

“The Shepherd’s Challenge”

Psalm 91:1-8 and Luke 3:7-18

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+91:1-8)

(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+3:7-18)

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Is this just another familiar story?

We have heard the Christmas story so often! Some of us were in children’s dramas dressed up in cast off bathrobes acting like wise men or shepherds. A few of us even got to be an angel or Joseph or Mary. This story is so familiar it is in danger of being trivialized. We have heard it so often, we can easily dismiss it. The adult skeptic who has heard this story so often asks, “What’s in this story for me?” Can we learn something new by hearing the angel and shepherd’s story once again? I like to think we can actually experience God in a new way through this old familiar story. I think the shepherd’s challenge in this story is our challenge today! To help us open up our minds to God, let’s analyze the story.

There are main characters in this story.

1. **The Shepherds** are obviously key players in this dramatic scene. Shepherds in Jesus time are members of the underclass. If you could not do anything else, then you could become a shepherd. If you were the youngest son, like King David, and could not participate in the family in any other manner, then you could become the shepherd. Shepherds spent days out in the fields watching and protecting sheep. Their family life was nonexistent. Their social life was amongst themselves. Their influence in the city or town was unknown. Shepherds were not seen, not heard, and not counted among society.
2. **The Angels** are obviously also key players in this drama. Angels are literally messengers of God. They are heavenly beings created by God. According to Psalm 8:5, (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+8:5) angels are created in the order of creation just a little bit above human beings. The Bible is filled with references to Angels. Indeed the Christmas story alone has an angel speaking to Mary (Luke 1:26) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+1:26), an angel speaking to Joseph (Matthew 1:20) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+1:20), an angel speaking to Mary’s uncle Zechariah (Luke 1:11) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=luke+1:11), and an angel speaking to Mary and Joseph telling them to run from King Herod (Matthew 2:13) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=matthew+2:13). We modern people have trouble believing in angels, but the people of Jesus time were convinced that angels existed and brought messages from God to them. And, if we scratch under a modern person’s skeptical skin we can find an angel encounter with almost every person here!
3. **The Sheep** are present for the angel’s chorus. We do know that animals enjoy music, but we do not know if the sheep experienced the joy of the angel’s song. William Barclay suggests that these sheep may be those kept for the Temple sacrifice. If so, they are Temple lambs who were the first to celebrate the coming of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. (John 1:29) (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=john+1:29)

4. **The Holy Family** is certainly the main character in this God encounter. Mary, Jesus' mother is present having just gone through the process of labor and delivery. Joseph, Mary's stalwart and faithful husband is standing by supporting. The new born Jesus: Emmanuel, "God with us" is present! And, as Dr. Kenneth Bailey teaches us, there is the family gathered including the various Aunts, Uncles, and cousins who were gathered for the Roman census. Truly Jesus was born into the family of King David and they were present for the birth!

What is the setting of the story?

1. **The shepherds were doing their job.** They are not on a pilgrimage. They are not out doing something spiritual. They are watching the sheep! They are ordinary men doing an ordinary job and God's messengers break into their lives.
2. **The angels made themselves known to the shepherds.** First one angel appears with God's message. Then, an entire heavenly choir of angels showed up and gave the shepherds a taste of heavenly music. If I were one of the shepherds I might be tempted to think that God was sending this crowd of singers to sing just for me. We can all get so ego centered. The angel choir is singing for Jesus. The good news of Christ's birth cannot be contained in heaven. The shepherds just happen to be around to hear it.
3. **The Holy Family was giving birth.** Mary's labor and delivery are normal human activities. There was blood, sweat, and tears in the birth process. There was exhaustion and exhilaration in the birth process. Joseph is concerned for and supportive of Mary his beloved. And, Jesus is born. Jesus, the Prince of Peace is born. Jesus the Messiah of God is born. Jesus, the Son of God and the Son of Man comes into the world at last!

What is the emotional tone of this story?

1. **The angels were joyful!** All of heaven is singing a joyful song to God for what God is doing on earth. The angel says to the shepherds that the message is one of great joy for all people! They are filled with heavenly joy!
2. **The Holy Family was exhausted and exhilarated!** I do not have to say anything about Mary, Joseph, and Jesus' exhaustion. The birth process is exhausting! The exhilaration is also obvious. Jesus was born healthy! Mary was alive and healthy. Joseph could celebrate the birth of a son! And, for this family there is a big upswing of emotion with the coming of the shepherds and the validation of the angels. Remember that Mary has endured the scorn of the community for her pregnancy before marriage. Joseph has taken the abuse from his peers for his loving treatment of Mary. I am sure both Mary and Joseph have questioned themselves and God about the events that lead up to Mary's pregnancy. Now, the angels sing. The shepherds come with God's good news and kneel down and worship the child. Scripture says that "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." They were exhausted and exhilarated!
3. **The shepherds were afraid!** Perhaps if you are the first child and first grandchild as I was you might respond to the angels with an egocentric, "Well of course God's angels will sing for me. After all, I'm worth it!" But, for the most part the shepherd's response of great fear is our response. When we face overwhelming, out of the box experiences the normal reaction is fear.
 - We are afraid of losing control.
 - We are afraid of not having enough money for our family.
 - We are afraid of what will happen in the government.
 - We are afraid of running out of money before we die.
 - We are afraid of a child dying.

