

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
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SURPRISED BY CHRISTMAS

Luke 2:8-20

Christmas is a season for surprises, isn't it? Christmas was approaching and a woman was busy in her kitchen making Christmas cookies. (I don't know about you, but my favorite Christmas cookies are sugar cookies with icing on them. In fact, even though it is not good for me to indulge, I like just about anything with icing on it!) While she was making cookies, there was a knock at the woman's door. It was a man in rather shabby clothes who was looking for some odd jobs. He asked her if she had any jobs for him to do. She said: "Can you paint?"

"Sure," he said, "I'm a rather good painter."

"Well," she said, "there are two gallons of green paint there and a brush. Out back there is a porch that needs to be painted. Make sure you do a good job. When you're done, I'll pay you what the job is worth."

"Fine," he said. "I'll be done quickly."

She went back to her cookie-baking in the kitchen and didn't think much more about it until there was another knock at the door. She said to the man: "Are you finished already?"

"Yes," he said. "But there is one thing you should know. That is not a Porsche back there. It's a Mercedes."

Oops! Happily, not all surprises are like that, whether at Christmas or any other season of the 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 learned that Mary was pregnant. He was surprised when an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that the child Mary was carrying in her womb had been conceived by the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18-25). Herod was surprised – and disturbed in his spirit – when he learned that a new "king of the Jews" had been born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2:1-8). The coming of Christmas was full of surprises.

It certainly came as a surprise to the shepherds watching their flocks outside Bethlehem that night. I love the way Max Lucado describes the night of Jesus' birth (in *The Applause of Heaven*). 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 the 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. And unforgettable. In the fullness of time, as Paul would say in Galatians 4, when everything was in readiness, the Sovereign God of the universe invaded this world of space and time – our world – in redeeming love. God Himself came to live among us in the form of a son 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.

One of the most surprising things about Christmas is that God would choose to send His angel to announce the arrival of the Messiah to a group of shepherds taking care of their flocks out in the fields. The announcement was not made to the rich and famous. It was not given to the powerful or the glamorous. Not to the movers and shakers of the media. Not even to the leaders of the religious establishment – the priests and rabbis and teachers of the Jewish law.

No. The news of the Savior's birth was given first to a group of common, ordinary men. Shepherds were not held in high esteem in the Palestinian culture of the day. They were, in fact, a despised class. Their work made them ceremonially unclean and kept them from being able to go to the temple for long periods, so they were unable to carry out the prescribed rituals to be made clean. They had acquired such a bad reputation as a group that, like women, they were not permitted to testify in court. They were considered to be too unreliable.

Yet it was to this group of ordinary shepherds – men who were looked down on by the respectable people of their day – that the announcement of Christ's birth was given. Ordinary men with ordinary problems and ordinary needs. Ordinary hopes and ordinary fears. Ordinary people who needed a Savior. Just like you and me.

And so, while the rest of the world went about its business totally unaware of the extraordinary things God was doing, these shepherds got in on the surprise of Christmas. I want you to notice three things the shepherds did to celebrate the coming of Christmas.

1. THEY CAME TO JESUS

Notice first that they came to Jesus.

Luke says in verse 9 that when the angel of the Lord appeared to them and the blazing glory of the Lord shone around them, the shepherds were, as it says in the Greek, “frightened with a great fear.” They were shaking in their sandals.

As we noted a couple weeks ago, that kind of response is not unusual. Throughout the Bible, people who were confronted by God or His angels had one consistent response: Fear. That is what happens when sin-stained human beings are confronted with the majesty and holiness and awesome glory of God.

Isaiah in the Old Testament saw the Lord, and he cried out in terror: “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 the Lord God Almighty as He is, and to see ourselves as we are in the light of His holiness and majesty and power and purity, can be a terrifying experience. The shepherds were frightened with a great fear.

But when they heard the angel’s announcement of good news, when they received this message that would bring joy to the world, when they heard the angels’ choir sing of peace on earth, their fear melted away, and they said to one another: “Come on! Let’s go to Bethlehem and see it for ourselves” (Luke 2:15). “Let’s check it out!”

And that is what they did. They came to Jesus. Without wasting a moment, they hurried off to see the Savior. They didn’t want to miss it.

Christmas is just two days away. Tomorrow is Christmas Eve. Some of us may still have so many things on our “To Do” list, or we may feel so preoccupied and so rushed to get everything done, that we simply have no time or energy to come to Jesus. If that is true for you today, may I gently suggest that you’ve missed the point of Christmas?

The shepherds were busy men. They had a job to do. But something happened to them. They heard the music of heaven. They were gripped by the good news. And they were drawn irresistibly to the baby in the manger. Why? Because this was no ordinary child. This baby was God in the flesh. God incarnate. He was Immanuel. God with us. This baby was the Savior they had waited for and hoped for. He was the Savior they needed. He was the Lord of all.

If you would celebrate and experience the real meaning of Christmas, you have to come to Jesus. You have to turn your eyes and your heart to Him. The good news is that Jesus has already come to you. That is what Christmas means. Jesus has come *to* us. He is God *with* us. And He has demonstrated His love for us in this: While we were still sinners, He died *for* us (Romans 5:8). And He asks each of us to come to Him. He asks us to welcome Him, to receive Him, to make room for Him in our lives, to accept Him as our Savior and Lord.

John 1:11-12 tells us the result of Christ’s coming to us:

He came to His own, but His own did not receive Him. Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God.

