

## Our Calling Luke 2:8-20

Occasionally we hear about people referring to their occupation as a calling. Webster's dictionary defines a calling as a strong inner impulse toward a particular course of action especially when accompanied by conviction of divine influence. Simply put, a calling is a strong desire to spend your life doing a certain kind of work, such as religious work. People feel called to be a pastor, a missionary, a doctor, a teacher, and so on.

I believe I had that call to be in ministry of some kind when I was in High school.

We have heard missionaries talk about a call to go a particular part of the world or to a specific people group.

The path each of us has taken in life has been or is a calling and yes may have even been the result of divine influence where you firmly believe God was directing you into a certain area of work.

In the text we are looking at today, the shepherds had a call, a call that was more than just the occupation of tending sheep. But first a word about shepherds in general.

Shepherding was a special call to anyone who would take on that task, especially when you consider the social stigma that accompanied a person who was a shepherd.

During the time period we are discussing at the birth of Christ, shepherds were generally looked down on. On the social ladder, shepherds were considered a rung above lepers. A collection of Rabbinical writings called the Talmud states that "no help is to be given to heathens (non-Jews) or shepherds." Let's consider a few reasons for this.

They were considered unclean. They were in daily contact with animals that were dirty and smelly. They were in contact with their manure and their blood from cuts and scrapes. They were in contact with the insects that swarmed them. This meant they were ceremonially unclean so they were treated as outcasts. The very nature of their work

made it impossible to attend religious services. I find it interesting that the very animals used in sacrifices would render their care takers unclean.

They were often isolated and forgotten. Many were nomadic moving around from place to place. Even if they were near their home, there were many stretches of time when they were out in the fields days on end tending their flocks.

They were treated with contempt and mistrust and often accused of stealing from others. Their testimony was not valid in court because they were considered unreliable. They could be impetuous, arrogant, even foul mouthed and prone to fighting.

**But aren't the outcasts, the marginalized, the sinners, the unclean the kinds of people for whom Jesus came to seek and save?**

What's even more amazing than the angelic message coming to the shepherds is that they were called to be the first witnesses, to take up the anthem of praise and proclamation of the good news that began with the angels. One source put it this way, "God entrusted the greatest message ever sent from heaven to a bunch of smelly shepherds."

And here we are over 2000 years later and God is still entrusting His message of hope in Christ to a bunch of smelly sinners, who are called Christians. We have been given the same noble task as the shepherds. It's not in tending sheep. It's a much greater calling. Let's look at our passage and consider what it has to say about our call. The first thing that we see is the purposeful witness.

### I. THE PURPOSEFUL WITNESS – vs. 8-17

We know a witness to be someone who gives a testimony about things that they either saw or heard. That person attests to the validity of facts surrounding their witness of an event.

These shepherds were to become eye witnesses to events they had both seen and heard on one starlit night outside of Bethlehem. They were out in the fields engaged in what shepherds were supposed to be doing at night – watching their flocks. Our text

tells us they were living out there. It was a job that required their full attention and so they never left their work. They were **“keeping watch.”** Literally it means they were watching watches. It doesn't mean they were clock watchers. It simply means they were constantly watching their flocks.

It's been suggested by some that these particular sheep were destined to be sacrificed in the temple at Jerusalem which was about 8 miles away. Just outside of Bethlehem, where our passage takes place, there was a tower called Migdal Eder, which literally means the watch tower of the flock. From this elevated vantage point up in the tower shepherds could watch the flocks against predators or bandits. Many Jews believed that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem (**Micah 5:2**) and that He would be revealed from the tower of the flock.

You have both heard and read this account dozens of times as the nighttime darkness is pierced by the dazzling light of an angel sent by God to announce the birth of Jesus. This angel bore both the message from God and the glory of God. Having just left the presence of God on an errand of utmost urgency, he appeared in the nighttime sky with a message of hope that would be for all the people. We discussed last week that this message wasn't just for Jews; it wasn't just for Jews of that time period; it wasn't just for a certain class of people; it wasn't for a certain region of the world or for a certain socio-economic group or even a certain age group. This message was for all people. It was a message to young and old, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, for people living north, east, south, and west. It was for people then and it is for people now.

So in looking primarily at the shepherds in this passage and considering the purposeful witness, we note that they first heard the messenger.

