

Christmas Eve, 2009
The Nativity of our Lord
Luke 2

Why the Shepherds?

Tonight is a **special** night.

It's the night we celebrate the birth of God among us - as one of us.
We eat **special** foods and wear **special** clothes
and our parties include rejoicing, thanksgiving, and something else....
Umm.. oh yeah, presents!

Tonight we hear again about the special birth of God's son Jesus, and the **special** way angels announced his birth to some very **special** people... but wait a minute.

What's so special about Shepherds? Why did they hear "Glory to God" sung from the heavens? What made them worthy of being the first ones to see the long awaited Savior? The short answer is "Nothing." There is absolutely nothing special about the shepherds but - **their part** in this story might just be **the most "special" thing of all.**

You see, first-century shepherds were not as innocent as the children who play them in Christmas pageants. People accused shepherds of stealing sheep or of letting the flock graze on land that belonged to someone else. They lived out in the open country and were often considered untrustworthy.

Because they worked on the Sabbath and occasionally had to touch dead animals, they were "unclean" and could not worship in the temple, even though many of their sheep would be there as sacrificial offerings for sin. Shepherds were people a bit rough around the edges and looked down upon as someone who couldn't manage some kind of better status in life.

But there is something about the angels announcement,

"To you... To you shepherds, to YOU is born this day a savior."

It is something that makes me think this child is about to somehow change their lives. To people like shepherds, who are outcast, unclean, ridiculed, tragic, sinful, coarse, lonely people - **to you** has this savior been born. On this day... right now!

Shepherds are **special** characters in this story because **in them we can see ourselves.** The birth of Jesus is a flesh and blood sign that God really is "for us" and not against us. We who are dishonest, unclean, coarse, lonely, untrustworthy sinners, **to us** God gives the ultimate of gifts: a release from our fears and a power to transform who we are!

The encounter of angelic beings with sinful, scruffy, smelly shepherds shouts to all of us that we can let go of our fears about God. God is GOOD and loves us even when we are not. That is a radical idea my friends but the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus abolishes religion as an attempt to appease an angry god. Instead Jesus takes our

sins upon himself and saves us from every evil thought, word, and deed that would separate us from God's love. Having done what we cannot do, the Spirit of Life sets out to **change** us from the inside out.

The angels tell the shepherds, "Do not be afraid" for the news we bring is Good News! The light of forgiveness, healing, and hope has entered into the world and there is no darkness, none whatsoever, that can overcome it.

What's so special about shepherds? Nothing... and yet everything. Shepherds are ordinary, broken people like you and me and yet their encounter with God's good news transforms their fears and emboldens them to go and see the amazing things God is doing. I can only imagine that they were never the same because of it and my prayer for each of you tonight is that you will not be the same either.

I pray that each of you will be filled with the joy of God's love
so that you can be a light in the darkness for someone else.
I pray that you will know how very **special** God sees you
because God is asking each of us to live bigger
and love deeper than we have ever thought possible.
I pray that when this light burns within you,
fear and grief and resentment will be no more
and then you will be free.

Free to be like the shepherds.
Free to let go of your fears and go and see what God is up to...
Free to tell, tell, tell EVERYONE about this good news of great joy for ALL people.

Amen.