The truth is that you can look to Jesus to be your helper in times of need. You can accept Him as a wise counselor and a great teacher. You can look to Him as a faithful friend. He is all of these. But He is more. In the end, if you never come to Him in repentance and trusting faith, if you never trust and receive Him as your Savior and surrender to Him as Lord of your life, you will miss the real meaning of Christmas.

The best way to celebrate Christmas, if you have never done so, is to embrace the Lord Jesus as the Savior of sinners and to trust in Him – and Him alone – for your salvation.

Have you come to Jesus? There is no better time than right now to come to Him. Today is the day of salvation. That is what the Bible says in 2 Corinthians 6:2. Today – right now – is the time of God’s favor. Right now counts forever.

Mary Sue and I received a Christmas letter this week from friends in eastern Pennsylvania who dropped out of church and drifted away from the Lord at least 15 years ago, maybe more. We were thrilled to read of their return to the fellowship of the church and the renewal of their faith and commitment to the Lord in the past year. They said God had taught them the truth and wisdom of this saying: “Life is short. Eternity is forever. Plan accordingly.”

It is true.

If you have never come to Jesus in faith, now is the time to do it. Right now He is waiting to be born in you. If, like our friends in Pennsylvania, you have drifted away from the Lord, now is the time to come back to Him and get back on track with Him. If you are simply distracted or stressed out by all the things you think you have to do to make Christmas meaningful, call time out and make time to be with Jesus.

The first thing the shepherds did was to come to Jesus.

2. THEY WORSHIPPED JESUS

The second thing I want you to notice is that when the shepherds came to Jesus, they worshipped Him.

They hurried, Luke says (2:16), to meet the Savior. But they did not go to Bethlehem as mere observers. Nor did they go to engage in debates about doctrine or the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. They went in awe and excitement. And when they came to Jesus, when they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, they worshipped Him.

Just as the shepherds had heard the angels sing of the glory of God, so they now lifted their hearts and voices in praise to the Lord who had revealed Himself and His salvation to them. They met the Son of God, and the experience changed their lives.

Christmas itself is a call to worship. It is an invitation – even more, a summons – to bow our hearts before the Son of God in adoration and praise and gratitude, to marvel at what God has done for us, to sing and shout for joy, and to honor God with the very best we have. Because He is worthy.

If you would celebrate and experience the real meaning of Christmas, you must join the shepherds in worshipping the Christ of Christmas. But notice this: The shepherds' worship was not limited to the stable. It was not confined to the place where they found Jesus. No. Luke says in verse 20 that they returned to their sheep, they went back to their job, they returned to the fields glorifying and praising God. Back in the ordinariness of daily life.

And that is the way it is to be with us. Our worship must not be limited to this church building, or to a prescribed time on Sunday mornings or Christmas Eve. Instead, it must flow out of our hearts wherever God has put us and wherever He sends us – at home, in our neighborhoods, with our families and friends, at school, at work, where we eat and shop. Everywhere.

Like the shepherds, you and I need to take the worship and praise of God back into life, so that everything we do becomes an act of worship. An expression of God's transcendent worth-ship and glory.

3. THEY SPREAD THE GOOD NEWS OF CHRISTMAS

There is a third thing the shepherds did when they were surprised by Christmas. They came to Jesus. They worshipped Him. And third, they went out and told others about it. They spread the good news of Christmas, sharing what they had seen and heard and experienced with everyone who would listen.

The shepherds had seen enough of life to know the world needed a Savior. They knew the world was filled with people stumbling about in the darkness. But now the Light of the world had come (John 1:5; 8:12). They knew there were multitudes of people searching for peace. But now the Prince of Peace had arrived. They knew there were many who were beaten down in their spirits and had given up hope. But now the true Hope of the world had come.

For a world that is lost, Jesus is the way. For a world that is confused about right and wrong, about truth and error, about the meaning and purpose of life, Jesus is the truth. For a world that is taking the way that leads to death, Jesus is the life.

And our world today needs Him just as much as the world of the shepherds did. Life today is far different than it was 2,000 years ago when Christ came into the world. But

the hearts of men and women have not changed. And they cannot change, unless they are changed by the Lord Jesus and His saving grace.

Let me ask you:

Do you know someone who needs to hear the gospel of Christmas?

Do you know someone who is still walking in the darkness – moral or spiritual darkness, someone who needs to understand and embrace the meaning and purpose of Christ’s coming to us as a baby in a manger?

Do you know someone who needs what you have found in Jesus?

Who will tell them, if not you and me?

One evening as Christmas was approaching, a 7-year-old boy came to his mother and said: “I’ve been looking at my tree, thinking about how Christmas is Jesus’ birthday. You know how I always want to invite gobs of kids to my birthday, and you won’t let me? Well, my Sunday School teacher said some kids don’t even know what Christmas is really all about. So it’s as if those of us who have invitations” – he paused for a moment, trying to find the right words to express what he was thinking – “it’s as if those of us who know have to share it with other people who don’t know.”

Exactly! The Christmas story, the angel said, is good news of a great joy, and it is for all the people. For you. For me. For everyone. Which means that those of us who know have a job to do.

When the shepherds were surprised by Christmas, what did they do?

They came to Jesus.

They worshipped Him.

And they spread the news of His coming.

May we go and do likewise. To the praise and glory of God. Amen.