

“THERE WERE SHEPHERDS.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Luke 2:8-14

Introduction.

This morning we come to a third text taken from Handel’s Messiah. I have discovered I am not the only one to preach texts from the Messiah. Pastor John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, once preached 50 sermons on the whole Messiah. I will limit myself to just one more on Christmas Day, the Hallelujah Chorus.

I hope this sermon series has encouraged you to put it on in your home this season. Phama and I played it last Monday night while we wrapped 25 presents for two and a half hours.

This shepherd scene is unique in the Messiah. Until now everything has been prophecy. Now for the first time we get real history. Angels speak and sing to shepherds about a baby born at a specific time and place, today in the city of David, Bethlehem.

Handel opens this scene with a pastoral symphony just played by the orchestra. Handel is creating a pastoral mood with simple melodies flowing along quietly and gently. The music is calm, like a silent night.

Then a soloist starts out simply and matter-of-factly, “There were shepherds abiding in the field.” And then something extraordinary happens, suddenly the angel of the Lord came upon them. And then the angel speaks and after that something even more extraordinary happens. The angel is joined by a multitude, meaning thousands of thousands, ten thousands of ten thousands.

Handel recreates that scene by having the entire choir in full voice sing “Glory to God in the highest.” Nothing is held back or left out. Handel unleashes strings and trumpets. It is about the closest we can get to the actual multitude of the heavenly host.

In a sense this is the Hallelujah chorus for Part One. The first crescendo in the Messiah.

Luke 2:8-9, The setting.

Let’s consider the text more closely. Much has been made of several incongruities in this scene.

First, is the fact that the announcement of Jesus birth on earth on was made to shepherds out in a field with their sheep.

This event is the greatest event that has ever taken place on earth, it's the turning point of history. The angel proclaims the most interesting news that could be made to mankind; not to Caesar, or to Herod, or to the High Priest, but to obscure, poor, lowly shepherds.

They were the least, the lowest, the outcasts, the dregs of society. Remember what we said about the Gentiles of Galilee who dwelt in the deepest darkness, the farthest from the light of the city of God. A light shined in their darkness and now it shines in the darkness to shepherds.

You may remember me comparing this to God making this incredible world changing announcement to long-haul truckers at a truck stop on I-90 in Iowa.

Long-haul truckers sleeping in their cabs, watching over their truck and load, guarding what was entrusted to them by their boss, spending days away from home. Humble hard working sinners.

Second, it is an angel who first speaks the Gospel on earth, first to Zachariah, then Mary and Joseph, and now to some poor shepherds.

But it doesn't stay that way. Angels are not the best suited to proclaim the Gospel on earth because they cannot testify from experience to the power and effectiveness of the Gospel. They don't know the power of the grace that saves and delivers from sin.

Fallen, sinful human beings are better qualified to preach to others, concerning Him by whom we have been healed and saved. Our weaknesses are better suited to show that the influence and success of the Gospel in our lives is completely by the power of God. God put the treasure of the Gospel in earthen vessels, and committed the ministry of His Word, not to angels, but to men. This is why God doesn't send angels to be preachers of the Gospel or pastors of churches.

Poor sinful shepherds become the first human heralds of the Gospel of the good news of Jesus.

Luke 2:17-18 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.

Luke 2:10-11, The message.

Luke 2:10-11 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.

Think about the incongruity and incompatibility of such a message. It's like, wait, what?

The Savior of sinners, the anointed Christ who is Messiah and Lord of all, is born a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in an animal manger. The humility of it all.

This is going to take faith, there is no other way. And this may be part of why God chose the shepherds, they were humble enough not to over think it and they simply obeyed the message, they went, they saw, they believed. Maybe that's it, it takes a shepherd to know a shepherd.

But Jesus is still a stumbling block to many who refuse to believe who He is and what He has done, they doubt He is the Son of the Living God, Savior and Lord.

God exalts the humble and resists the proud. Don't hold on to your pride, don't despise God's humbling of you, it is grace.

We are all biased and prejudiced toward the rich and the famous, the popular and successful, the movers and shakers. But why? God poured out utter contempt on all of it, by passing them all, by overlooking them completely, and stooping to a manger, stooping to poor, dirty shepherds.

Christmas has a powerful way of putting self-important people in their place. Christmas put Caesar in his place. Don't be impressed with rulers, kings, presidents, rich and famous and powerful people. No matter who is in power, God will prevail. Don't be fooled, don't make a big deal about what is not a big deal. They are nothing compared to the Christ.

How often do we need to be reminded, "what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and lose your soul?" What do you want in this life what would be worth losing your soul over?

Christ's condescension, His utter humiliation in becoming poor for our sakes, that we through His poverty might be made rich, should affect our hearts with admiration and gratitude and cause for worship. What love. Who in your life has sacrificed so much for you, given up everything, became poor for you, surrendered everything for you so that you could have eternal life? Who has done that for you?

