

THE SHEPHERDS – HOPE AND JOY

I'd like to invite you to travel back in time with me to the Shepherds First Christmas. You see the shepherds played a big part of the Christmas story. They are not just some extras in the "movie" of Christmas. Luke tells us the shepherds were taking the starring role. So let's take some time today and explore the shepherds' Christmas.

Try to imagine the scene with me. What if you were a shepherd; what would that mean to how you lived your life?

One you would be part of a despised group. Shepherds had a bad reputation, they would more than likely save 99 sheep over the one, because they figured if one sheep is missing, it is already 'a wolf's dinner.

Two as a shepherd you probably would be a bit rough around the edges, unshaven and unkempt, bad haircut, no business suit or fancy attire.

Three You would be uneducated and low-skilled.

Four you would be in the company of questionable folks who typically keep long hours at work - you know like keeping watch over the flock by night. Which means, you are not really a church-going or temple going type of person.

Five You may have learned how to be ruthless in order to protect the sheep from predators and thieves who would want to steal them. Even though they aren't your sheep – you cannot afford to own sheep – you have to protect the sheep for someone else – the owner. Or you may be

protecting the sheep that were used as Temple sacrifices. So if you lose one sheep here and one sheep there your boss will dock your pay.

Six you would rarely live at a permanent home because you have to continually search for grass and water in a dry, stony and sometimes really hot and hostile climate. Sometimes you have to travel far from human civilization, far from cities, just to get the sheep food and the shelter for them from the climate.

Seven you don't have 4 bedroom, 2 bathroom house – you have to sleep outside – perhaps you have a tent, but this is unlikely. You try to catch some sleep here and there and get some badly needed rest in the midst of noisy bleating sheep.

Eight You don't wear Adidas or Nike shoes – and if you did you would have to try not to step on the sheep droppings. You have no sunscreen, no hot showers, no deodorant, no MP3 player to while the days away. All you have is smelly sheep 24/7 who don't care about you.

But wait.

Suddenly a blazing light shines down and an angel says: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; He is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

Whew, that's lucky – God is not going to wipe you out. But it still is scary stuff. Why shouldn't you be afraid? The angel said there is good news of great joy; there is celebration of a new life born in the town of David! In

Bethlehem, a Saviour, the long-awaited Messiah, the chosen one, the deliverer.

Then you witnessed another remarkable sight. There was a band of angels praising God. This is unbelievable isn't it. Angels showing up, saying things that were out of this world.

Whoa, God brings peace to people. The Lord of the universe is speaking to you, a dirty smelly shepherd? The angel said, the child who'll be Messiah would be lying in a manger. A manger? That can't be true. That's like a serving plate for animals. Maybe you were really over tired and hallucinated or misheard it. After all, the angel did appear at night when most people are asleep.

But you have to check it out. This is exciting stuff! Good thing it is Bethlehem, just a small rural backwater town, not in some bustling city.

So you go to Bethlehem, to check things out. And after a while of looking around, you finally find Mary and Joseph and the baby wrapped in the common cloths of the day. And really, it is not such a silent night. The baby is crying, the animals are making a racket, and you come bursting in all excited and chatty.

But it is really true. What the angel said was not some silly dream. You were wide awake, watching the flocks when all these things occurred, so it is not some weird baseless UFO story! You witnessed it. You were there, experiencing the whole thing as if it were in slow motion.

That night changed things for the world. The shepherds show us that encountering Jesus is a different sort of experience. It had such an

impact on the shepherds that they had to spread the word after they had seen Him. This was a lasting hope and joy that they could not contain.

That it happened this way was a big surprise. The voice of prophecy had stopped for approximately 400 years. These were the dark times known by scholars as the intertestamental period or referred to by others as the “silent years.” There was political upheaval, oppression by invading forces, downturn in the economy and unrest! That God spoke again out of nowhere in the darkness and then to shepherds surely, not the classiest of people nor religious, is like rain after a long hot dry season.

God came to the shepherds and revealed the birth of Christ to them. That’s the truth of Christmas... God came, close enough to be touched, and held and showed Himself in the form of a frail, vulnerable babe to the lowly, the ordinary, despised, struggling, sinful folks like the shepherds.

In Christ, we see God loving, embracing, unconditional in His love, compassionate and so strong as He took the blows and the suffering of the cross for the sins of the world and announce there is forgiveness of sins for all who believe!

God has come to sinners, but not as a celebrity. He didn’t demand celebrity treatment, God came in a diaper, how demeaning! When the Messiah entered the world, all He got was dirty shepherds and animals and probably two wide-eyed tired out young people called Mary and Joseph.

God came in order to tell us we are not washed up, finished or rejects. God thought we were precious enough to Him to invest His life, to

squeeze His majestic holiness into a flesh-bound little human baby body. God did not come with terror or an invading army to force us to convert to Christianity or to blow away the universe or demand His way. God came close, close enough to be hugged by Mary and Joseph, close enough to be seen by the shepherds to clearly demonstrate that God is with us!

This tell us that God will never refuse us if we place our trust in Him. Even if our sins are scarlet – He will make them white as snow. God is salvation, He has come to save His people from their sins.

Take this Good News and store it away in your hearts, ponder it like Mary did. Don't let it get away from you. Treasure it, let in renewed hope again in your life. Where loneliness, despair, devastation, desperation have made an appearance in your life, remember God has entered that world as one of us who bled real blood and understands! And when the message to the shepherds sink in deeper... respond then with all your heart to God. Break out in praise! Bring out the Christmas gifts, for God has given us a Saviour.

There is never so much brokenness and sin in your life that will ever stop God showing His mercy on you.

Perhaps you need to go to Bethlehem just as the shepherds did and check out this rather fantastic story.

The Messiah has come and He came with a specific purpose – for you and I to draw near to God by a gift... the baby that was born in the most humble of circumstances, revealed to a bunch of nobodies. Isn't it a thrill, to know that the best thing about Christmas is – that when God

initiated a rather ridiculous plan to save the world, His plan included dirty shepherds, living in a dirty world?

Surely this gives you hope and peace to know God's favour is on you this day; to know that He has given us the best Christmas Gift ever – Himself.

Father, thank You for this gift that is unlike any other gift that has ever been given. Thank You for sending Your Son to save us from our sins. We forget what a wonderful and amazing gift our salvation really is. Fill us with your hope and joy—a joy so complete and overwhelming that we, like the shepherds, are compelled to share it with others. We are thankful for the certainty of heaven in Jesus. But until that day, we, like the shepherds, will choose to glorify and praise You. We will continue to rejoice in who You are and all that You've done. We thank You and praise You. And it is in Jesus's name that we pray, amen.