

Luke 2:15-20

Last week we started our study of Lk 2:8-20, by covering verses 8-14, in which the announcement of Christ's birth was made known to the shepherds.

As a quick summary, Lk 1 tells us the angel Gabriel appeared to Mary and noted she would be with child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Mt 1 tells us her betrothed husband, Joseph, later becomes aware of her pregnancy and is distraught about what to do. According to the Law he could have her stoned, but being a compassionate man, he decides to put her away. Gabriel then appears to Joseph and tells him to take her as his wife, to name the baby Jesus, and to abstain from intimate relations with her, until after the child is born.

Joseph and Mary live in Nazareth, a town in Galilee, about 90 miles north of Bethlehem, yet late in her pregnancy, they are compelled to walk to Bethlehem, the city of their ancestors, to register for the Roman census.

It is not an easy journey as the road traverses the steep hill country in the middle of Israel. Bethlehem is small, maybe 300-1000 people. Its economy is based on supplying sheep to the Levites based in Jerusalem just 6 miles away, for the temple sacrifice.

Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem but there is no room at the local inn, so they seek shelter in either a meager structure in town, or in one of the numerous limestone caves that surround it. They are alone. Mary goes into labor and is able to deliver her child. According to custom, she washes him, then wraps him in strips of cloth and lays him most likely in a stone trough lined with straw.

It is sometime between April and November as it is now warm enough for the shepherds to be out in the fields at night. To protect their flocks they place them in stone pens with one entrance, where the shepherd can lie across the opening to either protect them from anyone or anything coming in, or to make sure none escape going out.

We learned the shepherds were a lowly lot, poor, uneducated, humble, but no doubt, hardworking and responsible. By virtue of being with their flocks for extended periods, they were also in violation of the Mosaic law as they worked on the Sabbath, hence they were disdained and considered sinners.

So this is the scene as we approach Lk 2:9. The text says, *Suddenly*, and we read an angel appears to the shepherds in full heavenly splendor. He announces to them the birth of the Messiah, and then God opens a portal between heaven and earth whereby the shepherds are privileged to see the Divine announcement of our Lord's birth in heaven. There are innumerable angels all rejoicing at the news. It is a similar scene to what Daniel saw in Dan 7 and John saw in Rev 5, but in their case they witnessed Christ's coronation party rather than his birthday party.

At some point the heavenly portal closes, and we now pick up the narrative in verses 15-20 which now records the shepherd's response to what they have seen and experienced.

The Shepherd's Response, vs 15-20.

Vs 15a, When the angels had returned to heaven,

Verse 15a records the closing of the heavenly portal and marks the transition to the shepherd's response. First of all, we see the angels *returned to heaven*. It is if a door opened and the angelic host stepped into our world and mingled with the shepherds. They then returned, the door closes, and now the shepherds are processing what they just experienced.

Vs 15b, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

We know from verse 8 the shepherds were initially terrified after seeing just one angel, and now having seen the heavenly host they are able to gather their wits and now confer with one another and decide to go to Bethlehem to find the sign and see the child. In other words, they embrace the message, and hurry to get to town. Note their response to the Word of God is what anyone's response should be; they heard—they received revelation, they believed—or had faith, and then they acted upon it—they went. Rm 10:17, *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ*; and as Jms 1:22 says, *do not merely listen to the word, but do what it says*. My question is what did they do with the sheep? Did they leave one of their buddies with them all or did they just get too excited and ran off to town? Another mystery.

The Greek word, *rhma*, translated *thing*, is an interesting word. It means reality. Stepping back, we see God's word spoken, and the content of that word has reality. Literally the shepherds say, *let's see this reality that has happened!*

Vs 16, They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.