#### **A. They Heard the Messenger – vs. 8-14**

No one really knows why God chose these marginalized shepherds to be the first to hear the good news and then herald the great news. But He did. Maybe it was to show us that all people are accepted by God, that he includes the outcasts. If

the message had been given to those in the upper class maybe they would have concluded that the message was just for them, after all they deserve it, they're an important part of the well-being of society. On the other hand, it's also possible that they could have ignored the message thinking that they didn't need it.

But by going to the shepherds who were already considered outcasts, God was showing us that everyone needed this message of salvation and hope. Last week we discussed that it was good news which would bring great joy to all people because the Savior, Christ the Lord was born.

But the angel didn't want the shepherds just to hear about the good news. He wanted them to be witnesses to this good news. It's implied that they were to go because the angel gave them two signs, two identifying marks that would distinguish this child as the Savior. They were the sign of His clothes and the sign of His cradle. This newborn would be wrapped in swaddling clothes or literally strips of cloth.

In the study Bible I use in my office I have a strip of cloth that was given to me by my Mom one Christmas. On this particular Christmas day when she read the Christmas account from Luke, she gave each of us a strip of cloth. Mine serves as a marker for this passage and is a reminder that God became human, born as a tiny baby who needed to be cuddled and changed and fed. The eternal hope of all humanity rested in this infant. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God was clothed in humanity just as this infant was clothed in strips of cloth. They would find this child in the humblest of conditions. If his clothes weren't enough to identify him, that He would be found lying in a manger would confirm the truth of the message about the identity of the Savior.

These signs were important to identify the baby, but more important than the sign was the message heard that night by the shepherds that a Savior was born.

Joining the angel was a multitude of the heavenly host giving glory to God. I have to wonder if the

light that pierced the nighttime sky was seen by anyone else. Was the sound of their praise carried on the winds into town so that others heard the glory being given to God? We'll never know for sure, but one thing is certain, these shepherds heard the messenger. **Verses 15-16** give us their response. We're told that they hurried to the manger.

### **B. They Hurried to the Manger – vs. 15-16**

I want you to notice the eagerness, the enthusiasm, and the willingness of these shepherds to hurry into Bethlehem.

There is no delay.

There is no doubt.

There is no debate.

They didn't question what they had just witnessed.

There is joyful obedience.

My only question is who was selected to be the one who had to stay behind and watch the sheep or did they all go?

Implied in what the angel said about the signs of how they could find the baby was the need for them to go into Bethlehem. Once the angels left, they agreed to go find the baby as it had been told them. That's obedience. I would also suggest that it was faith. I don't have anything to back it up other than just considering their response, but I believe they were already looking for the Messiah, they already had a measure of faith. Their faith didn't begin at the manger when they went and saw for themselves the Christ child. Their faith began back on the hillside, their hearts were already prepared to hear the message. I would suggest that the evidence of their faith is seen in their response. They hurried to go see what had been told them.

Now something I have read many times and just noticed this past week in my studies is this: **“Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”**

That suggests to me they understood that the message came from God and the angel was His messenger. It was a divine revelation.

We don't have angels speaking to us, or at least I

haven't to my knowledge had any appearing to me with news. Yet the Lord speaks to us every day through His Word. The question is whether or not we are listening and whether or not we are obeying through the eyes of faith. The response of the shepherds was that they heard, believed and obeyed.

**Would we have responded the same way as the shepherds if we were in their sandals?** They hurried to the manger. That's what faith does.

**Hebrews 11:1 “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.”**

And when the evidence of their faith was substantiated, their response was to herald the message.

### **C. They Herald the Message – v. 17**

They came as watchers of the good news of great joy in the Christ child born that night and left as witnesses about the Christ child born to them as the Savior. The responsibility of bearing witness of the birth of the Savior had been effectively passed on from the angel to the shepherds. They became the first human heralds to His birth.

The hymn writer so aptly puts it:  
 We've a story to tell to the nations  
 That shall turn their hearts to the right,  
 A story of truth and mercy,  
 A story of peace and light,  
 A story of peace and light.

For the darkness shall turn to dawning,  
 And the dawning to noonday bright,  
 And Christ's great kingdom shall come to earth –  
 The kingdom of love and light.

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Our response is to “Go, Tell It on the Mountain, that Jesus Christ is born.”

Warren Wiersbe pens his thoughts by saying that “telling others about the Savior is a solemn obligation as well as a great privilege, and we who are believers must be faithful.”

It is becoming an even greater challenge in our day and age and culture to be vocal about our faith.

