

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Third Sunday in Advent, December 15, 2013

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)
Hymns: 84, 104:6, 103, 109, 364:5-7
Lessons: 1 Samuel 16:1-13, Titus 3:4-7, John 10:1-16.
Sermon Text: Luke 2:8-18.
Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehltrittter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

If someone really wants to get a message out to people today, there are a multitude of ways it can be done. You tell people and let word of mouth share the message. You can write a letter to the newspaper. If you think you have something really important to tell, you can call newspapers and radio and television stations and schedule a press conference. And of course there are the social media – things such as Facebook, Twitter, web pages and blogging on the Internet.

God had a message about 2000 years ago that he really wanted to get out to the entire world. But this message first came to mankind in a small town, Bethlehem, as you heard last Sunday. That message is that a Savior for all mankind has been born.

You and I might have targeted someone else for this incredible message. We might have chosen people in high positions in Israel. But our heavenly father proclaimed the message first to a rather strange target audience: shepherds.

The third candle lit on the advent wreath is called the shepherd candle. As we look at the Advent wreath, let us also look at Scripture and hear again about

SHEPHERDS AND THE GOOD NEWS

- 1. Humble shepherds hear from angels the Good News of a Savior!**
- 2. They find the Savior lying in a manger.**
- 3. They share the Good News!**

Although shepherds were very much necessary in the Jewish economy the shepherds who were out watching their flocks at night weren't very influential, or rich. Imagine them sleeping with a blanket in the middle of an open field while trying to keep watch over their flock. Imagine them not being able to take showers or baths. Imagine them eating simple meals. We could imagine a situation kind of like camping out under the sky without all the comforts we have come to associate with camping today. So they might have lived under rather primitive conditions when they were out in the field. Scripture doesn't say that these were the owners of the sheep, although they may have been. It says they were shepherds. Owners of sheep often hired others to do the shepherding, to do what could be called 'the dirty work'. So we could surely consider these men to be common working people. They may have even been outsiders to society in a double sense of not being very influential in the community and possibly not very pleasant to be around.

Many of the shepherds in Scripture were not known for their social skills. Moses was a shepherd for about 40 years, and when God sent him to bring God's people out of Egypt we read "***But Moses said to God, 'Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?'***" (Exodus 3:11) He also complained to God: "***O Lord, I have never been eloquent, neither in the past nor since you have spoken to your servant. I am slow of speech and tongue.***" (Exodus 4:10) Of course, God gives people the gifts he needs. David was a shepherd who later, at the choosing of God, became king of Israel. God seems to have

shown special favor to shepherds. Think of other Old Testament heroes who were shepherds to whom the Lord gave special responsibilities: men like Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and David, as well as the prophet Amos.

Scripture speaks much of shepherds and their responsibilities. The very familiar twenty-third Psalm that begins ***“The Lord is my shepherd”*** is probably ingrained in almost everyone’s memory. That Psalm reveals our Lord as a shepherd who cares for his sheep. John in chapter 10 of his Gospel repeated that in a very memorable way, talking about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep and lays down his life for them. Jeremiah 23:4 promises that the Lord will be our shepherd gathering his people together in safety and we ***“shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall they be lacking”***.

And now you hear of God revealing the birth of his only-begotten Son to humble shepherds out working in the field. Why would God choose to announce the birth of Christ to sheep tenders, to shepherds, and not to the rulers of Israel who surely would have had better resources to get the message out? Is there a message here for us? After all, God chose YOU to help get the message out. You confess that “the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith.” And he has also made you his ambassador, to help share the Good News of Jesus Christ, our Good Shepherd.

We need such a Good Shepherd because as the prophet Isaiah described us, we are like sheep who have wandered away from our master. ***“We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.”*** (Isaiah 53:6) Thank God it is Jesus our Good Shepherd who goes out and searches for us and brings us safely into his flock.