- We are afraid of losing our house to foreclosure.
- We are afraid of losing our jobs.
- We are afraid of being chronically ill.
- We are afraid of our spouse dying.
- We are afraid of dying.

What do all these fears have in common? In each of these fears we are faced with overwhelming situations that come to us from outside of our normal lives and have the possibility to change us forever! What we have here is the shepherd's challenge. And, it is our challenge! What do we do when we life throws us a curve ball and our first emotional response is fear!

The shepherd's response to the shepherd's challenge of fear!

1. **The shepherds acknowledged their fear!** Why else would the angel say to them, "Do not be afraid"? They respond with fear to the angel's coming. They are downright shaking in their boots. They are as the King James Version of the Bible said it, "Sore afraid"! When you find yourself in an overwhelming situation and are afraid, the first thing you can do is to acknowledge I am afraid. You cannot accept the shepherd's challenge until you honestly acknowledge where you are emotionally! I remember my first encounter with the shepherd's challenge. I was about 13 years old and on a trip with a bunch of church boys to a convention in Washington, D.C. Our group had stopped at an amusement park for a day of fun. I had always been afraid of roller coasters. And, this park had a large wooden roller coaster. The park was relatively empty of people that day so we could ride all we wanted. The peer pressure got me on the roller coaster the first time. But, I acknowledged my fear to myself and determined to defeat the fear. I bought 15 tickets and stayed on the roller coaster for 15 simultaneous rides. When I got off the coaster, I was no longer afraid. I was a fan! I acknowledged the fear, faced the fear, and defeated the fear! The shepherd's acknowledged their fear!
2. **The shepherd's faced their fear and turned toward God!** The story says that the shepherds decided to quickly act upon the angel's information. They did not hesitate. They did not decide to wait until morning. They went to Bethlehem with haste! When we face fear our first temptation is to panic and become paralyzed. Our next temptation is to procrastinate. But, the healthy response to an overwhelming life storm coming your way is to take a deep breath, pray, listen for God's direction, and become active! If you are facing foreclosure, pray then talk to someone about it before it happens! If you are possibly going to lose your job, pray then get your resume on line quickly. If you think something is wrong with your body, pray then go to the doctor. If you are afraid something is wrong with your marriage, pray then seek marriage guidance now! The shepherds listened to God and with haste moved down the road!
3. **The shepherd's worshipped at the feet of Jesus!** When you feel afraid, when life has thrown you and ugly, positively horrible curve ball, then your best response is to kneel at Christ's feet for guidance. Allow the Holy Spirit to speak to you through the words of Holy Scripture telling you to let go of your fear. Let the Holy Spirit teach you that fear creates a wall around your mind and heart that keeps God out. Let the Holy Spirit teach you to trust in God in a deeper way than ever before. There are over 500 Scriptures encouraging you to let go of your fear. Here are a few:
 - **Psalm 46:1-7** "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear...." (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+46:1-7)
 - **Psalm 91:1-8** "You who live in the shelter of the Most High...you will not fear the terror of the night or the arrow that flies by day or the pestilence that stalks in the darkness..." (www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+91:1-8)

- **Psalm 118:1-6** “...With the Lord on my side I do not fear. What can mortals do to me?...”
(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=psalm+118:1-6)
- **Isaiah 35:1-7** “...Say to those who are of a fearful heart. ‘Be strong, do not fear!’ Here is your God...He will come and save you....”(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=isaiah+35:1-7)
- **I John 4:18** “There is not fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear...”
(www.biblegateway.com/bible?passage=1+john+4:18)

When you acknowledge that you are afraid, open your heart and mind to God, and worship and pray at the feet of Jesus Christ, you find a presence and a strength to handle anything that this world might throw at you. With Jesus in your life fear cannot rob you of God’s joy; fear cannot rob you of God’s peace, fear cannot rob you of God’s love. In point of fact, as you worship at the cradle of the Christ child, God’s love will cast out your fear and get you ready to move back into your life with creativity and strength.

After visiting the manger, the shepherds went back to work!

When you accept the shepherd’s challenge, face your fear, open yourself to God’s presence, worship at Christ’s feet, you then go back to work. But, you are transformed! You are strengthened. You are renewed. You are ready to overcome your fear and do your work with a different spirit. The shepherds went back with a spring in their steps and a twinkle in their eyes. They were touched by God! They were blessed by God’s love. Fear no longer held them back. They were ready to do their everyday ordinary work in an extraordinary way.

You too can overcome your fear. Take the Shepherd’s challenge this week and cast out the fear that robs you of God’s joy, steals away God’s peace, and covers over God’s love. You can overcome fear. Fear has no power over God or God’s people! Listen well each time the icy grip of fear comes at your heart. Listen well and hear the angel saying. “Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy to all people!” And that message is for you!