

HOPE CHURCH CAROL SERVICE, 21 December 2014

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Passage: Luke 2:1-20

INTRODUCTION

We've just sung one of the most popular carols, about the shepherds who watched their flocks by night. But have you ever wondered:

“Why shepherds watched their flocks”?

Or maybe just ***“Why shepherds?”***

This morning we're going to focus on the group who were the first to arrive at the stable in Bethlehem – the shepherds – and ask who they were and how they got there.

WHY SHEPHERDS – WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN, WHY?

Luke story starts with a statement we've all got used to – but we probably don't understand it in the same way his first readers did.

Luke 2:8 *“There were shepherds living out in the fields nearby (i.e. close to Bethlehem), keeping watch over their flocks at night.”*

The first-century Palestinian or Jew would have said “Well obviously, of course they were.” But it doesn't really mean anything to us.

Imagine if he'd said *“There were gamekeepers living out in the woods near Balmoral, keeping watch over their pheasants at night.”* We'd know exactly what that meant, who they were, where they were, why they were there:

- These are not just any old woods, they belong to someone special
- These are not just any old pheasants, they're being reared for a special purpose
- These are not just any old gamekeepers, they have a particular role

The same is true of these shepherds:

- These are not just any old fields, they belong to someone special
- These are not just any old sheep, they're being reared for a special purpose
- These are not just any old shepherds, they have a particular role

Everyone knew that:

- The fields near Bethlehem belonged to the family of the Chief Priest
- The sheep in those fields were being reared for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem
- The shepherds' job was to inspect the new-born lambs to make sure they were perfect and suitable for sacrifice

Once we understand that, it unpacks new insights into what was going on in Bethlehem that first Christmas night, and why God's angel came to the shepherds first with the news of the birth of Jesus.

Let's take a look at some of those insights.

THE SHEPHERDS' JOB

The Jewish religion taught that every human being was separated from God because they failed to live right. This meant that each person would be judged by God, found guilty, and condemned to eternity without God in hell.

The only way to make things right was through animal sacrifice, killing innocent animals in the temple. Then God would accept the animal in the place of the person, and the person would be forgiven.

But this didn't really solve the problem, as people kept doing wrong things and needing to make another sacrifice. (And as we'll see shortly, killing an animal wasn't the ultimate solution either, true forgiveness needs something much more significant than that.)

So lots of animals were needed for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem, they had to be perfect, and most of them were lambs. The law requires two lambs to be sacrificed each day (morning and evening), which requires 730 lambs each year. Then at the annual Passover festival, each family had to sacrifice their own lamb, which meant thousands more.

And the lambs had to be perfect, which meant pre-approved by the priests as acceptable for sacrifice. In fact they arranged for a supply of perfect lambs to be available at the temple so that pilgrims at Passover could buy one when they got there – for a price. And they couldn't use ordinary money, they had to use special temple money, which they could get from the money-changers – for a price. It's interesting that these sacrifices weren't free...

So where did all these lambs come from?

Bethlehem is about six miles from Jerusalem. It is a rural community, where sheep have been farmed for centuries. Remember King David who designed the temple, was a shepherd in Bethlehem. Since the temple was built, sacrificial lambs for the temple were raised in Bethlehem, and the fields belonged to the family of the Chief Priest. They of course weren't farmers, so they employed shepherds to raise the sheep, and to inspect the new-born lambs to check that they were perfect and suitable for sacrifice.

THE SHEPHERDS' PROBLEM

This gave the shepherds a real problem.

The Jewish law said that anyone who touched blood, faeces or a dead body was ritually unclean, and unable to enter the temple. But the shepherds were unable to avoid this type of contact in their daily work with the sheep. So they were permanently ritually unclean, and banned from the temple and synagogues. This means they could never offer a sacrifice to make themselves right with God. They would always be outside the presence of God and beyond his forgiveness.

It's ironic that the people who made it possible for everyone else to offer a sacrifice were themselves unable to do so.

