

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Second Sunday after Epiphany, January 16, 2011

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Hymns: 84, 104:6, 103, 109, 364:5-7.

Lessons: 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Titus 3:4-7, Matthew 2:1-12.

Sermon Text: Luke 2:8-18.

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” We must assume that very few people in Bethlehem were aware of that baby lying in a manger; and only Mary and Joseph were in on the secret of his divine origin. That changes as God goes public with the Good News. The Good News of His salvation is not just for Zechariah and Elizabeth and Mary and Joseph. Jesus Christ is the Savior of all people.

The first audience to hear the Good News is a band of shepherds living out in the fields near Bethlehem. King David had been a shepherd out on those same fields. Now news of the birth of one greater than David is broadcast to shepherds. Today, let's look at those

“*SHEPHERDS ABIDING IN THE FIELD, KEEPING WATCH OVER THEIR FLOCK BY NIGHT.*”

- 1. What happened to them out in the fields.**
- 2. What they did after the angel appeared to them.**

“An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” This is the third appearance of angels in Luke's Gospel. Angels serve as messengers of God to announce and interpret events which would otherwise go unnoticed or be misunderstood. The shepherds are told that the baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem is no one other than the Savior, Christ the Lord!

This is also the first occurrence of the name Christ in Luke's Gospel. Christ is a Greek word which translates the Hebrew word Messiah meaning ‘anointed one’. Since it was customary to anoint kings in the Old Testament, the word Christ has reference to the fact that Jesus is descended from David and destined to rule forever. The birth of Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament promise that God would send a Messiah to save his people and also all mankind from their sins.

To the shepherds came the first message of Jesus' birth. The one who came to earth to be the Good Shepherd with the intention of gathering everyone into his fold is first preached to shepherds. While the shepherds were going about their work, watching and guarding their flocks, a miracle of the Lord took place in Bethlehem. It was not the great and mighty of the nation who were chosen as the recipients of the wonderful tidings of the nativity of Christ, just as it was not proud Jerusalem, but little Bethlehem that became the Lord's birthplace. To these, who were probably very simple people, like us, a supernatural revelation was suddenly given. An angel of the Lord came upon them, he stood above them. It was an unexpected apparition out of the quietness of the night, beneath the starry heavens. At the same time, the glory of the Lord lighted up the space around the shepherds, from the face and form of the angel himself, as a messenger from the splendor of the heavens. And they were terrified. They were thoroughly frightened. Sinful man cannot endure the light from the presence of the holy God. Besides, the suddenness of the angel's appearance caught them unawares; there was no gradual preparation of their senses for the startling appearance that burst upon them. But the message of the

angel was reassuring with all the beauty and love of the Christmas spirit. They should not remain under the domination of fear, for the angel gave them a message which is, in its substance, the entire Gospel. He announces to them a great joy, in order that their hearts may be filled with that joy. And these wonderful tidings will not be confined to them alone, but are intended, and will be proclaimed, to all people.

This good news of great joy is amplified by the sudden appearance of a multitude of the heavenly host singing praises to God. Their song is familiar to us from our Sunday worship where we continue to sing “The Gloria In Excelsis” – “Glory be to God on High!” The song of the angels has a double focus. In the highest heavens there is resounding glorious praise to God for his generous gift of the Savior. On earth there is peace for people on whom God’s favor rests.

“The glory of the Lord” that was shining around them was the glory of the Lord which the children of Israel had seen on Mount Sinai. It was the glory of the Lord which had previously dwelt in the tabernacle and the temple of Israel, and through which God had testified to his people of his gracious presence. God had now in a new way announced his dwelling with his people. Instead of Law, the glory of the Lord now announced the Gospel. But this still created great fear and trembling in the shepherds. This fear was removed by a joyful message. The angel announced to them great joy, which will be for all people. Today is born to you a Savior, who will redeem Israel from all her sins and from all her troubles. The Savior is Christ, the promised Messiah, who was born in the city, the town, of David

This King and son of David appeared in humble circumstances, and the ‘swaddling clothes’ and manger are the signs by which the shepherds were to recognize him.

