

Who Are We Called to Be?

Luke 2:8-20 The Shepherds

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What do you want to be when you grow up? Ever been asked that question? So what were some of your responses as a kid? (fireman, police officer, doctor, housewife...).

How did you finally decide what you wanted to become when you grew up?

Sometimes it just happened over the course of time.

Sometimes, like my wife Maureen, you just knew from a young age you wanted to be a teacher (like her grandmother?).

Sometimes it was a suggestion someone made.

Sometimes it was by taking an aptitude test.

Sometimes you simply followed in your parents' footsteps.

Sometimes you just started going to a post-secondary institution or got a job and eventually figured it out.

And sometimes, like me, you are still figuring out what you want to be!

When I was 7 my Dad invited me to an indigenous woman's home after church one Sunday (he was the pastor). I played with her children while he shared the gospel and led her to the Lord. As we were leaving, she pointed her finger at me and said, "Someday you will be a pastor just like your dad!" Which 7 year-old doesn't want to be like his dad? By the time I hit my teenage years, that was the last thing I wanted. But then something amazing happened. After High School and two years of Bible College, I began to have people identify and affirm my various gifts, especially for teaching and the next thing I knew, I was off to Seminary. A few months after graduation, a certain church in South Langley called and invited me to consider being their youth pastor!

Did I question this call on my life? Many times (in fact I still have those days...we all do!). It didn't help when the youth would tease me by saying, "Darrel, when are you going to get a real job?" I would respond with, "When you grow up!" Well, eventually they did grow up but I'm not sure I really have!

We are in week two of our current sermon series, **A New Advent**. Last week pastor Rob asked the question, Who Are We? He gave us an in-depth look at some of our history as a church. He left us with the question: Are we ready for another season of adventure? Today we are in Luke 2:8-20, which ironically, is our Scripture memorization passage. How are you doing so far? This passage really gives us some surprising things to consider as we ask the question: **Who are we called to be?**

Open your Bibles to Luke 2:8-20. How does this passage begin? *“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.”* Our focus this morning is on these Shepherds which is the surprising thing. Why? Because of how most shepherd’s were viewed in that time and culture. Let’s just say that if you had asked the question on the streets of Bethlehem to some children, what do you want to be when you grow up, you probably wouldn’t have heard...a shepherd like my dad. Which is really too bad because throughout the OT in Israel’s history, shepherds were actually well respected and watching over sheep was considered noble. But to most people in the first century, not so much.

One German scholar says shepherds, specifically, hireling shepherds (those who were hired out and had no ownership of the sheep), had a rather unsavory reputation. “They were often dishonest and thieving; they led their herds onto other people’s land and pilfered the produce of the land. They were often accused of stealing some of the increase of the flock. Consequently, the people were warned not to buy wool, milk, or kids from shepherds on the assumption that it was stolen property. Shepherds were not allowed to fulfill a judicial office or be admitted in court as witnesses.” This scholar goes on to say, “there is no suggestion that the shepherds to whom the angels appeared were not devout men, though they were from a despised class.” (Joachim Jeremias)

So who are these shepherds? We don’t know much about them but it is possible that because of their proximity to Jerusalem (Bethlehem was 8 km to the south of Jerusalem), these shepherds may have been the keepers for the temple flocks and specifically those sheep intended for temple sacrifice—animals that needed extra care and protection because they had to be perfect, without blemish to be worthy of sacrifice.

Then comes the amazing revelation! Verse 9 tells us that “An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” (literally, they feared with a great fear). Do you think???

Stop for a moment and let this phrase sink in. “An angel of the Lord appeared **to them.**” Really? To ordinary shepherds? Why not to the religious leaders? I would suggest because the religious leaders were not ready to receive this news. They were too caught up in their positions of authority. Too busy making sure people followed the rules. Sadly, the very ones who should have been ready and eager for the coming Messiah were not. Ezekiel 34 is a chapter filled with woes against spiritual leaders. Listen to verses 1-2.