“And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.” The shepherds on the fields of Bethlehem were frightened. There were lights in the sky. Then they heard noise – someone talking to them. Have you ever been out late at night, and been surprised by a sudden light or movements or noise? Wasn’t it kind of eerie? Just imagine how the shepherds must have felt upon seeing an angel with the brilliant glory of the Lord shining around them. Scripture says they were terribly frightened. You would’ve been too. Angels just didn’t appear every day!

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.” The angel’s message is reassuring. There is no reason for fear but there is reason for joy. Can you imagine that the shepherds were paralyzed with fear? You yourself may even have experienced how fear can keep you from thinking clearly, freezing your mind as well as your body. But God handles this. There was a joyful message to them and for them. The angel brought them ***“good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”*** God handles their fear and deals with it, and gives them especially good news!

But God can use fear to get our attention. How often haven’t we reacted to fear with a cry to God for help and prayer to God for help? Fear certainly got the shepherds focused on the angel’s message of good news. When you feel frozen by fears remember the message of the Angels: ‘don’t be afraid.’ And why should we never feel afraid? It is the good news that the angels said to the shepherds.

Don’t be afraid! ***“For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”*** This savior is for you. He was born to remove you from this world of fears to his heavenly home in his right time.

This event, that these shepherds received the message of the Angels, was not just a chance happening. It was not an accident. It was God’s intention that these shepherds would be in the right place at the right time. This is part of God’s plan, for he tells us in Galatians 4:4-5: ***“But when the time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons.”***

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” What an amazing, marvelous sight this multitude of angels must have been!

The angels told the shepherds what they would find and how they should find it. The angels made the sign very clear for them. ***“And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling***

clothes, lying in a manger.” Could the son of God have made any more humble entrance into the world, a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger? The manger would have been in a stable or a barn. And that is where the baby Jesus was born. The sign that was given to the shepherds would be something they wouldn’t find just everywhere.

They were to go and find the baby. They were wearing their working clothes. They would not have to take time to change clothes, or dress up in what we would consider our Sunday best clothes. Perhaps, like many common people at that time, they did not have many changes of clothing. Perhaps they only had one cloak or tunic. Perhaps you remember John the Baptist saying *“The man with two tunics should share with him who has none, and the one who has food should do the same.”* (Luke 3:11)

They were told to go to a place where they would be in their element and feel comfortable. They would not have had to go to an inn, where wealthy, well-dressed people might be staying. They would not have to ask at the hospital about the new baby, for there were no hospitals. But God revealed the location of the new-born Savior especially for them. Jesus was born humbly. What may have been his first visitors were humble everyday working people. But they were sent by God’s angels.

When we think about how we regularly come again and again and hear the word of God, we don’t come to a humble stable. We come to a building which, relative to a stable, is practically a physical temple. And we tend to dress up in our nicest clothes. We do this because we want to present to God our best and let him know how important he is to us. How do we know the shepherds did not want to present to God their best? There’s no mention of any gifts being given by the shepherds but instead we have God’s marvelous gift being given to mankind.

“And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste.” Notice they didn’t say ‘let’s go see if this has really happened.’ To them, the events described by the angel were a fact, a done deal. Christ’s birth was something ‘that has happened’.

They went to Bethlehem to be eyewitnesses of the blessing and to fully experience the joy of this event. They traveled there in faith, in anticipation of what they would find, not in doubt, not wondering if they would find anything at all. The shepherds offer us a great example of faith. They took God’s message at face value. They show us what it means to trust God even when there are countless reasons to question. They accepted the message of love and goodwill, even if they did not feel they deserved even to hear such words of grace.

They came *“and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.”* When the shepherds set out, they knew what to look for. And they found it, just as the angel had said.

Then they shared their story. They couldn’t contain themselves. They told of the angel messengers and their startling message that stated who the baby is and what he would become: *“a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.”* What a wonderful event they now had to share!

Don’t we sometimes we find that we just can’t wait to share the excitement of good news with another person? We’ll call friends and give them the good news of all kinds of things that are important to us. But what about the most important message in the world?

May God give us the grace to live like these shepherds in faith and to be excited to share the message as they did! Amen.