

Shepherds

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



Prayer of Illumination

Loving God, fountain of every blessing,
Open to us your life-giving word,
and fill us with your Holy Spirit
so that living water may flow out of our hearts—
a spring of hope for our thirsty souls and our thirsty world;
through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Scripture: Luke 2:8, 15-18, 20 (NRSVue)

⁸ Now in that same region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard

it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, ¹⁹ and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – “Shepherds”

We’re all pretty familiar with the Christmas story, *right?* We know the scene:

The young hipster couple is laughing all the way on their horse-drawn sleigh ride to Bethlehem. Joseph’s looking well-rested and confident at the reins. “Don’t worry honey—I’m sure the Holiday Inn down the street will have room for us there.” Mary’s wearing starched, wrinkle-free attire, with a light blue sash. Her contractions miraculously aren’t noticeable. The epidural was doing its work. The shepherds arrive fashionably late. They’re freshly showered and wearing their still-warm-out-the-dryer garments. Their new Birkenstock sandals squeak with each step. Jesus’ delivery is a breeze. Mary gives birth after she sneezes. Jesus arrives in the world pre-washed and peacefully sleeping like a baby.

We like to sanitize & romanticize the Christmas story—making it cozy, with soft track lighting behind the manger to highlight baby Jesus. But we know that’s not the real story, because that’s not real life.



Mary isn’t officially married to Joseph when she’s pregnant. They travel 80+ miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem across Samaritan and Judean hills. There was no room in the inn. Mary doesn’t have a hospital or even a home delivery—she gave birth on the first floor of a barn, maybe a cave. She was away from her family.

Jesus is placed not in a cradle in his new nursery but an animal feeding trough. The stable stinks to high heaven and is noisy with other animals.

And who were the first people to announce salvation has come to earth? *Dignitaries? The in-laws? Fox or CNN news? Social media influencers?* Shepherds. Lower-class, looked-down upon shepherds who had BO-smelling sheep and smoky campfires. Things are a bit messy in the Christmas story—like real life. We read the shepherds were living in the fields. The open fields were their home. While on the night shift, the angels that we looked at last week appeared in glory. What were the shepherds doing when they received the angelic visitation? *They were doing what shepherds do.*

God's plan was revealed . . . when they were just being themselves, doing their regular routine. The shepherds remind us we can encounter God in the mundane. We can be attuned to God in the regular flow of life—we've just got to be aware, attentive.

When God was ready to give Moses the Torah on Mt. Sinai, God said to Moses in Exodus: "Come up to Me on the mountain and *be there*."

A rabbi once asked, "If God told Moses to come up to the mountain, why did God also say "be there"? Where else would he be? The rabbi reasoned, "God wanted Moses to be not only physically present, but to pay close attention. To be fully present to God.

Judaism has some wonderful practices to help the people of God to pay attention—to be present to God. It's called *berachat* or blessing. It goes like this:

"Holy One of blessing, your presence fills creation."

[Then you fill in the blank according to where you are or the situation you're in:]

"*You're the God who brings forth bread from the earth.*"

"*You're the One who removes sleep from eyes and slumber from my eyelids.*"

"*You're the One who spreads the shelter of peace over us.*"

Each time the blessing is offered, it's a way of saying:

"*Pay attention, God is doing something awesome all around us.*"

The shepherds teach us to notice, to pay attention to God—even in the small stuff of life. Like seeing the glory of God in a little Child. The shepherds also remind us of another important message. *Christ was given to the whole world—but especially to the lowly*. This theme is found throughout the Scriptures.

Jesus's Mission Statement in Isaiah 61:

"The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to comfort all who mourn."

Or the song of Mary in the *Magnificat* found in Luke 1:

"He has lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things."

Or in Luke 14:13 where Jesus tells us:

"When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.
And you will be blessed."

The shepherds remind us who God remembers. One of the titles of Jesus is "Friend of Sinners." I want to be friends with Jesus' friends. And let's not forget—Jesus is friends with us. He's willing to be identified with us!

The shepherds were considered ceremonially unclean in the Jewish culture of the day. They were kept out of the temple. They were a rough and tumble bunch—probably had a little pinch between their cheek and gum. But God saw the shepherds differently. God gave the shepherds the honor of sharing with Joseph and Mary the message of the angels:

“A King, a Son has been born for us. Salvation has come!”

