

What Were They Thinking? : The Shepherds
By Jason Huff
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Isaiah 40:9-11, Psalm 80:1-7, Luke 2:8-20

Our final Scripture reading for today comes from Luke 2:8-20. Listen now to God's Word. "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone 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 about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."

If you're under the age of 30, it's almost certain you've never seen an 8-track tape. It's almost impossible to find another technology that was so universally accepted and then universally despised in such a short time. The 8-track was the first truly portable music format, and in 1967, eight-track players were standard in every Ford vehicle. For the first time, you could take your records with you virtually anywhere. Believe it or not, 8-track was a giant success financially. But the 8-track had major problems; the sound quality was bad and the tape inside often got chewed up. You couldn't rewind or choose the song that would come next. Now the 8-track is merely a punch line, a joke about how old or retro or out-of-date something is. Even the joke is getting old because today's kids won't even understand it.

Now some of you are wondering what 8-track tapes have to do with the birth of Jesus. That's a good question. But when we think of the shepherds and their role in the Christmas story, we need to understand who they were and what it meant for them to receive the news of the Savior's birth. Just like the 8-track went from being seen as a marvelous innovation to a piece of junk destined for the garbage heap, if there was ever a job that went from hero to zero in the world of ancient Israel, it was that of the shepherd.

Shepherding was the profession of Israel's key leaders throughout history. Abraham and his sons and grandsons were shepherds. Moses became a shepherd. David started off as a shepherd. He wrote perhaps the best-known chapter of Scripture, Psalm 23, writing, "the LORD is my shepherd; I shall not be in want." There were no men greater than these in all Israel.

Shepherding was once seen as the job of a king was because sheep are among the most helpless animals on the planet. How desperate are they? They can't find food or water on their own, only as a group. Their only defense against predators is running together in large herds – a bear or a pride of lions can't catch them all or pull one out easily – but even then, they have a terrible sense of direction. About the only thing that saves them is that they can discern the voice of their shepherd. Huge herds can graze together because the one thing they know how to do is follow their leader home.

And to add insult to injury, sheep are temperamental animals. They regularly bite the hand that feeds them. When you see a picture of a shepherd with a sheep on his shoulders, that's not the shepherd being nice with a piggyback ride. A lost sheep will get so scared that it will literally freeze. The shepherd had to carry it back home. The metaphor of a ruler as a shepherd meant that a king was to be benevolent and kind to those under him. In the Old Testament, God calls Israel "sheep without a shepherd" when He shows mercy to them. These metaphors were expanded by Jesus' teachings, as He called Himself "the good shepherd" who would lay down His life for His sheep.

So what happened? How did shepherding go from being a noble profession to one that was despised? It took a few bad apples and an interpretation of Israel's law for it to go downhill. As it turns out, a lot of folks who own sheep don't want to tend sheep. The simplest thing for them to do was to hire folks to take care of their flocks. Problem is, it's a difficult and dangerous job that doesn't pay well. Shepherds would live with the flocks from late March to the end of November. Anyone willing to do that job would be single, likely destitute, willing to have no real home for months on end. Families with several children would often send their youngest son off to be a shepherd because they had no other way to pay for him.

With all that in mind, what would keep a shepherd from ripping off his employer? What was to keep a shepherd from selling milk or wool or animals to someone else and then claiming bandits or predators stole them? Not a whole lot. And there wasn't a lot of incentive to fight off a bear in order to preserve someone else's property. It's no wonder that the oral law of the Jews said that "a man should not teach his son to be a shepherd...for their craft is the craft of robbers." One Jewish commentary on Psalm 23 reads, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd." The Jewish courts refused to hear testimony from shepherds on principle.

What made it worse was this: a shepherd had to attend to his sheep, so he couldn't participate in the religious life of the community. Even if their employer allowed them the time, their job put them into contact with unclean and dead animals on a regular basis, which made them ritually unclean. Unless they gave up shepherding, which most couldn't afford, they were forbidden in the temple or the synagogue. The lack of religious education learning the Scriptures made shepherds all the more likely to be untrustworthy. It was a vicious cycle.

So why them? Why did God choose to reveal the birth of His Son first to the most despised class of people in the whole nation of Israel? God foreshadows Jesus' mission in sending the angels to this lowly band of shepherds. In His own ministry, Jesus stressed that He was sent to the lost sheep of Israel. When Jesus proclaims the salvation of the wayward tax collector Zacchaeus, Jesus stated, "For the Son of Man came to seek and save that which was lost." Jesus' debates with the religious people of the day, those who believed themselves to be righteous, never went very well. Instead, Jesus went to the least and the last of society, those who everyone else had rejected, those that had been written off.

It should be no surprise, then, that Jesus' birth was heralded to shepherds. These impoverished, often thieving men, they knew they needed a Savior. They needed rescue as much as the sheep in their care did. They needed healing from their emotional wounds; they needed relief from their spiritual poverty; they needed forgiveness for their darkened hearts. And Jesus offered them much more. Even as a little baby, the birth of the Messiah meant that God had something more in mind for them. Redemption was no longer a dream. It could be real, even if the religious and righteous of their society would never accept it. They would know the truth – that Jesus was God's own Son, sent to all who would believe on His name.

