

The First to Hear the News

Luke 2:8-20

John Breon

What a year this has been! We don't have to go over all the ways this year has been strange and difficult. But who would have imagined a year ago when we were celebrating Christmas what our lives would be like today?

Still we celebrate today that in Jesus God came into the real world where we live. Jesus was born at a particular time in history, but he came into the world we all share. In those days, the Roman Emperor Augustus ruled the world. When he ordered a census, probably for tax purposes, everybody went to register. Joseph and his betrothed and pregnant wife Mary went to Bethlehem. That's where Joseph's family was from. And Jesus was born while they were in Bethlehem.

Their nation was under the rule of an oppressive foreign power. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, a little Galilean village that was mocked and looked down upon. Because of crowding in Bethlehem, they had to bed down in a stable and use the animals' feed trough for a cradle. Later, when they take Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to dedicate him according to the Jewish Law, they offer the sacrifice allowed for poor people.

Heaven and earth meet in Bethlehem. God and humanity come together in a manger. God humbles himself and gets down into the lowest places with us.

The first people outside the stable to hear the news that Jesus was born are a group of shepherds. God's glory was revealed to shepherds. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been shepherds. King David was a shepherd. The appearance of angels and glory to shepherds ties the newborn Jesus to those great shepherd leaders from Israel's history.

But at the same time, those shepherds in the field near Bethlehem were outsiders. They were most likely peasants. They were at the bottom of the social scale, the scale of power and privilege. God's glory that was usually associated with the temple is now manifest on a farm (Joel Green,

Luke: New International Commentary on the New Testament). The great news comes to an unlikely group of people.

So the shepherds are outsiders because the society they live in holds them in low regard. They're also outsiders because they're not members of Jesus' family. Normally, in the Bible, announcements of miraculous births come to parents. Here the announcement comes to some shepherds. Mary and Joseph learn about the angels' announcement and song from the shepherds, most likely.

Angels constantly dwell in the glory of God. When they appear in the field outside Bethlehem, the glory of the Lord shines all around. So they show the brightness, the light, of God's appearing. They also tell about God's glory in terms of praise and honor. And the angels' announcement and song come not to kings or governors in palaces, not even to Mary and Joseph, but to shepherds. They were the first to hear the news of the birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

Let's put ourselves in the scene. Imagine you're one of the shepherds in the field. Dozens of sheep are bedded down for the night. The fire has burned to embers. Shepherds take turns sleeping and keeping watch for predators. Maybe you're lying down looking at the stars. Suddenly there's a brilliant light shining all around. It's not a soft, warm light. It's blazing and revealing. It's the glory of the Lord, the light of God's presence. And it's terrifying. In the light that's shining all around, there's a figure speaking to us. An angel of the Lord says, "Don't be afraid." Though the blazing glory of God can be frightening, we don't have to fear. Whatever events or struggles or illness or loss might frighten us, we don't have to be afraid. It's o.k. to be scared. It's o.k. to be sad. It's o.k. to be frustrated. But fear, sadness, and frustration aren't the last word. "Fear not." "Good news." "Great joy." Savior, Messiah, Lord. Jesus is the last word.

Don't be afraid because good news is here. In the Roman world the word for "good news" was a technical term for announcements of victory, the birth of an emperor, or some other momentous event. The Holy Spirit inspired the early Christians to take over that term and turn it into the announcement of what God does in Jesus.

This is good news of great joy for all people: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Savior, Messiah, Lord. Those words wrap up all our dreams and longings. God is acting to save, to deliver, to lead his people. God is coming near. The angel gives a sign to look for: "You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." That's not where babies belong! And what does this baby have to do with the glorious appearing of God? Why is this baby's birth good news? Why is the angel telling us this?

Suddenly the angel isn't alone. The sky seems filled with angels declaring God's glory and announcing peace. Luke says they were *saying*, "Glory to God," but we usually imagine them singing it—in Latin: *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. "Glory to God in the highest." The angels are reflecting God's glory back to God. This is glory as praise. God is glorious and by faith we can see God's glory as God is present with us. We can also give glory to God, or reflect God's glory, when we praise God.

Glory, praise to God in the highest. God is high and exalted. But God also comes near. God dwells with the lowly. And coming to be where we are, God brings peace. "And on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." God's favor, God's grace, and peace to you through Jesus the Messiah.

Then it's like a curtain closes. It's dark again and we can't see the shining glory and the countless angels praising God. But their song of praise keeps ringing in our ears and in our hearts. Shepherds look at each other, stunned. Then they say, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

Now shepherds hurry into town and start looking for a manger. We find the place where Mary and Joseph are with their baby who's in a feed trough. And looking at this newborn, wrapped in cloths and lying on the straw, we know this is the One we've been told about. The One we've been looking for all our lives. This little baby is the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The glory of the Lord is wrapped up in this child. God has come near. God is present.

Seeing Jesus and knowing him, we immediately start telling other people about him. Good news is for telling! Shepherds spread the word of

what the angel told them about this child. People are amazed. That's a natural reaction, but it's not yet faith. And Mary treasures all these things she hears and ponders them in her heart. Decades later, Luke probably talked with Mary and heard this story from her.

Shepherds go back to work, now "glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told." The good news was true. It really happened.

These shepherds go and see what the Lord made known to them. Then they go and make known what they have seen and heard. All the while they're glorifying God. They're giving praise and honor to God because they've seen God's glory made known. The good news is still true. The results of Christ's coming still happen to us and among us.

Michael Card describes the shepherds' experience in a song:

How do you capture the accents of angels?
How do you put words to the taste of their light?
You cannot describe how their words burn right through you
How you became dizzy with heart-pounding fright

In the midst of your fear how they sang you a song
To the glory of God Most High
How all of the sudden, that when they departed
They left a hole in the sky

How do you worship a king in a cattle trough?
When you cannot bow any lower than He?
And what kind of gift to give Someone with nothing?
In humiliating humility

Wrapped up in rags, what a heart-breaking sign
Yet on His sweet face what delight
The darkness that prowls here cannot comprehend
This impossibly bright point of light

So everyone listened in awe and amazement
To all we'd been told 'bout this beautiful boy
But Mary His mother, she wordlessly wondered
And pondered her treasure of joy

Who could conceive how the Savior was born
In a place only fit for the cattle to feed
His poverty made Him our perfect Provision
The one hope for our every need

(Michael Card, "A King in a Cattle Trough." *The Nazarene: Forty Devotions on the Lyrical Life of Jesus* 88-89)

The good news is for you. Jesus was born for you. He lived and died for you. He was raised from the dead for you. If you receive him, he comes to you now in the Holy Spirit. He's there for you at the end of this life. He will come again for you, to raise you up to life in God's new heaven and new earth.

What do we do with news like this? We believe it. We let it change our lives. We become messengers who share the good news with others.