

## “The Shepherds’ Good News!”

(a sermon based on Luke 2: 8-14, page 58 in the New Testament, NRSV pew Bible)

by

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I want you to imagine with me long ago and far away in old Judea. It began no differently than any other night spent with the sheep on the hills outside Bethlehem. It was cool and crisp.

Darkness brought “relief” from the sweaty days of dust and dry sage. Relief, too, from the running, dancing, bleating, and butting of the animals! At night the sheep were quiet. The stars were bright. The fire was blazing. My brothers were dozing...

Suddenly, there was a spot of light, as thin as a laser, widening... I looked up... It was as though the night sky was opening up! I guess it was a star being born... a super-nova or a comet. But the light beam didn’t drive away the night which was all around us. It just sort of “pierced” the darkness.

I shook my brother’s shoulder. **“This you gotta see!”** (*look up, look down, shrug*)

Everything was quiet. I expected to hear the crackle of flame or a buzzing of blazing glory, but it was a silent night... a still night. I listened for the sound of starlight falling on our open field, but we heard only the steady slow breathing of our sleeping sheep... and the snuffled snore of a shepherd. I looked at my brother... (*shrug*)

**Whoooaawh! Whoosh! Yo, a voice! Yikes!** Something was out there!

I covered my head. (From what?? I dunno!) I crouched down. (Why?? I dunno!) I probably should have ***bolted and run***, but I didn’t think of that. The voice was coming from the light in the night sky! I was in a cold sweat for fear.

**“Don’t be afraid!”** I heard someone say... I looked at my brother, but it wasn’t him. He was ducked down just like me! I looked around.

The voice didn’t wake the sheep, so maybe it was ***all in my head!*** A voice just ***in my ears only***, like a dream, y’know? Except that my brother heard it, too. ***A dream for two?*** I mean, that’s too weird!

**“Fear not! For, behold, I bring you good news. Glad tidings of great joy which shall be for all people. This very day, in David’s hometown** (in Bethlehem, you know... over *there* where the starlight is pointing) ***your Savior was born – the Christ, the Lord!*** The Messiah! You know, God’s Son? Look, guys, I can prove it to you this way: check out the stables! ***You’ll find***

*a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger...* Yeah, all wrapped up like a present and bedded down in a feed-trough, surrounded by animals. Look, you gotta believe me! And not just me, *them!*"

Suddenly there was, alongside that first solo voice, a whole host of messenger angels – I thought it was the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, a-rocking and a-rolling with rhythm & blues: "*Gloria, in excelsis Deo! Gloria! Alleluia! Christ the Lord is born!*"

When they finished, it was like the wind had been knocked out of us! We were breathing hard... and *the sheep hadn't even woken up!* The night was suddenly so still again, you could almost hear the grass grow. No one spoke. No one moved. Then my brother said: "*Well, maybe we ought'a go to Bethlehem, and see what has happened.*"

You would think, with the starlight overhead and the messenger angel's directions, that we'd've found the baby Jesus just like that (*snap!*)! But Bethlehem is a farm village, and you have *no idea* how *many* stables it's got! We didn't know which one was the right one, so we pretty near woke up the *whole town* as we poked from stable to stall, from one barn to another.

*Say, you got a baby in that manger?* You mean a baby-calf? *No, a kid!*  
A goat? *No, a baby!* Well, Mary's got a little lamb...

Us shepherds may not be noted for being the smartest folks around, but I'm proud to say that *we were chosen*, by God... and *we didn't quit* until that boy was *found!* There they were – Mary & Joseph, and the baby – just as we had heard tell. We were *so excited!* We told 'em what the angels had said about their baby, and we couldn't wait to tell the rest of the world!

It probably went *something* like that...!

The shepherds told Mary & Joseph what had been revealed to them about their son, Jesus: that he was "*a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*"

An historian would have to admit that their report (of what happened with the angels) is now *second-hand*, having been filtered through the shepherd's own worldview and interpreted into language. But they were so *hasty* about it, and they were so *happy* (so thrilled to be part of the *unfolding event*) that "*all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.*"

These humble, hard-working shepherds from the hills around Bethlehem (what we might call the "working poor") – these *disheveled examples* of Judea's lower class – were (for all intents & purposes) the first *Christian evangelists* in the Gospel of Luke!

They are the first ones to spread the "Good News" of Jesus' coming. The angels may have sung in heavenly tones "*gloria, in excelsis deo*" -- singing in *classical Latin* fit for a king (singing in the language of Caesar's Roman court!) -- but I doubt that would have counted for much among the shepherds.

You see, these *relayers* of the song (these interpreters of the angels) were a more *earthy* lot. If the Gospel message had been sung in *Latin*, the shepherds might've just scratched their hairy heads and gone back to sleep. Just another "herald" from the King!