Many are seeking to silence our witness in the public square. There was a story in the news this past week about a family in North Carolina who had put up a cross with lights as part of their Christmas display. They were told to take it down by their homeowners' association because it was not an appropriate decoration. They appealed the decision by showing Scripture passages that show the correlation. The case is still under review. Kudos to them for proclaiming the truth about Christmas and not bowing to those who seek to silence them.

The overwhelming joy the shepherds experienced at seeing the Savior resulted in their enthusiasm to share the good news that the Savior had been born.

Andy Williams sings about this being the most wonderful time of the year with kids jingle belling and everyone telling you to be of good cheer. Yes, he sings about it being the happiest season of all with holiday greetings and gay happy meetings when friends come to call. It's not because of the parties we host or the marshmallows we toast. It's the most wonderful time of the year because the Savior has been born and the shepherds proclaimed the good news of what they had heard and seen. They gladly told any and all who would listen.

William Hendricks writes "These men hid nothing. They told their story to Joseph and Mary, and to many others besides (v. 18). So thoroughly convinced were these men of the truth of their story, and so sure were they of its importance, that they were willing to risk disbelief and even ridicule."

**What keeps us from proclaiming the good news about our Savior? Are we reluctant to share it because of fear of ridicule? Are we not convinced in our own hearts and minds of its validity and importance? Are we willing to be fools for Christ, so convinced of the reality of the good news and the salvation Christ offers that we will risk ridicule?**

These shepherds had nothing to lose. **How could they keep silent about the greatest news ever revealed to mankind?**

It convicts me not to be just visible with my faith, but to be more vocal in my witness.

### Can we rightly sing?

I'll tell the world, that I'm a Christian,  
I'm not ashamed, His name to bear;  
I'll tell the world, that I'm a Christian,  
I'll take Him with me anywhere.

I'll tell the world, how Jesus saved me,  
And how He gave me a life brand new;  
And I know that if you trust Him.  
That all He gave me, He'll give to you.

I'll tell the world that He's my Savior;  
No other one could love me so.  
My life, my all is His forever,  
And where He leads me I will go.

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John MacArthur writes: "The response of those who come to Christ is to tell others about Him. Usually the most bold and passionate people in proclaiming the gospel are the newest Christians; the longer they are saved, the less excited they seem about their salvation, and the less eager they are to share their faith. But true spiritual commitment is determined by the quality of and tenacity of believers' long-term joy over their salvation. One measure of that joy is how eagerly they share the gospel. Lack of the zeal and passion that compels believers to tell others about Christ betrays a sinful heart of indifference and ingratitude."

Those are strong words indeed, words worth our consideration. **How eager are we to share about Christ our Savior born to save us from our sins?**

Let the words of **Romans 1:16** be our standard: **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ; for it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believes; to the Jew first; and also to the Greek."**

They heard, they believed, they acted, they shared. These shepherds were the first 1<sup>st</sup> century witnesses.

**Matthew 28:19-20** is our marching orders to go into all the world and make disciples by proclaiming the gospel.

Likewise **Acts 1:8** compels us to go in the power of

the Holy Spirit to be witnesses for Christ. The shepherds are our examples of the eagerness, perhaps even the urgency of sharing that Christ the Savior is born and to do so with joyfulness.

There's a little phrase tucked neatly in **verse 17** that is of importance. It says **"they made known"**. It means to declare or certify or to have thorough knowledge of. Simply put, it means to tell in such a way that people can understand it. That means when they declared what they had seen and heard they thoroughly explained the truth and facts about the proof of what they were sharing that Jesus was the Christ they had been waiting for and they did so with conviction and eagerness.

**Will we be like the shepherds and be a purposeful witness about Christ?**

In **verses 18-19** we are given the paradoxical wonder to the message proclaimed by the shepherds.

## **II. THE PARADOXICAL WONDER – vs. 18-19**

We are given two responses by those who heard the shepherds testify about what they had seen and heard regarding the Savior's birth. We see first the response of the people.

### **A. The Response of the People – v. 18**

Our text tells us that those who heard the testimony of the shepherds were amazed. Luke uses that word on 12 other occasions when writing about how people were amazed at the miracles and teachings of Jesus. It means to contemplate, to wonder at, or to be astonished. It produced a sense of curiosity, but it did not produce commitment. They listened, perhaps politely but it didn't change their hearts, they weren't moved to belief or action. We don't get the sense that people rushed off to see the Christ child in person. They didn't respond the same way the shepherds did.