The word *hurried* means fast, quick, or pronto! The implication is they ran to the village. Are we as quick to respond and act upon the WOG? The fields are probably within a 2 mile radius of the town, so anywhere from a few minutes to a half an hour later the shepherds are wandering the dirt paths of Bethlehem. Again, we are not told how the child was found, but found he is. I wonder about the interaction between Joseph and these shepherds. Imagine a motley group, out of breath, who suddenly come upon the most private of family experiences- the birth of a child. The shepherds are complete strangers to Joseph and Mary. Did Joseph and Mary feel threatened? I wonder if Mary and Joseph had seen the Glory appear in the fields and had some inkling they would have visitors. We are not told. What was the conversation between Joseph and the Shepherds? Shepherds, "hey we were out in the field and angels appeared to us and told us to find a newborn in a manger, and when we did, we know from the angel we have found the Son of God. Your kid fits that description so we have come to worship him". Whatever the interaction, the shepherds are allowed to visit the Christ child. Now I also wonder about their subsequent conversation. How the shepherds explained what happened to them in the fields, and perhaps Mary and Joseph sharing with the shepherds how the angel had also visited them. As a grandfather, I know you can only be with babies for so long, so the shepherds end their visit and leave. But they don't keep their experience to themselves as verse 17 notes.

Vs 17, After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.

Remember the shepherd's response in verse 15. They received the message of Christ's birth, they believed it—or had faith in it, they then acted upon it, and now in verse 17 they witness to it. They have seen the reality of it for themselves and now they proceed to tell anyone they meet what has happened. The sudden appearance of an angel, the message of Israel's consolation, that their Messiah has come, the reality of finding the baby in their town --just down the street! They are so excited they are bubbling over with joy and wonderment. It is a contrast to my own sinful heart when the news of Christ's birth is overwhelmed with the cares, anxieties, and business of this season. A good word to us all.

Vs 18, All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished,

Verse 18 tells us the shepherds had an audience as no doubt they corralled anyone they encountered in the small village as they made their way back to their sheep. The verse says the people were *astonished*. The word means to marvel or be amazed. It is interesting that there is no mention that the people of the town ran off to see the baby. That is what I would have done. You saw angels and they said go find this baby—and you found him—I would want to go and find him too.

Vs 19, but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.

We are now given some insight into Mary's reaction to all this. No doubt Luke had interviewed her prior to writing his narrative. You can almost hear his question, Mary, what was your reaction to all this? The scripture says she *kept all these things in her heart*. What things?

- a. that she was maybe 14 years old and had been betrothed to Joseph.
- b. that an angel—the angel Gabriel had appeared to her as an angel and had appeared to these shepherds.
- c. that she became pregnant without knowing a man by the Spirit of the Living God.
- d. that she finds herself alone with her husband in the town of her ancestors, with a newborn.
- e. that there was no place to find a room.
- f. that she is in a cave or a lean too with a bunch of animals.
- g. that now a bunch of shepherds appear and share a story that confirms what Gabriel told her.
- h. that she is the mother of the Son of God.
- i. and that there he is, the creator of the World, my Savior, the Messiah of Israel, the hope of Nations, the Lamb of God who will take away our sin, there he is on my chest suckling at my breast.
- j. And now I am wondering what is to become of us, and of this child.
- k. These are things she is pondering, and she takes them deep into her heart and meditates, and as the scriptures says, she *thought about them often*.

Vs 20, The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

Verse 20 concludes the scene. The shepherds finally return to check on their flocks, and as they are doing so they praise the Lord. There is a good word here to all of us. These shepherds just experienced the highest emotional charge of their lives. They received revelation in the most glorious fashion imaginable. They had just seen the Christ child. They were spiritually on top of the world; and now they have to go back to work. This is the reality of our lives. Spiritual highs are nice –but they do not characterize our everyday experience. But I do know something that can; it says the shepherds were *glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen*. They were joyful! This is something I can experience, the joy of knowing Christ each day, finding Him in his word and as I work, thinking and pondering on all he has done.

Luke then throws in this little addition; *it was just as the angel had told them*. It is like hey I told you so. Luke is telling his readers; you can trust the Word of God. It is truth. It has reality. The story played out just as the angel had said it would.

Let me leave you with this:

- a. The shepherds received revelation –today you have been given the same.
- b. They received it, believed it, placed faith in the message they were given, then acted upon it; they went to Bethlehem, they found the Christ child, they shared their story with Mary and Joseph. Then they witnessed to it to all they encountered. A good pattern for us to follow-hear, believe, act upon, and witness.
- c. They returned to work with a different attitude.