There's something I really like about the fact that, from the very first eye-witness account, the Christmas story has been a blend of **heaven and earth**, a blend of actual experiences and **interpretations**, of angel voices relayed by **shepherds**... the lowest, most **common** folks.

The people who "heard tell" were **amazed**, says Luke, who recorded these memories in writing more than fifty years later. Over the course of those years, the shepherd's story had grown both in its **retelling** and in its **reinterpretation**. So, what we get in the Gospel is a much more mature and seasoned **telling** of whatever remarkable **raw events** actually happened that night.

If the proclamation of peace & goodwill, and the identification of Jesus as the Messiah Savior, really did have its **origin** in the glorious event of the **angelic choir**, its **second version** was the song of the shepherds -- a story which brought **amazement** to all who heard of it.

Hence, any subsequent spreading of that story (such as the folks who told it to Luke) would be, at best, **third-hand**! Anyone who has played the parlor game "tele-phone" knows how quickly a message can get garbled or changed as it is whispered around the circle.

So, how do we **know** things happened like this on that first Christmas? The angels weren't coming back. Shepherds came and went, and some of them might **lie**.

As a good reporter should, Luke cites his source: "**Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.**" And so, Mother Mary plays an important role in the history of salvation. Not only did she carry Jesus for nine months **under her heart** in her womb, she kept these memories alive long after her son had died.

The shepherds may have blown **in**, blown **off**, and then blown **out** again, bubbling over with spiritual excitement at the story they had to tell (a story they couldn't keep inside, for it was **real** News!), **Mary** stored the event in her memory, deep inside her. **Mary treasured the words** she heard from the shepherds and pondered them in her heart. While the "evangelicals" let loose all over town with their claims, **Mary kept all these things to herself**, holding them dear, deep within her heart, as a mother is prone to do.

**Telling** the latest news, even the good news of the Gospel, is **necessary** in order for it to **spread**. There is nothing wrong with that! Before newspapers, magazines, and printed posters -- even before written reports like Luke's Gospel -- people spread the word **orally**. It's human nature: **inquiring minds** want to know what's going on! **In-siders** like to leak information to show that they're connected (that they are "in the loop" if you know what I mean).

**Talk radio** is big business in our day; **gossip** is a favorite pastime of many; reporters rush to "scoop" a story before anyone else gets it. If you're like me, when it comes to the "news," we always feel like we're "**catching up**," as though we should have known **first-hand** what's happening: **eye-witness** news, breaking-news... see it "live!" Yes, the shepherds had a story to tell -- the "scoop" of the ages: **the birth of the long-awaited Messiah!** -- and they told it with **lively energy!**

And the shepherds were **not** the first ones to do so: remember the **angels!** Talk about ultimate "**insiders**," angels are privy to the plans of **God!**

If it weren't for those angel *insiders*, who just *couldn't keep quiet* about the *Advent* of the Messiah into the world, Jesus may well have "snuck in" under cover of darkness: born in a little town, to a couple of unknown nobodies. He might have had a normal childhood in Bethlehem (or in Nazareth) until he was *called into action by God* when he became an adult. Frankly, *God's plan* might have been for Jesus to be a "*sleeper cell*" living among the people (in deep cover, a "covert" operation) until activated by the Holy Spirit at his baptism and sent on his adult mission (as is the case in Mark's Gospel). Jesus Christ, a "*stealth*" *Messiah*...

*But no...* those angels *let the cat out of the bag* in Luke's Gospel, just like the wisemen from the East do in Matthew's Gospel *when they spill the beans* to King Herod, forcing the Holy Family to be on the run from the get go.

I understand the excitement of announcing good news the moment it happens, and I probably would have been just like them -- like the messenger angels singing in the night; like the exuberant *shepherd evangelists* who became the talk of the town. But there is a place for Mary, too. Quiet, reflective, processing the events *internally*...

The angels acted like insiders who wanted *glory* -- and they got it. *Glory in the highest, in excelsis deo!* The evangelical shepherds, too, make a name for themselves by *relaying* that "insider information" to the town. But Mary, who is in fact more *intimately connected* to God's Holy Spirit and to Jesus than were the angels or the shepherds, keeps his identity *secret*, holds him to her breast, treasures the memory, and *keeps it real*.

I'm glad the shepherds had their story to tell, I'm glad the angels came to them with Good News! And I'm grateful to Mary, who was in the know, first-hand, who kept these matters to herself until the time was right. You & I are (like all three of them) are *full of news, good news*. We are simply awaiting the chance to share it. May that occasion arise sometime *soon*.

God's Savior has come; may there be peace on earth.

Amen!