Follow the shepherds, make haste to see this thing, come and see, believe and obey, then go and tell.

The Song.

Luke 2:13-14 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, good will toward men.”

Glory to God in the highest. In the highest Heaven, to the highest degree, for this highest display of His glory and grace and mercy. Job 38:7 says that at the creation the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy. But this is redemption, a greater work so a multitude of angels sing, for God’s *goodness, wisdom, and power* are even more abundantly magnified.

The glory of God’s *goodness* shines in the mercy He shows in our deliverance from misery through the humiliation of His Son.

The glory of God’s *wisdom* shines in that He found a way to pardon our sin rather than justly and rightly punishing us for our sin, by opening our blind eyes and hard hearts to the glory and grace of the Gospel.

The glory of God’s *power* is in His overcoming every obstacle to secure so great a salvation.

On a scale of magnitude, the creation of the universe is a one and coming of salvation in the incarnation is a million.

Peace on earth. Goodwill toward men.

Peace on earth. Now I know what all of you are thinking when you hear the words peace on earth. You are thinking peace on earth. Am I right? You hear peace on earth and you think peace on earth. Who doesn’t?

The end of wars, the end of fights and arguments and disagreements, the end of division and strife, the end of everything that makes life unpeaceful.

That is not the greatest need for peace, war on earth is not the biggest problem.

When Adam sinned, we all fell in a state of war and rebellion against our Creator. We renounced our allegiance and loyalty, we threw off our dependence on God and His government. We declared ourselves free to become an end unto ourselves, to do our own thing, to follow our own will. We joined the resistance movement against God and everything that is God’s.

Colossians 1:21 says we were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds.

Ephesians 2:13-17 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our *peace*, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility 15 by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making *peace*, 16 and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. 17 And he came and preached *peace* to you who were far off and *peace* to those who were near.

In Jesus Christ, God has made peace with God possible, even though we were the worst and most unworthy of enemies.

You who are still at war, you who are still part of the resistance movement, you who are still trying to call your misery, happiness, throw down your arms, put aside your instruments of battle, and surrender, submit to His terms for peace.

Do not remain indifferent to the glory of God, and strangers to His peace. Do not remain blind to the excellency of God's great grace or deaf to the gracious invitation of the Gospel. Humble yourself and listen to the song of the angels and learn from the shepherd's response.

Implications and application.

Let me close with a question. When you hear what the angel said, does it sound like good news to you? Is that a big deal to you?

The only way this is good news is if you think you need a savior to save you from something. Is there something inside of you needing saving or are you pretty content with how you are right now? If you don't feel the need for a savior, then you don't have Jesus. He comes to those who call on Him out of a great need.

But we must be more specific about the need. Some people want saving from a great personal crisis or a financial need, or deliverance from a bad relationship, or a bad decision or choice or sickness or cancer. If that's what you want from a savior, and not deliverance from sin, then again Jesus is not yours.

Remember what the angel said to Joseph about Mary.

Matthew 1:21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.

But we are still not all the way there yet. How many of us want our sins forgiven, how many want to be saved from the consequences of our sin, saved from being cast off and missing out on heaven? Jesus didn't come just to save us from the consequences of our sin, He came to be the destroyer of our sin.

I John 3:8 Whoever makes a practice of sinning is of the devil, for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil.

Romans 8:13 If you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.

Jesus is the Savior, but He is not a Savior to those who don't see their sin and hate their sin and want to be completely delivered from their sin. Only then is Christ our Savior, our deliverer, our rescuer and redeemer.

He is the *Savior*, the one thing we need more than anything else. The gift of a Savior presupposes our need for a Savior. He alone is the one we need to deliver us and rescue us from sin and misery.

Give your whole heart to the whole Christ, not a partial Savior, for then He is no Savior at all.

He is Lord of lords and King of kings, or He is not Lord and King at all.

May the Holy Spirit lead us to faith in Jesus so that our eternal souls are rescued from perishing and made to possess the most glorious inheritance.

Luke 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

Prayer: Holy Father, I pray you would enter into our hearts more fully than ever, and for any here who have not yet invited you in, by your Holy Spirit convict them of their sin and cleanse them of all unrighteousness and give them a deep longing for that peace that only you can.

Eternal Father of glory, open the eyes of all our hearts to see glimpses of your glory and open the eyes of our hearts to see the glorious hope to which you have called us. Fix our eyes on Christ's complete victory over sin and death. Holy Father, make these realities so clearly known to all of us that it chases from our hearts and minds, anxiety, grumbling, complaining, selfishness, fear, doubt, unforgiveness and increases in us hope, peace, joy, love and faith in Jesus, for the sake of Jesus. Amen.