There are a few questions that would be great to ask the shepherds about that night...what it was like to see an angel or to meet Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus that night...all of us might think of those. But as I was pondering it this week, I wondered this: who stayed behind and watched the sheep? The angel tells them the sign, and then they discuss it and they say, "Let's go see!" But there were thousands of sheep out to pasture. Somebody had to stay behind. Who was that? The youngest? The oldest? The guy who drew the shortest straw?

The reason I ask that question is because the shepherds make me think about how we sometimes feel about the wonderful and glorious things we read in the Bible or we hear from other people about their spiritual lives. We've had no angels showing up proclaiming the Savior's birth. We believe in Jesus; we trust in Him for salvation; we begin to notice our lives changing and we attempt to make decisions that honor His lordship in our lives. But there are no bells and whistles. There are no pronouncements from on high. And when something major does happen, when we do get an encouragement, we do get some sort of sign that God is at work, it often happens through somebody else. We are pleased for them; we are glad that God has blessed them; our faith is strengthened by it all. And yet for many of us, we're still the guy back with the sheep while everybody else runs to Bethlehem. We have to take it on faith that the report the others bring back to the fields is true.

The author of Hebrews talks about faith like this. In Hebrews 11:1, we find this definition of faith: "now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see." Those shepherds who ran to the manger; they needed faith to run. Those shepherds left behind? They needed faith to believe that the promised Messiah had been born even if they never got to see Him with their own eyes. Maybe they got the chance to go visit later; Scripture doesn't say. But likely, the angel had to be enough.

What is enough in my life? What is enough in yours? Because those shepherds, years down the road, were probably still shepherds. They had the memory of that one fateful day, an awesome day, an incredible day, but thousands of days came after it. And so I encourage you...if you are having a hard time seeing God in your life, if you're having to take it on faith that God is with you and working in you, if the miracles seem to happen to everybody else but not to you, don't worry and do not be afraid. The strongest faith is not the one that believes after seeing angels and signs and wonders; the strongest faith belongs to the person who only hears secondhand, who only gets a glimpse of the miracle, yet still believes. That is the essence of faith. Blessed are the shepherds, for they saw the angel; more blessed, said Jesus, are they who have not seen and yet still believe.

The other question that came to mind this week for the shepherds was this: who listened to their message? It says that they spread the word, and everyone they told was astonished. But why were they astonished? Was it because they believed? Or was it because these shepherds were telling some crazy tale about a chorus of angels singing and a baby in a manger? If you're amazed by a story, the less likely it is you believe it. My guess is that a lot of people just thought these guys had been hanging out with those sheep far too long. If you could barely trust a shepherd not to rip off his employer, how could you trust him to tell you about the Savior of the world? And yet it seems the shepherd couldn't stop. They returned to their fields glorifying and praising God. It didn't matter what people thought of the story; they knew what they saw.

Do we hear the messages that God is sending to us, or are we too influenced by the charisma or position of the speaker? My shelves are full of books by folks who have a bunch of doctorates or have big churches with thousands of people. We give them authority because of their education or the number of people who attend their church. God could have sent His angel to those kinds of people in ancient Israel, but He didn't.

Which begins to make me wonder...am I doing enough to hear the people on the margins, on the fringes, how they see Jesus working in their lives? When you see a family praying over their new home built by one of our teams that's worked with Habitat...when you hear the word of a former con telling you that Jesus has radically changed his life...when a young mother comes into the food pantry and tells you about what a blessing it is...when a disabled man in a wheelchair wants to discuss the sermon...do we listen? Maybe we do. Maybe we don't. But could you imagine ignoring the shepherds only to find out when it was too late that the Messiah of the world had been in your midst?

Let's do what God did through Jesus. Let's listen to those whom we might normally dismiss. Let's proclaim the good news of salvation to those who we think aren't interested, to the lonely, the angry, the frustrated, the depressed, the weary, the drunk, the manipulator, the gossip. God has spoken to shepherds. God has spoken to us. God wants to speak to others through us. May He open our hearts so that we might be willing to speak to all who might hear and believe in Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord.

You know what? God knows we're not perfect. Far from it. Even when we believe in Christ, we are still broken vessels. Our cracks are still showing. Just like those shepherds, we are far from the people that we know we should be. But the story of God is not about what we can or can't do – it's about what God has already done. In our weakness, in our faith of a mustard seed, in our brokenness, God can use us. He already has. So as we go out this week into the final days before Christmas, let us be comforted – a Savior has been born to us, who is Christ the Lord, the One who will rebuild us from the ground up, who has already paid the price for our renovation. Let's celebrate the story of the One whose birth announced that salvation is at hand for you and for me and for all who believe.