The word of the Lord came to me (Ezekiel): “Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy and say to them: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says: Woe to you shepherds of Israel who only take care of yourselves! Should not shepherds take care of the flock?’

This was written almost 600 years before the birth of Christ. Nothing seems to have changed. The religious leaders at the time Luke is writing this were no different from those Ezekiel prophesied against. Instead of acting like spiritual shepherds for the people, they were only concerned about themselves! And so the angel came to plain, ordinary, smelly shepherds. Think about it. The glory of God was revealed to **THEM!**

But that's not all. The good news of the birth of the Messiah is first announced to these lowly shepherds! The word for good news in verse 10 is the Greek verb *euangelizō*, from which we get our English word, "evangelize." The angel is commissioning these shepherds to be the first ones to share this good news with others, which they do after they see baby Jesus with their own eyes.

What an amazing thing. Yes, occupationally they were shepherds, but now they were being called to proclaim the good news that the Messiah had come. Do you think they woke up that morning and said, "Well, tonight's the night we get our new orders from heaven." No! But that's what makes this so amazing. God chooses to use ordinary people to reach ordinary people. These shepherds were the perfect group to receive the news and begin to proclaim it because, if it came to them (of lowly social status), then certainly it truly was good news for ALL people.

This is exactly what the angel announces. *"I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people."* Church, this is the good news we celebrate not just at Christmas, but everyday. The gospel message of salvation is not just for us, it is for everyone. Just as the shepherds were called into the narrative of Jesus' birth, so we too are called to be proclaimers of that good news!

Who are we proclaiming? The angel is very clear. Look at the names he gives to Jesus. Saviour, Messiah, Lord.

- Saviour (one who rescues).
- Messiah (Christ) - anointed One. The Jews used this term to refer to a royal deliverer who God would send to set them free from oppression and purify them as a nation.
- Lord (owner or master. Someone of high position).

It is important to note that the angel does something very unique by putting the names Messiah and Lord together (or as some translations read, Christ the Lord). This phrase is used nowhere else in the New Testament in exactly this way. One writer suggests the meaning implied by the angel is that Christ is the Lord, with "Lord" being used to refer to Yahweh himself (Marshall).

Yahweh, the great "I AM", who came to Moses in a burning bush. Yahweh, the most holy name by which God revealed himself to the people of Israel. Yahweh, a name so sacred the Jews would not pronounce it out loud and so substituted the name, Adonai.

By putting Messiah and Lord together, the angel was equating Jesus with God, leaving no doubt in the shepherd's minds that this truly was the Messiah prophesied about hundreds of years earlier and which the Jews were waiting for. This certainly lines up with how John opens his gospel. "In the beginning was the Word (Jesus), and the Word was God."

So how do the shepherds respond? Their fear quickly turns to curiosity which turns to excitement, which then leads them to action in verse 15. *"Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."* They didn't wait around to see what would happen next. They went! And where did they find the baby? Just as the angel had said. In a manger of hay in a simple stable.

I like how one author writes. "So fitting that the news of the Lamb of God's birth would come to shepherds. And that the reception would be hosted in a stable. A place crowded with the faces most familiar to them, the faces of animals. A place where the look of their clothes and the smell of their flocks blended in. A dimly lit place, where out-of-place people would feel most welcome" (Ken Gire). Maybe that's why God chose them to be the first to hear about and see the Messiah.

But there is one more note of interest about the shepherd's response in verse 15. They go because it is the Lord who has **told** them about the good news. It is this little word "told" that grabs my attention and it should yours also. This word is used not just once, but three times. First they are **told** by the angel. Then in verse 17 they **tell** others what they've been told. And finally in verse 20, they return to their sheep praising God because everything they had seen was exactly what they had been **told**.

This is a clear example of how we should be sharing the good news. First we were told about the good news and we responded by believing. That should lead to us telling others what we have found (after all, if it really is good news we shouldn't keep it to ourselves). And then, after we've shared, we leave the results to God but we rejoice and give praise to God that he has entrusted us with the message of good news!

