

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Thursday, December 24, 2015
Christmas Eve**

THE SHEPHERDS' CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:1-20

Do you think this Christmas will hold any surprises for you? Will you find any surprises under your Christmas tree this year?

Christmas itself came as a surprise. It was a surprise to Mary when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and told her that though she was a virgin, she would give birth to a son who would be the very Son of God (Luke 1:26-38). It was a surprise to Joseph when he found out that Mary was pregnant. He was surprised when the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him that the child in Mary's womb had been conceived in her by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25). King Herod, the ruler of Judea, was surprised – and not at all happy – when he learned that a new “king of the Jews” had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-8).

Christmas certainly came as a surprise to the shepherds who were tending their flocks outside Bethlehem the night Jesus was born. I love the way Max Lucado describes that night in his book *The Applause of Heaven*. Many of you have heard this before. He says it was “an ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a God who loves to hook an ‘extra’ on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed. The sheep would have been forgotten, and the shepherds would have slept the night away. But God dances amidst the common. And that night He did a waltz. The black sky exploded with brightness. Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute (a) shepherd was dead asleep, the next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an alien. The night was ordinary no more.”

No longer ordinary, but extraordinary. That's for sure. In the fullness of time, as Paul says in Galatians 4, when everything was ready, the Sovereign God of the universe launched an invasion of this world of space and time – *our* world – in conquering, redeeming love. God Himself came to live among us in the form of a baby born in a stable. He came to save us from the power and penalty of our sin. He came to bring peace on earth and peace to our troubled souls. He came to die. For you and me.

That God would send His angel to announce the arrival of the Messiah to a group of shepherds is one of the great surprises of Christmas. Shepherds were not wealthy or powerful or important people. They would not have had many followers on Twitter. They were anything but cultural or religious icons. The media didn't seek them out for comment on the pressing matters of the day. They did not have access to power. In the ordinariness of their lives, nobody paid any attention to them. They were the epitome of ordinary.

Nevertheless, it was to common, ordinary shepherds that the announcement of Christ's birth was made.

So, while the rest of the world went about its business unaware of the extraordinary things God was doing, the shepherds joined in the celebration of Christmas. The first Christmas. They celebrated Christmas by doing three things: First, they came to Jesus. Second, they worshiped Him. Third, they went out to tell others about the birth of the promised Messiah.

All of us have our Christmas traditions. Every family has its own traditions. Some of us open gifts on Christmas Eve. Others of us wait until Christmas morning. For most of us, maybe even for all of us, coming to church on Christmas Eve is one of our Christmas traditions. Whatever your traditions, I want to suggest that we can learn from the shepherds how to celebrate Christmas.

THE SHEPHERDS CAME TO JESUS

First, we see that the shepherds came to Jesus. They came to see Jesus.

When the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, they were, as it says in the Greek, “frightened with a great fear” (Luke 2:9). They were shaking in their sandals.

Which is not an unusual reaction. Throughout the Bible, people who are confronted by God or His angels have one consistent response: fear. This is what happens when sin-stained human beings encounter the majesty and holiness and glory of God.

Isaiah in the Old Testament saw the Lord, and how did he respond? He was sure it was all over for him. He cried out: “Woe is me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips ... and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord Almighty” (Isaiah 6:5).

To see God as He is, and to understand what we are really like, can be a terrifying experience! The shepherds were frightened with a great fear. But when they heard the angel’s announcement of good news that would bring joy to the world and the angel choir’s song of glory to God and peace on earth, their fear melted away. And they said to one another: “Let’s get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can. We’ve got to see this for ourselves” (2:15).

So, off to Bethlehem they ran. They came to Jesus. Without wasting a moment, they went to see the Savior. They did not want to miss it.

Here we are on Christmas Eve. And I want to ask: How are you tonight, really? Are you feeling so weary from all your feverish efforts to get everything done, so worn out from trying to make this Christmas perfect that you have no energy left to come to Jesus? Are you still preoccupied in your mind with unfinished tasks for tonight or tomorrow?

Don’t let all the customs, traditions, or expectations we have created for Christmas keep you from coming to see Jesus. Whatever else you do or don’t do, make sure you have time – and take time – to come and be with Him.

These shepherds had work to do. They were busy men. But they heard the music of heaven. They were gripped by the message of good news. And they were drawn to the baby in the manger. Why? Because this was no ordinary child. This child was God incarnate, God in the flesh. This child was Immanuel – God with us. This child was the Savior whose coming had been prophesied for centuries. This child was the Lord, the King, the Ruler of all.

