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Christmas Eve

December 24, 2013

“The Joy of Salvation”

(Luke 2:8-18)

Rev. David K. Groth

“8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!” 15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. “

Collect of the Day

O God, You make us glad with the yearly remembrance of the birth of Your only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ. Grant that as we joyfully receive Him as our Redeemer, we may with sure confidence behold Him when He comes to be our Judge; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

It's a rough and tumble lot keeping watch over their flocks at night perhaps a few miles from the village of Bethlehem. There is nothing in the text to suggest these shepherds were devout men whose faith was rewarded by this extraordinary appearance of angels. In fact, shepherds, because of their occupation, were, we might say, rarely in church. Religion was not their strong suit; they had to be out there with the sheep. Shepherds also had the reputation for not carefully distinguishing between what belongs to them and what belongs to others. When there were shepherds around, other men tucked their moneybags back under the folds of their clothing, and pulled their wives and daughters a little closer.

Shepherds were always held in suspicion. Today you sometimes suspect car mechanics of charging for repairs you didn't need or repairs they didn't make. Some of you may be mechanics and know how hard you have to work to gain the trust of your clients. And when we find an honest mechanic, we offer our daughters in marriage, and do everything we can to keep that relationship on good terms. Similarly, until they proved themselves, shepherds were always held in suspicion.

But they are among the first of many lowly and sinful people with whom the Lord Jesus would spend so much of his ministry: the tax collectors, prostitutes, and other sinners. These are the ones who would swell the crowds gathering around Jesus to hear him preach and teach. Often the upright and righteous folk didn't have much use for Jesus, and Jesus would never force his grace

or salvation on anyone. Instead, he said, “It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous [those who think themselves righteous], but the sinners” (5:31-32).

So the angels are sent to the shepherds, and they are scared stiff. Who wouldn't be? The glory of the Lord shone around them, and that's not usually Good News for sinners. They knew what sort of men they were and were not expecting any religious merit badges from God. And they knew they were at God's mercy. They would have to take from God whatever God doled out.

What a relief, then, to hear the angel of the Lord say, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” That message of the angel would change these shepherds. They would never again be the same after hearing it.

There are many Christmas movies around which tell how people are dramatically changed at this time of the year. There are movies of misers who become generous, workaholics who finally realize the importance of family, or industrialists who come to understand that people are more important than product. These are mere echoes of the change these shepherds experienced. But what movies today leave out is what was most important to the shepherds then: the incarnation of a Savior. That's what changes lives, not lights and tinsel and the cashiers saying “happy holidays”. That won't do it. But the news that the Savior was born for you . . . that changes lives.

As soon as the angels depart the shepherds say to one another, “Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.” Notice, they did not say “Let's go to Bethlehem to see *if* this thing has happened.” They went with confidence that what the angels had told them was true. They believed the Good News.

Now, perhaps you are thinking, “Of course they believed. If a host of angels delivered a message to me, I would believe it too.” But the fact is what matters is the Word of God, not really who delivers it. Think of it. The

vast majority of Christians, after all, never had the benefit of angels announcing anything to them. For most of us the Word of God was communicated through parents, preachers, teachers, or the stumbling witness of another Christian who cared enough to take a risk. In any case it is God's Word that makes the light of Christ to shine in the darkness of our hearts. "Faith comes by hearing" Paul writes (Rom. 10:17).

Notice the shepherds went to Bethlehem *in haste*. They recognized this news is too wonderful and too important to put on hold. They found where Jesus was and then out came the excited report to Joseph and Mary and anyone else who would listen. They "made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child." That's surely an understatement. I picture them stumbling over themselves to get the word out. They're animated and interrupting each other, searching for words big enough to describe the angels. Vs. 18, "And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them."

Who knows how long the shepherds stayed, but their witness surely did not end there. Verse 20, "And the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." That suggests they went out and told others of the birth of the Christ child. This makes them possibly the first evangelists: having heard the good news, they shared it with others.

Notice it never occurred to the shepherds to keep this Good News to themselves. For years the world has been telling us it's ok if you have religion, but you really ought to keep it to yourselves. And we've bought into that, haven't we? We think that's appropriately humble and the respectful thing to do in a pluralistic society. But that thought never even occurred to these shepherds. Having received the revelation of the Messiah's birth, they became willing witnesses. They couldn't help themselves.

"They returned glorifying and praising God." There is a thing the Bible calls *the joy of salvation* and that's what was filling the hearts of these men. It's the joy of knowing that we're not just free floating aimlessly and accidentally through life, but that there is one who knows us because he created us. There is one who watches over us and cares for us because he sustains

his creation. There is one who loves us and has mercy on us, not because we're so loveable but because that's who he is. He is good and merciful, loving and gracious. He is guiding us along the way. That knowledge, that joy was filling the hearts of these shepherds. Same old sheep in the fields, but not the same old shepherds.

The Bible never says anything more about these men. Did they keep in touch with Joseph and Mary? We have no idea. In that day it would not have been easy. Were they still alive to witness some of his miracles thirty years later, or to hear him preach and teach? Did they learn of his crucifixion, and if so, what did they make of that? Did they hear also of his resurrection? We have no idea. But what we do know is they would never forget what the angel announced to them. How could they? "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for **all** the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." They would never forget it. It changed who they were; they would never again be the same. And that message to the shepherds was meant for you and me too. It's in that little word "all". Good news of great joy for **all** the people (we're part of that "all"!). So for you was born that day a Savior.

That's what we needed the most: not just another teacher or preacher or philosopher. Not just another political activist defending the rights of the poor and needy. Not just another religious zealot. No, for to you is born this day a Savior.

Savior from what? Earlier, the Lord told Joseph in a dream, "Name him Jesus" (Jesus means Yahweh saves) . . . "Name him Jesus" the Lord said, "for he will save his people from their sins." That's what we needed the most. We may think what we most need right now is a big old vacation, or relief from congestive heart failure or debt forgiveness for all those Christmas

gifts under the tree. Jesus cares about all those things too because he loves us, but they are not why he suffered himself to be born in Bethlehem. He did not come down to spell us a temporary relief. He came down to save us from our sin and win for us everlasting life. He came down to die on the cross as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He came down to take on the old evil foe and to put him in his place. He came down to assure us we've not been abandoned by the one who put us on this earth. Quite the opposite. An almighty and merciful God has joined himself to our plight so that we too would know the joy of salvation.

Never again will the Christmas story repeat itself. Nothing like Luke 2 will ever happen again. But in another way, this Christmas account is repeated every day as men and women of every stripe, class, nation, and language hear the good news of a Savior in Jesus Christ, and receive the Savior into their hearts by faith, and then share the Savior with those they know and love.

So, do as the shepherds did. Let this news change you. Make this the first thing and the main thing. Let it infuse you with the joy of salvation. And then share the news as the shepherds did so gratefully and gladly. Amen.