I'm amazed at some of the phenomenal magic tricks that can be done, but it doesn't make me want to go out and become a magician.

I'm amazed at some of the music that people can

produce on various instruments, but it doesn't make me want to become a magician.

I'm amazed at some of the structures that are built around the world, but it doesn't make me want to go out and become an architect.

These bystanders heard the good news but weren't compelled to take personal interest in seeing for themselves the good news.

Were they too busy and would go later? Were they just being polite, but had no real interest? What was it about the message from the shepherds they didn't believe? Was it disbelief about seeing angels? It's difficult to know why they didn't respond, but their response is no different than that of people today.

Jesus told a parable of a sower. We read about it in **Matthew 13**. The sower planted seed that fell on four types of soil. The seed represents the Word of God. Some seed fell on hard ground and never took root. Some seed fell on rocky ground and while it took root never grew deep and the sun dried it up. Some seed fell among the thorns and got all tangled up and choked out. Still other seed fell on good ground. It seems to me that the types of soil in the parable are represented in the types of response by those who heard the good news of the Savior's birth but did nothing with it.

It wasn't important.

They might get to it some other day.

They had to take care of some other things first.

The response of the people was that they were amazed but they weren't affected, and their lives don't appear to be altered because of the good news.

But then we see the response of a parent.

### **B. The Response of a Parent – v. 19**

Our text says that Mary treasured up and pondered all these things in her heart. The word ponder means literally to throw together, to put one thing with another and consider, to bring together in one's mind.

Mary took all the pieces of what the shepherds had shared with her and pieced them together in her mind. She considered everything they had told her

and treasured them, stored them up, tucked them away for safe keeping.

Once again as we approach Christmas we are called to wonder after the news of the Christ child, to treasure His birth and its impact for us, that He is the one who was born for the purpose of being our Savior. **What is your response to this message that brings good news of great joy for all people?** This news is for you.

We have considered the purposeful witness.  
We have looked at the paradoxical wonder.  
Finally, let's contemplate the passionate worship.

### III. THE PASSIONATE WORSHIP – v. 20

First, there is the place of their worship.

#### A. The Place of Their Worship

**Verse 20** tells us they returned. It implies that they returned to the fields where they were living, back to the hillside, back to their occupation of tending sheep, out into the country surrounding Bethlehem.

When we have had an encounter meeting the one who saves, we will also return to what we were doing, but we won't be returning in the same way. They were changed men with changed hearts. Things may have been the same on the outside when they returned to the hillside, but things weren't the same on the inside. One writer states that **"they returned to where they started and worked faithfully but now they were worshipping fondly."**

Which leads to the purpose of their worship.

#### B. The Purpose of Their Worship

What affected their worship, what transformed their heart was the encounter of what they had seen and heard. The angel's message and then the collective worship of the angels glorifying God echoing a harmonious anthem of praise spoke to the hearts of those shepherds who in turn believed the message and responded in obedience by going to see for themselves the truth of what the angel had said. The confirmation of that message resulted in their

witness and in their worship. Let me suggest to you that their witness was also a form of worship. So when you are sharing the good news of Christ you are offering God praise because you believe the truth of the message found in Christ. Sharing our faith is always a clear indication of our adoration for the One who saved us. It's a testimony that what we have seen and heard is real, so we joyfully express it to others in the hopes that they too will be moved by faith and in obedience to believe its message of salvation that brings great joy. They were passionate about their worship because of the purpose of their worship.

**Is our worship an evidence of our witness to the things we have seen and heard about Christ?**

Let me suggest one final thought to you from this passage. Worship always has an object. In this case we see the person of their worship.

#### C. The Person of Their Worship

We worship what we love or we love what we worship. We are told in Scripture that to worship anything or anyone other than God is idolatry. The command given in **Exodus 20:3** is to have no other gods before Him. The command given in **Deuteronomy 6** is repeated in Mark's gospel that we are to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. God must, therefore, be the object of our worship and that's evident with the shepherds. **Revelation 4:11** and **5:13** tell us that God is worthy of all our praise.

**"The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."**

Our calling this Christmas is to be a purposeful witness and a passionate worshipper. It was their faith that led them to do both. **So what is your response to the message of Christ? Do you believe that He is the Savior, Christ the Lord?**

If so, go witness and worship.

If not, come, see, and believe.