That's why the shepherd's job was rated really low in Jewish society, and they were treated as outcasts. Jewish oral tradition (as recorded in the Mishnah) says: "*A man should not teach his son to be an ass-driver, or a camel-driver, or a barber, or a sailor, **or a shepherd**, or a shopkeeper, for all these trades are trades of thieves.*"

Not much of a job description, and not something you admit to in the local pub when someone asks what you do for a living!

THE SHEPHERDS' CALL

So these shepherds were used to being ignored, insulted, abused, rejected – which is why they lived out in the fields with their flocks – no-one else wanted to know them.

But this night they were in for a surprise!

First, an angel turned up! Not a small cuddly cherub, but an awesome supernatural being surrounded by the radiance of heaven. Luke, who was a medical doctor, rather needlessly tells us that they were “*terrified*”!

Then the angel gave them a personalised message. What did he say? – apart from the words that all angels seem to open with: “*Don't be afraid!*” His words were full of reassurance to these outcasts who were ritually unclean and unable to go to the temple.

He said “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.*”

The angel emphasised that the message was meant for those shepherds in person – good news to you that will be for all the people. The announcement of the birth of Jesus came first to the shepherds, to the outcasts, the rejected, the worthless.

And the message was followed by an amazing outburst of joy from an army of angels, praising God and giving him glory. Wow!!!

THE SHEPHERDS' RESPONSE

The shepherds didn't just sit there amazed when it was all over. They took action. “*We'd better go to Bethlehem and see what's happened.*”

So they rushed over there and found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus in a stable, just as the angel had said. The shepherds told them what they'd seen and heard, and they were all amazed too.

These men were discounted and rejected by the society of the day, with a dirty job that made them religiously unclean and prevented them from approaching God.

Their job was really important though, inspecting new-born lambs to ensure that they were suitable for sacrifice in the temple at Passover.

And isn't it amazing that the angel came to these men first with the news that Jesus was born in Bethlehem? And that he told them to go and see the baby? They were the first on the scene apart from Joseph and Mary.

ONE KEY INSIGHT

This makes even more sense when you hear how Jesus was described later in his life – as the Lamb of God.

For example when his cousin John the Baptist saw Jesus coming to the river Jordan, he said “*Look, it's the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.*” (John 1:29)

The first Christian theologian, Paul, said “*Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed.*” (1 Corinthians 5:7). Peter said “*You were redeemed ... with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or defect.*” (1 Peter 1:18-19).

Even 700 years before Jesus was born, one of the prophets, Isaiah, described the coming Messiah as being “*like a lamb that is led to the slaughter*” (Isaiah 53:7). And when someone asked the disciple Philip who this prophecy was about, he explained that it was about Jesus (Acts 8:26-35).

Jesus is the Lamb of God, born to take away the sins of the world, the one perfect sacrifice.

- Jesus was born in Bethlehem, in the same place as the lambs for the temple.
- Just like those lambs, Jesus was destined to die in Jerusalem at the Passover festival.
- The lambs were a temporary sacrifice for sin, but Jesus died once for everyone.

And the shepherds from the fields around Bethlehem, whose job was to inspect the new-born lambs – they were sent by the angel to be the first to see Jesus at his birth. Amazing!

WHAT ABOUT YOU? ARE YOU A SHEPHERD?

I wonder whether now you might associate a bit more closely with those shepherds in the nativity scene?

- Maybe you feel on the edge, not acceptable to the religious scene?
- Maybe you think you're not good enough to approach God?
- Maybe you think there's no way for you to get right with God?

The shepherds felt all those things.

But the angel told them “*I bring you good news ... a Saviour has been born to you”.*

If you were to see an angel this Christmas (no, a real one!), he'd say the same to you.

And the right response would be to do what the shepherds did – “*Let's go and see*”. Go and find Jesus this Christmas, even if you're not religious, or you don't think you're good enough. This saviour is born to you.

PRAYER