A multitude of the heavenly host appears. This is God’s army of angels made visible. Only this one time, only at the birth of Christ an uncountable multitude of God’s angels became visible on Earth, because the child in the manger is the Lord all the angels serve. Glory to God in the highest! To God belongs the song of praise of the heavenly host, which will sound forth into all the world and into all eternity. God does the work for which no man and no angel can thank him. Great is the mystery of godliness, and this is how God revealed it to mankind. God was manifested in the flesh!

And on earth peace. In Christ, the God-man, heaven and earth, God and humanity are again united. God is reconciled to the sinners on Earth through the birth of Christ. The great work of redemption that Christ is to do, is guaranteed, and reckoned before God as if it were already completed.

Goodwill toward men. In Christ God is now the God of good will to mankind, being pleased from his heart again with the whole human race.

God had announced to the shepherds the great event which now had happened and the shepherds believed the message from heaven which urged them to see the child of whom the angel spoke and sang.

We must remember that the expression of these good tidings is so all-inclusive that it should not be applied only to the people of Israel, but to all people in all nations of the world.

The voice of the angel rises, in joyful ecstasy, to the climax of his announcement: For unto you is born this day a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, in the city of David. The angel used terms with which the shepherds were familiar from their youth. As believing Jews, believing descendants of Abraham, they had been looking forward to the coming of Messiah, the Savior.

Christ is the one for whose coming the Jews looked anxiously. He is the one in whom the real believers in Israel expected the Kingdom which should last throughout eternity.

The true humanity and the true divinity of the newborn babe is here clearly stated, even as the angel summarizes the prophecies of old, in calling Bethlehem the city of David. And Christ was born a true man, to purify and sanctify our sinful conception and birth. Luther wrote: "To help our poor, miserable birth, God has sent another birth, which had to be pure and unsullied, if it should cleanse our impure, sinful birth. That then is the birth of Christ the Lord, His only-begotten Son. And for that reason He did not want to – he could not – let Him be born from sinful flesh and blood; but He should be born of a virgin. That is what the angel says with these words: 'Unto you is born.' This implies: All that He is and has is yours, and He is your Savior; not only that you regard Him thus, but that He can deliver you from sin, death, devil, and all misfortune; yea, as great as He is, He is born for you, and is yours with all that He has." And, finally: Note the words "*unto you.*" "As though he would say: Until now you have been captives of the devil; he has plagued you with water, fire, pestilence, sword, and who can narrate all the misfortune?"

As suddenly as the angels had come so suddenly they left. The shepherds are once more alone with their flocks. But they can hardly go on with their watching over their sheep as if nothing had happened. They hurry off to Bethlehem to see this thing which the Lord had told them about.

The angel had given them a sign so that they could recognize the baby lying in a manger. What they searched for, they found. We don't know how long they stayed. We don't know what was said. Some have suggested that they gave gifts: perhaps food and some kind of woolen cloth to help warm the baby and his parents. But we do know that the shepherds did not keep the news to themselves. They spread the word. Their message was not so much about the baby in a manger; rather they shared the angel's message: a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. The people who heard the shepherds talk were amazed. They may have questioned whether perhaps these sheep herders were perhaps a bit unhinged or crazy. Yet the shepherds knew what they had heard and seen. And they likely also echoed the angels' praise with their own earthly songs as they returned to their waking flocks.

The shepherds tell the good news which astonished many people. Everything is dependent on the Word which tells us about Christ, and he who believes this Word from the heart, also speaks it and confesses Christ before men, leading a great many poor sinners to partake of the salvation in Christ.

The shepherds finally returned to their flocks on the field and continued there watching over the flocks. In their hearts however a new and blessed light was shining because what they had seen and heard in that sacred night they never forgot.

In their daily labors they did not cease to thank and praise God that they have now found their Savior, like all believing Christians. In their daily living and conduct they are no different than other people, for Christians are daily active in their chosen occupation and are not ashamed of even what is considered by many to be the lowest manual labor. And yet in this way Christians are different in their daily lives, in that they give praise to God for everything that happens.

But in their hearts there is a new light and life, rejoicing in the midst of their labors in God their Savior, who has rescued them from all weariness and misery of this earthly life and who has opened heaven for them to sing the grace of the Lord eternally.

What a marvelous example! These shepherds tell of the Savior. We find it so easy to take it all for granted. After all, haven't we had the good news of salvation since we were children? But not everyone knows that message of the Gospel. May God give us the courage and excitement to share the message to those we contact every day! Amen.