Let me be open with you. I struggle with the telling part. I'm pretty good at living out my faith. I will even step into conversations, but when it comes to sharing (telling) the gospel message...out loud, I can get shy...and I'm a pastor! I am praying for more boldness and opportunities...Can we pray together?

The apostle Paul makes it pretty clear that the telling is our job in Romans 10:9-10.

*But how can they call on him to save them unless they believe in him? And how can they believe in him if they have never heard about him? And how can they hear about him unless someone **tells** them? And how will anyone go and **tell** them without being sent?*

So...Who are we called to be? How would you answer that question in light of our little study of the shepherds? Why not chat about that with someone as you grab a coffee and snack. Or invite someone out for lunch and have a conversation.

In closing, let me make a few observations and comments around this question: Who are we called to be?

Observations:

1. The shepherds were not educated or well accepted by society and yet God chose them to be the first to hear the message. This tells me that regardless of age, education, gender, social status, job or ministry experience, God can and will use us if we are willing. You've probably heard the phrase, "God doesn't call the qualified, he qualifies the called." I don't know if this is actually true because God can do both, but my point is we are all called as disciples of Jesus into his grand plan of salvation. Are we giving people in this church opportunities to use their gifts, talents and abilities? Where might you be seeing or treating someone as a lowly shepherd, not worthy of your time or effort?
2. The shepherds were located in close proximity to Bethlehem (probably 1 km). This meant they were close to where Jesus was born—the Messiah, the Good news. We too are in close proximity with people who need to hear the message of good news and we can do this. How? Remember the Ukraine fundraising lunch, the neighbourhood BBQ, the Fall Fun Fair? These are just the beginning. What else might God be calling us into?

While writing this sermon last week a call came into the office from a single mother who needed help with rent and food. She lives in close proximity to this church. Did I see this as an opportunity or an inconvenience? I'm ashamed to admit my first thought was, not another one! Do I have to? I gave this woman a call and asked questions to discern if the need was legitimate. Then I connected with Sue and Shirley who are part of the Congregational Care Team. Shirley graciously agreed to go meet this woman and we are now in the process of coming alongside and helping her out. I don't know what will come of this, but here was an opportunity to love someone in need right here in our community.

3. The shepherds were quick to respond to the message. The text tells us as soon as the angels left, they “hurried off” to find Jesus. They didn’t stand around discussing, they didn’t form a committee. They didn’t even draw straws or cast lots to see who would go. They went immediately! Because of their quick response, they became the first to “tell” others about the things they had seen and heard.

How quick are we to respond to opportunities God places before us? For several months now we have been saying we are in a period of transition—and we have been. When does that period end? When do we start diving into what God has for us? I’m going to step out and suggest the time is NOW! We’ve just finished 8 weeks of focused prayer nights where we listened for what God was saying to us as a church. BTW, thanks to the 30+ people who participated during that time. I believe we are beginning to get a sense of who we are called to be. Here are a few things that have repeated themselves in these times.

- Let go of the past...it will only slow us down
- Something new is coming...an open door of opportunity
- Trust and have faith...God is with us and will guide us
- Listen to God’s voice and seek his face through more prayer
- Keep our eyes on Jesus

This process is not over and this list is not complete! We’ll hear more about this in the New Year as we invite you all to participate in some discussion around what we are hearing God say we need to become.

4. The shepherds don’t leave their occupation, they return to the sheep but their lives are never the same. They couldn’t keep the good news to themselves. This is what God calls us to as well. To be the good news wherever we are...Each one of us has been strategically placed where we are in order to be good news to those around us. As the old saying goes, “bloom where you’re planted.” Sometimes we wait for an “angel” moment on a hillside when God simply invites us into the journey of following him in obedience.

Let me leave you with two questions:

1. What kind of shepherd are you? (responsive, obedient)
2. Who are you/we called to shepherd?

Next week pastor Rob will help answer the question: How do we get there?