

“Shepherds”; Series: Advent Presents
Luke 2:8-20
Westside Fellowship CRC; 23 December 2018
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In a few months, I will be going to the holy land for a biblical studies tour. I'll be going with Tim and several of the pastors from Classis Quinte and I'm really excited for all that I will be learning! Most of the other CRC pastors in Canada have already been on the tour. I was having lunch with one of them a couple of months ago and he said that he learned something fascinating about the shepherds out in the fields near Bethlehem. But he said he couldn't tell me, because one of the big important things about this tour is that you enter it without any spoilers. You're supposed to be open and ready to discover, and it's just not as fun if you come in with all the learning. Because I knew that I would be preaching on the shepherds this advent, I asked Richard to pretty-please tell me what he learned. I even offered to buy him his lunch if he told me. That worked. 😊

So, what he told me was this: the details in Luke's account are important. We read in Luke 2 verse 8 that there were shepherds living in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks AT NIGHT. The fact that they were out and about *at night* is what Richard said I should pay attention to. Apparently, shepherds don't do this. They didn't do this then and they don't do it now. At night, shepherds bring their flocks into their folds (that are like caves) for milking and resting. Perhaps the reason that the shepherds were out in the fields with their flocks that night was because they had given up their cave. For someone else... Perhaps the shepherds were out in the fields that night because they had given their cave to Mary and Joseph. Perhaps

the sheep pen of the shepherds was the very place where Jesus was born and these shepherds were the hospitable ones who made room for Mary and Joseph, and, eventually, baby Jesus - - -

You know, I don't know if there's enough to go on in this text to tell us that this is what was going on here. But what a wondering it is! And what I *do* like about this interpretation is the way that it paints a picture of these shepherds. Though they were relatively low on the ladder of social status, they may have been exemplary in their hospitality... willingly giving their sleeping space for a very pregnant young woman and her tired husband.

And though, as one commentator writes, "some commentators argue that the shepherds symbolize God's meeting the despised... this negative reputation for shepherds is later than the first-century Judaism. The biblical shepherd imagery is mostly positive" (Darrell Bock, *Luke*, p. 87). Right? I mean, think of King David – the boy shepherd who became king... And think of David's song – Psalm 23 – which talks about how the Lord is *his* shepherd (singing Psalm 23 by Stuart Townend) "The Lord's my shepherd, I'll not want. He makes me lie in pastures green. He leads me by the still, still waters. His goodness restores my soul." These shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks by night... they were doing with their sheep what the Lord does with his people. They were caring for them and keeping them safe...

They were *keeping watch*... another activity of God... God is the one who watches and keeps watch over / stands guard over. We read in Psalm 121, The Lord watches over you. The Lord is your shade at your right hand. The sun will not harm you by day, nor the moon by night.

If the shepherds weren't used to being out in the fields with their flocks *at night*, I wonder if they weren't just a bit afraid already. Perhaps they were reciting to themselves Psalm 121... The Lord watches over us... The moon will not harm us by night... Or perhaps they were singing to themselves, "And when I walk the darkest path, I will not fear the evil one, for you are with me, and your rod and staff are the comfort I need to know." They needed comfort out there in the field that night. They needed it when they were in the dark – and even more so – when the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, they needed comfort even more for they were *terrified*.

The rod and the staff of the Lord, their shepherd, came to them in the first words of the angel,



“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 then the sky was filled! There were too many to count – and they were saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.” And *maybe* the shepherds were putting two and two together... “Wait a minute, do you think it could be? Do you think the very couple that we let stay the night in our sheepfold – do you think they are now a family of three? Could the Messiah, the Lord, be sleeping in one of our mangers right now?! Let’s go! Let’s see this thing that has happened!”

And maybe as they went, they sang, “He guides our way in righteousness, and he anoints our head with oil... And our cups, they overflow with joy – we first on His pure delights!”

And when they got there – there they were – Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus – lying in the manger – a feeding trough for their sheep. Jesus – the one who would later say to his disciples, “This is my body, which is for you. Take it and eat it.” Indeed, God prepares a table before us in the presence of our enemies. After the shepherds had seen Jesus, they went and told

everybody what they had seen and what the angels had said. And then it says, the shepherds RETURNED... returned to their fold? Returned to Joseph and Mary and Jesus who were *in* their home? They returned glorifying God and praising God for all they had heard and seen... all the things they had heard and seen that matched perfectly what they had been told.

To be told something and then to see the thing that you have been told is really true – well, that builds trust... trust in the Lord their shepherd. And perhaps they could sing all the more robustly, “And I will trust in you alone, And I will trust in you alone. For your endless mercy follows me – your goodness will lead me home.”

There’s another theory floating around about these shepherds... And that is that these weren’t ordinary shepherds... these were shepherds who were watching over flocks of sheep that would be used in the temple sacrifices. These may have been Levitical shepherds watching over the temple flocks. And perhaps right in their fold... their fold that held the lambs used for making sacrifices... perhaps right in the feeding trough that fed the lambs used for temple sacrifices – perhaps right there they laid their eyes on the sacrificial Lamb of God – the lamb without blemish or defect (1 Peter 1:19)... the lamb about whom John the Baptist would later say, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29)!

And in a strange circle of symbol and truth, this little one, lying in a manger, was not only a lamb, but also one of *them*... he was also a shepherd... *their* shepherd. He would one day tell his followers, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). Who knows but that one of these young shepherds there that night, ended up in the crowd that heard Jesus say those words. “I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep” (John 10:14-15).

When the apostle John records his vision of the end in the book of Revelation, he says that the one who sits on the throne shelters the saints with his presence. “Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For [LISTEN!] the Lamb at the centre of the throne will be their shepherd; he will lead them to springs of living water.’ And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes” (Rev. 7:15-17).