Shepherds were the first ones to share the good news of great joy. Christ’s first evangelists. It’s interesting to note that shepherds in history have witnessed other famous births: *Oedipus, Paris, and Romulus*. They all had shepherds attending their birth.

Our calling is to honor who God honors—to see Christ in others that might be a little rough around the edges or run in different circles than we normally do. We’ll be surprised at what we learn from them. There are famous shepherds in Scripture: Rachel, Moses, and most notably King David. In fact, shepherds teach us about Jesus’ origins. One of Jesus’ titles is the Son of David, meaning he’s in the line of the Shepherd-King David from Bethlehem.

Hundreds of years earlier before Christ’s birth, the Lord led the Prophet Samuel to the sons of Jesse to anoint the next king of Israel after King Saul. Samuel passed over all seven of Jesse’s sons. “*Are there any more sons that you have Jesse?*” “*Humm . . . one, two, three, four, five, six, seven . . . Ah, yes. I forgot! There’s one more son of mine—the youngest. Little David, he’s out in the fields—tending the sheep.*” Samuel said, “*Send and bring him.*”

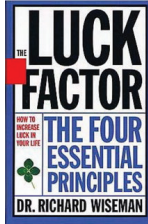
The Lord spoke to Samuel when the young shepherd boy appeared before him. “Rise and anoint David, for this is the one. The Lord does not see as mortals see—the Lord looks on the heart.” After Samuel took a horn of oil and poured it upon his head, the Spirit of the Lord fell upon David. Later in David’s reign, God promised David, the Shepherd-King, that the Messiah would come from his lineage. Our passage is the fulfillment of this ancient prophecy.



Bethlehem shepherds were also responsible for raising and taking care of the unblemished lambs that would later be sacrificed in the Temple in worship. In the same way, these shepherds were present for the birth of Jesus, the Lamb of God, whose perfect sacrifice thirty-three years later would take away the sin of the world.

Finally, the Shepherds teach us how to act upon God’s words. We read that they paid attention to God’s message revealed by the angels. They had conversations with one another about their experiences. They explored, tested, and confirmed the information given to them. They tested the waters. And they spread the good news. Just like the angels did for them. They didn’t table the motion. They didn’t put it on the back burner. Rather, The Message translation says, the shepherds left running to see the sign given by God—a child, snugly wrapped, in a manger.

This Advent let's test out what God has revealed to us. Kick the tires of our faith. Be open to the clues and trails that God gives. Get out of your comfort zone. Seek not creature comforts, be a creature of discomfort. That's where the growth is. Adventure out and see where the clues lead. And tell others the good news. Invite them along with us to Bethlehem. Go tell it on the mountain...and in the valley too!



I know we're talking about shepherds this morning, but we can turn to a wise man for insights, psychologist Richard Wiseman. He started the "Luck Project" in the UK—where he researched people who viewed themselves as either lucky or unlucky. He came away with four common themes of the "fortunate ones" in his book "The Luck Factor." I think we can apply many of these findings to our faith.

Principle One: Lucky people are skilled at creating, noticing, and acting upon interesting opportunities. They do this by building relationships, having a relaxed attitude to life, and by being open to new experiences. We have ears to hear, eyes to see, a nose to smell the God who's already there.

Principle Two: Lucky people make effective decisions by listening to their hunches and gut feelings. As Christians we'd add that we also listen to that still, small voice. The lucky actively boost their intuitive abilities by meditating, praying, and clearing their heads through journaling.

Principle Three: Lucky people are hopeful realists. They believe there's always something to be learned—even in crummy circumstances. The God of hope helps us to persist in the face of failure.

Principle Four: Lucky people learn from mistakes, failures, and unfortunate events—rather than being paralyzed by them. They imagine how things could have been worse and don't dwell on what can't be changed. They look to and accept God's forgiveness. And then seek to move forward, all the wiser for it.

Let's follow the Shepherd's lead this Advent. Notice God's unseen hand in the small stuff. Be open to God's surprises—seeing ourselves not as much lucky, but blessed and fortunate in Christ. Let's talk about Christ amongst ourselves. Let's spread the word about Jesus—the good news of great joy for all people—including our friends and family who maybe haven't encountered Christ's comfort and joy yet. This Advent let's be a people who glorify and praise God on the road to Bethlehem.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "*The Annunciation of the Shepherds*" by Nicolaes Berchem, 1649
["The Luck Factor"](#) by Dr. Richard Wiseman

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