

- This is the third week – the middle week – of our Christmas Re-imagined series.
  - This series is a look into what might have happened if those that experienced the events back then had responded differently. A blend of “what if” and looking at what actually happened.
  - There was a children’s book series written some years ago called “A Series of Unfortunate Events” that detailed the unfortunate lives of the Baudelaire children. I think that if the story of Jesus arrival was written about today, it would be called, “A Series of Unlikely Events.”
  - Nowhere is this more true of than the people we are looking at today.
  - Ordinary (maybe we would even call them less than ordinary) people whose lives were interrupted in a strange way that started with fear but ended in joy.
  - “What if the shepherds responded according to their fear?”
  - Some deal with fear occasionally and for some it is a daily thing.
- On the face of it, it was a pretty strange fear. But we all have fears. Some are weird fears. Some are common to many people. The 10 most common fears when I looked it up (in no particular order) are:
    - 1. Flying
    - 2. Public Speaking
    - 3. Heights
    - 4. The Dark
    - 5. Intimacy
    - 6. Death
    - 7. Failure
    - 8. Rejection
    - 9. Spiders
    - 10. Commitment
- Many people live in a perpetual state of fear.
  - We call it other things. Anxiety. Worry. We medicate it.
  - What fear does is it distorts how we see things. What we feel. Our perspective. **FEAR DISTORTS.**
  - It’s like looking through water – you think you see clearly, but depth perception, angles, and so on aren’t quite right. We think it’s right there and then we go to pick it up and miss it.
  - If the shepherds had responded according to their fear, it would have been because their fear distorted their view they would have missed out.
- Here is how the historian Luke described Jesus’ birth and the encounter of the shepherds. *4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*
    - I can picture God in heaven being ecstatic about the birth of his son.
    - It was a once in the history of the world event. It was incredible news.
    - God wanted to let people know the news. He was bursting at the seams.
    - Many dads give out cigars or chocolates when their kids are born. Today, we call, text or post on Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat or Twitter. We want everyone to share in the good news of the birth of our new child.

- God wanted to announce this amazing event. He wanted to do it “God-style.”
- He could have announced it in any way to anyone. He could have told it to kings and emperors. To religious leaders and social elites. To thousands of people gathered in the cities. And so God, ready to celebrate this amazing event, decided to tell . . . shepherds on a hillside in the middle of the night.
- Theology 201: God is unpredictable. He often does things that we would never expect and in ways we would never look for.

*8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.*

- Put yourself in the situation.
- It is in the night. (The word for keeping watch was the term used when describing guarding or watching over something in the middle hours of the night.)
- Things are quiet. The sheep are probably mostly quiet and sleeping but the shepherds were wide awake. They had to be alert for anything that might threaten the sheep at night.
- This was the routine every night. Night after night. Unless something attacked the sheep, nothing interesting ever happened to a shepherd.
- All of a sudden there was an angel. What seems to be different from other angel appearances is that the “glory of the Lord shone.” When Moses saw God’s glory his face glowed so much that he had to cover his face so as to not terrify the people. When Isaiah saw the glory of God, he collapsed onto his face, completely undone by it. When Peter later saw God’s glory in Jesus, he kind of lost it and spoke like someone who did not have a clue. God’s glory has a way of doing this.
- When the angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and the glory of the Lord was evident . . . they . . . were . . . terrified.
- They weren’t startled. They weren’t a little fearful. In the original language, it is literally translated, “they feared a great fear.” This was no small thing.
- What drives their fear? The surprise of the appearance of an angel interrupting their quiet lives? Was it the “Glory of the Lord”? Was it connected to how society saw and treated them which ultimately affected how they saw themselves and God?
- Shepherds were historically considered an honorable profession. Adam and Eve’s child Abel was a shepherd. Jacob was a shepherd. Moses heard God’s call to rescue the Israelites as a shepherd. David was compared to a shepherd of his people. Prophets and kings and leaders were called to “shepherd.”
- By the time of Jesus birth, shepherds were part of the marginalized, forgotten people.
- They were social outcasts. They didn’t fit in with the culture.
- Generally, they were uneducated, unsophisticated and had a smelly job.
- Being a shepherd was a dead-end job. There was no hope for advancement. They had little chance of doing anything different the rest of their life.
- You wouldn’t want your daughter to marry one.
- They were always traveling and moving with their sheep so they didn’t have much of a home life.
- They were known to be brash and bold, with foul mouths and ready to fight quickly. Living out in the fields away from society made them unappealing to most people.
- They were not trusted. Shepherds had the reputation, fairly or not, as being thieves. They couldn’t be trusted. They were a little shady.
- They were not permitted to give testimony in legal proceedings.

- Shepherds made up the lowest class of people, coming in just ahead of the lepers. In the Talmud, which is a collection of interpretations and insight from the rabbis, we read these words: “No help is to be given to heathen or shepherds.”
- They were religiously unclean.
- Because of a shepherd’s work schedule and constant migration, they could not attend regular services and perform the necessary rituals of purification. Thus, Shepherds were religiously unclean. They were not allowed to go into the temple. When they did show their faces at the temple, they got ‘those looks.’
- A person in right standing with God was not to touch a shepherd, lest they too become unclean.

- The product of their work was very important for both religion and the economy, but in the big scheme of things, they themselves were not considered very important.
- I think it is fair to say that the shepherds would not have been expecting this event.
- When the angel appeared to them, of course they were afraid (something supernatural like this would be frightening), but consider also the teaching that these men were indoctrinated with – they were unclean, under judgment, at enmity with God.

