

HOPE CHURCH CAROL SERVICE, 23 December 2018, David Hillson
OUTSIDE-IN: THE SHEPHERDS' STORY

Passage: Luke 2:1-20

INTRODUCTION

The Christmas story is full of unlikely characters. Those on the edges find themselves at the centre of the action. The unimportant get starring roles. The forgotten are the first to know. It's a story of the unexpected that flips the world on its head and turns the outside in.

This is the third instalment of our "Outside-In" series. We've already met Mary, a teenage mother with an apparently-fatherless child, and Joseph, a broken-hearted man with shattered dreams. Now the story moves to the little town of Bethlehem, where the couple are required to report for the Roman census, even though their baby is due any day.

There's no room for them to stay, but they have to find a place to have the baby, so they end up in an animal stall.

It's time to meet our next bunch of unlikely characters in this unique story – cue shepherds.

SHEPHERDS – WHO, WHERE, WHY?

We all know how the story starts (Luke 2:8): *"And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night."*

But most of us don't know the back story that would have been familiar to everyone who originally heard or read those words. These weren't just any old shepherds in any old fields watching any old sheep.

Imagine the story started like this: *"There were gamekeepers staying in the woods at Balmoral keeping watch over their birds at night."* We know where the woods are, who they belong to, what the birds are, and what the gamekeepers' job is.

These fields in Bethlehem belonged to the chief priest's family, the flocks were kept there to produce lambs to be sacrificed in the temple at Jerusalem at Passover, and the shepherds' job was to raise the sheep, and to inspect the new-born lambs to check that they were perfect and suitable for sacrifice.

Then we remember that Jesus came for a purpose – to give his life as a sacrifice for people who were separated from God, to open the way for reconciliation and restoration – and that his sacrifice could only achieve that because he himself was perfect. And Jesus was called "The Lamb of God"?

Does that change your view of this part of the story? Do we begin to see why Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and the first people invited to see him after his birth were shepherds – **these** shepherds?

THE SHEPHERDS' PROBLEM

But the shepherds had 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. They really were outsiders from "nice society".

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.*"

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.*"

Which raises another problem – how did they know where to go? The angel just said "wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger". Which manger? Where?

Traditionally we think of the manger being in a stable behind the inn that was full, but the Bible doesn't say it was behind the inn, or give any other details. Verse 7 just says "*she gave birth ... and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*" But the shepherds seemed to know where to go – how?

You remember that their job was to inspect new-born lambs to make sure they were perfect, ready for the sacrifice. They didn't do this out in the open field. There was a tower in the fields called Migdal Eder, which the shepherds used as a watchtower. It had a room on the ground floor where pregnant ewes were taken when they were ready to give birth, with a ceremonially clean manger at the centre for the lambs to be placed and inspected.

This was a place the shepherds knew well and used often. There were many mangers in and around Bethlehem, but this was "the manger". Maybe that's why these shepherds were able to go quickly to the right place, because they knew exactly where to look?

Migdal Eder, the watchtower of the flock, is mentioned a few times in the OT, including Micah 4:8:

- *As for you, watchtower of the flock, stronghold of Daughter Zion, the former dominion will be restored to you; kingship will come to Daughter Jerusalem.*

Some Jewish traditional rabbis interpreted this to mean that the messiah's kingship would be announced from this watch-tower.

SO HOW CAN WE SUMMARISE THE SHEPHERDS' STORY?

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 where to go and see the baby? They were the first on the scene apart from Joseph and Mary.

These outsiders were truly invited right into the heart of the Christmas story.

WHAT ABOUT YOU? ARE YOU A SHEPHERD?

How is this relevant to us today? Are there similarities between us & those shepherds?

- Maybe you feel on the edge, not comfortable in the religious scene?
- Maybe you think you're not good enough to approach God?
- Maybe you feel that God's far away and there's no way for you to get right with him?

The shepherds felt all those things.

But let's go back to what the angel said to them: "*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 as well as everyone else – 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 how about those of us who call ourselves Christians, who come regularly to church and know this story inside out. Do we think this message is just for someone else, those outside, them not us?

On our own, all of us are unacceptable to God, barred from his presence, outside looking in. We too need to hear this good news that will cause great joy. A saviour has been born to us as well, Jesus, the lamb of God, born to take away the sins of the world, our sins, the perfect sacrifice given once and for all.

This message is for each one of us.

If you were to see an angel this Christmas (no, a real one!), perhaps this is what he'd say to you: *"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. A Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."*

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, or if you've been part of God's family for a long time. This saviour is born **to you**, to all of us.

Still today, Jesus turns the world outside-in, including everyone, inviting everyone. Don't miss out on the real meaning of Christmas – you are welcomed into this story.

PRAYER