not only allow but to embrace the community that sought refuge there and began building a ministry around the weary folks that would gather for the night, serving food and sleeping on the steps to spend time talking with the homeless and preparing breakfast for them in the morning. One evening an elder at the church who had been a member for a number of years rolled out his sleeping bag amidst several of the guests he would serve the next morning and bedded down for the night. As his eyes slowly began to the darkness inside the entryway he suddenly gasped in surprise. High above his head painted on the vault of the ceiling of the arch above him was a giant eye looking straight down at him. "In all my years here I have walked through this arch hundreds of times and have never once seen that" he exclaimed. The homeless man beside him laughed and said, 'Yea, we lie here every night looking up at that eye. It is the eye of God and it brings us a lot of comfort when we're trying to sleep. We know that God is watching over us and we don't have to be afraid.'

I would wager to guess that our eyes have begun to adjust quite nicely to the darkness around us.

In the frantic rush to Christmas amidst the debates over Merry Christmas and happy holidays, in the shopping and the travel and the paperwork and the planning, I would imagine that the last thing any of us is looking for is the glory of God. We have seen these fields before, passed through this arch a hundred times, we know that God is out there somewhere but do not expect to actually encounter him as we go out into these days. In this holy season while I peer over the piles of paper on my desk or stare at my hands in disbelief over the idea of shepherding a few dozen runny-nosed shepherds on Christmas Eve, or look down into my empty wallet or my

packed calendar, I am amazed by the many ways I myself stand in the face of these holy days and see only darkness around me. But when the night sky lit up with heavenly hosts and revealed with unflinching clarity the painful details of the world around those shepherds, the first words uttered by the angel was 'do not be afraid.' Do not be afraid, for look I am bringing you good news of great joy. And suddenly there was a multitude of heavenly hosts saying 'Glory to God.' Glory to God. And the shepherds went with haste to see the baby because that kind of good news is worth abandoning your daily cares for and rushing off to celebrate. It is worth a little glorifying. This week we are invited not just to use our voices to lament all that is before us but to join the chorus of those who would be blind but receive sight, were lame but would walk, who were sick but were made whole, had died but received new life. We are invited to drop everything that we are doing to rush to the manger in amazement that God would even see fit to tell us he was coming, let alone live and die and be resurrected to new for the likes of you and I. We are invited to look at the paths we tread unconsciously each and every day and recall that even when we do not feel bathed in heavenly light the eye of God is watching and his hand is upon us. That God is watching over us and we don't have to be afraid for to you is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Let us go out and glorify him. Amen.