*10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

- Like every other person in this story that we are looking at, they were faced with a choice after their encounter. What happened if their actions were based on their fear?
- What if they were fearful of making mistakes?
- What if despite all the angel proceeded to tell them, they decided to wait for further corroboration before making any moves?
- What if their terror of the angels overwhelmed them such that they were unwilling to do anything?
- What if they responded with fear of what others might say or think?
- What if they were fearful about what people would say if they walked into Bethlehem in the middle of the night? Their reputation was already not that great.
- What if they were fearful about going to the wrong place? Of making a fool of themselves?
- What if a fear of problems and consequences dominated their thinking?
- What if they were worried about their sheep wandering off while they went to see this Messiah? Their livelihood was at stake.
- If the shepherds had acted based on these fears, they would have missed out on something amazing.
- **FEAR DISTORTS.**

## **I. We fear when our identity is based on the wrong thing.**

- Consider, the angel appearing to the shepherds was not a random choice.
- They did not happen to be on the very spot where God was going to announce his son’s birth.
- He chose them! God handpicked them. Despite all logic.
- It is amazing that heaven would put on such a massive display of its resources for a small handful of nobodies.
- I believe God did it for a multitude of reasons.

- One, Jesus was the long-awaited shepherd. He even identified himself as the Good Shepherd later in his life.
- He was also the long-awaited lamb. The sacrifice that would be for our salvation.
- There was tremendous symbolism.
- But I believe that he also chose the shepherds because God delights in using the despised, the weak and the lowly, to accomplish his plans.
- There is something tremendously affirming for the shepherds knowing that God picked them.
- They might have wondered why, but I am sure it emboldened them.
- We so often live in fear because we spend our time worried about what others think, what they will say or what my reputation will look like.
- I'm just . . . I can't do that.
- I'm not talented . . . that's not for me.
- If I do that, then people will . . .
- **FEAR DISTORTS.** When we begin to embrace how God sees us. When we know we are chosen. When we realize God's opinion matters more than others. It is then that we begin to find freedom from fear.

## II. We fear when we doubt God's motives.

- We often miss the bigger picture of God when we fear.
- Way too often we fear acting on what God wants us to because somewhere in the back of our minds we don't believe that God has our best in mind. We doubt that God has a plan that is actually good. We see the immediate potential consequence and stop without trusting in the good news.
- Consider the message to the shepherds. God's interruption in the lives of the shepherd was not to make them scared. It was not to intimidate. It was not to cause them to become ridiculed by others. It was not to make them feel lousy about themselves.
- "This is good news, not just for you but for all people." The best news.
- "A Savior is born." All the hopes of the Jewish people have been brought to fruition. My plans are being fulfilled now.
- "This will be a sign to you." He was going to direct them to see it. To experience what God had just said.
- "Glory to God and peace to you." God is glorified. You can have God's peace and favor.
- This appearance of God to the shepherds was good news!
- Whenever we doubt God's motives, it can lead to fear.
- There have been times that God asked me to do something. As I thought about it, I considered all the bad things that could happen. It would overwhelm me and I sometimes ended paralyzed with fear and not doing or only partially doing what God wanted.
- When I begin to think this way, I am not understanding God's motives. We do not have to fear God's work. We don't have to fear his message. Even when the action is difficult, his motive is never to lead us wrongly. **FEAR DISTORTS.**

## III. Fear can keep us from experiencing God.

### A. Fear can prevent action.

- What were the shepherds to do with what they had just heard?  
*15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."*

- There was not a debate about whether it was true or not.
  - There was not even a debate about whether they should go and see.
- 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.*
- They moved on it. They hurried. They acted immediately on this good news.
  - They became the first guests to this miraculous birth. They got to see the Messiah!
  - How often have I not volunteered, not prayed for someone, not taken a risk, not followed God's promptings because of fear?

### **B. Fear can keep us from advancing God's kingdom.**

*17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.*

- The shepherds confirmed what the angel said to them, and then they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.
- People were amazed at the message. Probably because of the message and who it came through. Shepherds don't normally know this kind of information.
- People heard the message. God was glorified.
- Too often I have let fear keep me from opening my mouth, my wallet or even my home. I wonder what God wanted to do that never happened because of my fear.

### **C. Fear can rob us of joy.**

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

- Their lives had changed.
- Permanently? Maybe. Short term? Absolutely.
- Whether they were devout God followers before, they are now. Their focus is completely on the amazing events. On the news. On the child. On the whole package.
- Their hearts were transported to a place of joy. Their focus shifted towards God and what he had done and worry, anxiety, boredom were exchanged for wonder and amazement and delight.
- Most of you know this. When God leads us and we respond, it changes us.
- Example: Missions trip from those who never wanted to go. They experienced God. Joy.

### **FEAR DISTORTS.**

- Mrs. Monroe lived in Maryland. She was a mother of 8 children. One afternoon she came home from the grocery store and walked into her home. Everything was the same as always, except it was a little too quiet.
- She looked into the living room and five of her darling children were sitting around in a circle, exceedingly quiet, doing something in the middle of the circle. She put down the sack of groceries and walked over closely and saw they were playing with five of the cutest skunks you can imagine.
- She was instantly terrified and yelled, "Run, children, run!" Each child grabbed a skunk and ran in five different directions. She was beside herself and screamed louder. It so scared the children that each one squeezed his skunk. And as we all know, skunks don't like to be squeezed.
- So often our fear is unnecessary. It creates the very problems we are trying to escape.
- The next time you are anxious, worried and fearful, ask yourself: What am I believing about myself in this situation? (What I need, what I want, what is making me grab for control) What am I believing about God? (What he thinks of me, what he wants, his view of me, his character)

- We are children of God, loved and adored, secure as image bearers of God.
- We have a heavenly Father whose motives are never messed up, and only for our good.
- If we live from this confidence, we will be able to take action, take risks and when we do, we will change God's kingdom and live with increasing joy.