To find Christmas, you don't have to go to Tysons or Georgetown or Springfield Town Center or any other shopping mall. You just have to come to Jesus. The good news is that He has already come to you. Now He asks you to come to Him. He asks each one of us to make room for Him in our lives, to accept and receive Him as our Savior and King.

You can accept Him as your helper in times of emergency, as many people do. You can accept Him as a great teacher or a wise counselor. You can look to Him as your friend. He is all of these. And more.

But in the end, if you do not come to Him in humble, trusting faith, if you never receive Him as your Savior and surrender to Him as your Lord, Christmas will count for naught in your life.

The best way to celebrate Christmas, if you have never done so, is to embrace Jesus Christ for who He is – the Son of God and Savior of sinners, and to trust Him and Him alone to make you right with God.

If you have never come to Jesus, even if you've been coming to church for your whole life, there is no better time than right now. The Bible says that today is the day of salvation. Right now is the time of God's favor (2 Corinthians 6:2).

The reason Jesus came, He said, was to seek and to save the lost (Luke 19:10). Even His name points to the purpose for which He came. He was given the name Jesus, which means *The Lord saves*, because He came to save His people from their sins (Matthew 1:21).

If you have been putting it off, waiting for the right time to come to Jesus and get right with God, this is it. Right now He is ready to be born in you. Will you come to Him with an open heart and trust Him to be your Savior?

That is the best way to celebrate Christmas.

THE SHEPHERDS WORSHIPED JESUS

The shepherds did not only come to Jesus. Second, they worshiped Him.

They hurried to Bethlehem. But they did not go as scholars to conduct an academic inquiry or to debate the possible meaning of what had taken place. Nor did they go as curiosity-seeking tourists. They went with a sense of awe. They were bursting with excitement. Just as they had heard the angels sing to the glory of God, now the shepherds themselves lifted their voices and hearts in praise to the Lord who had revealed Himself and His salvation to them.

I'm glad you're here tonight. I don't think there is a better place to celebrate Christmas. And this is the best way to do it, because Christmas itself is a call to worship. It is an invitation to bow our hearts before the Son of God in praise and adoration, to marvel at what God has done for us, and to sing and shout for joy.

If you want your Christmas to focus on what really matters, the best way is to join the shepherds in worshipping Jesus. But notice that the shepherds' worship was not limited to the stable where they found Jesus. No. Luke says that they returned to their sheep. They went back to their jobs. They returned to the fields glorifying and praising God. Back into the ordinariness of daily life.

Which is the way it is to be with us. We must not limit our worship to this beautiful sanctuary or to a prescribed gathering time on Sundays. Worship is to flow out of our hearts wherever we live and work and play and shop, wherever we go and wherever God sends us. Everywhere.

Like the shepherds, we need to take the praise and worship of God with us back into life.

THE SHEPHERDS SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRISTMAS

The shepherds came to Jesus. They worshiped Him. And then they went out and told others about the Savior. They spread the good news of Christmas, sharing what they had seen and heard and experienced with everyone who would listen.

These shepherds weren't educated men. But they weren't ignorant of the world's need. They knew the world was full of people stumbling about in moral and spiritual darkness. They knew people were searching for peace. They knew there were lots of people who had lost hope. But now the Light of the world had come. Now the Prince of Peace had been born. Now the world's only true Hope had arrived.

You and I need Jesus every bit as much as the shepherds did. And our world needs Him every bit as much as their world did.

Whom do you know that God has put in your life who needs to hear the good news of Christmas?

Who are the people you know who still walk in the darkness, who need to know Jesus and the forgiveness, the freedom from sin and guilt, the light and life and peace and joy of His saving love?

And who will tell them, if not us? Who will tell our family members, our neighbors, our co-workers, our teammates, our friends, and our enemies, too, if not you and me?

The message of Christmas, the angel said, is good news of great joy that is for all the people (2:10). It is for everyone. Everywhere. Which means that those of us who know the message of Christmas – those of us who know Jesus, the Christ of Christmas – have a job to do.

Like the shepherds, may we come to Jesus, may we worship Him with exuberance and awe, and may we go and tell others about the Savior and His coming to us.

Lord, let it be so in us tonight and always. Amen.