

Sermon preached by Pastor Ben Kuerth based on Luke 2:1-20 on December 24, 2016 at Victory of the Lamb

**Series: The Way It Was**  
**Today's Focus: A Shepherd—A Wide-eyed Witness**

**“Surprised to Find Peace!”**

As a shepherd, living outside much of the year, I've spent some cold nights in the Judean countryside, but nothing like the cold and snowy weather you've experienced here in Wisconsin the last couple weeks from what I understand. So it's nice to be here tonight in this warm, comfortable building with you all. What a nice place! I have to admit though, I'm humbled to be here because I'm not at all the kind of person who'd normally be your preacher.

You see I'm just a shepherd—like a babysitter, except...a sheep-sitter. My job was to watch over sheep—to keep them safe and well, alive. To keep them from wandering off and injuring themselves (which they seem to enjoy doing!) and to protect them from the dangers of sneaky bandits and hungry wolves. I hear you sometimes see coyotes in your backyards here in Franklin. Well they're nothing compared to the dangers that our sheep faced out there in the open! And the thing is, unlike your pastors, I didn't go to the Seminary and study to become a preacher. I didn't go to the University of Jerusalem to get a communications degree or anything like that either.

Most of us shepherds were considered part of the lower class. Actually, as an occupation, being a shepherd was about as lowly as you could go. And people didn't always trust us. I hate to admit it but shepherds like me didn't have the best of reputations. Some shepherds didn't give a rip about the sheep they were hired to protect. Some shepherds were known to lie and cheat and steal.

And if I'm to be perfectly honestly with you all here tonight, I've had my own issues. I mean... I've tried hard to be a good person to make up for some of the stuff I've done, but I can't undo it all. Impossible. And no matter what I do, I just can't win in the eyes of some people. And there are some major regrets that I have in life too. A lot of things I wish I never said. A lot of things I'd go back and do differently if only I could. This is the kind of stuff you think about when you're a shepherd staying up trying to count the sheep. But I'm guessing a lot of you have those same kind of thoughts, don't you?

Sometimes sitting out there in the cold at night it could feel awfully lonely. Sometimes while fighting to stay awake, I couldn't help but think I deserved to feel that way. That somehow I deserved to feel all alone. I questioned whether God could accept me, whether he even cared.

Any of you here tonight feel like that? Like I said it's cold out there in the Judean countryside at night but maybe where you experience feeling cold the most is on the inside, because emotionally, even though you're perhaps sitting close beside family, you've never felt more distant from them. You've never felt more alone. Maybe it's the things you've said recently. Or cumulatively the things that have been said to you over the past year, the past ten...or more. Things that would have made the most hardened Roman soldier blush.

Or perhaps for some of you your highest hope would have been to be present here today with someone that loves you unconditionally but for whatever reason that person is absent in your life or you wonder if you'll ever find them. Your heart aches for companionship and you feel lonely. Folks, I don't know

what you're all feeling on the inside tonight but as a shepherd I do know what it's like to feel alone out in the cold.

Have you ever considered that Jesus knows this feeling too? You know as a shepherd I didn't live in the suburbs in a nice comfy home. I mean you all have some nice houses around here. If baby Jesus had been born in Franklin instead of Bethlehem I'd like to think he probably could've found a place in one of your spare bedrooms...except, well I'll just say it, I wonder...how many of you would have turned away that young Jewish couple Joseph and Mary—those Middle Eastern looking folks from out of town frantically going door to door at night looking for a place to stay? How many of you would've judged them a security risk and pretended you weren't even home hoping they'd just go away? Bethlehem might have been the first time but it wasn't the last when people didn't have room enough for Jesus.

But what do I know? I'm just a lowly shepherd, a country boy without a college degree. I have no credit cards. I have no special credentials. I don't even drive a car. We didn't have any government health care and my job provided no 401K retirement plan.

But I was there! I was there on that first Christmas Eve! In fact my shepherd friends and I were the very first people ever to really get to celebrate Christmas. And even though after that night we continued to be shepherds—and so in one sense everything about our lives stayed the same on the outside (just like all of you will go home tonight and much on the outside in your life will stay the same)—yet on the inside from that evening on we'd never be the same! And so the real reason I'm here to tell you my story is because I believe that long after tonight your lives will never be the same either.

There we were, just like St. Luke the good doctor said, living out in the fields nearby Bethlehem, keeping watch over our flocks by night. In hindsight I realize now these were the same fields where 1,000 years before us a young king David would've watched his father Jesse's sheep before he became king and his own son Solomon built a temple for the Lord. And there we were watching over sheep, some of which would later be sold in the temple for the religious sacrifices in Jerusalem while nearby in a Bethlehem stable the Lord was keeping watch over his ancient promise of sending a Savior. Of providing a once-for-all sacrifice—his own Son as an unblemished, sinless Lamb who would die one day on the cross to take away the sins of the world! Little did we know. These are the kinds of things you think about later when you're alone with your thoughts out there in the fields.

Because it's not like we were sitting out there playing with our iPhones or watching Netflix. And so in some ways maybe it was easier for us shepherds to have conversations and make these connections. We didn't have all the distractions you have today. I can't imagine how tough it must be to focus on God and his promises when you're constantly being marketed to with ads for newer and brighter and better toys and distracted by endless notification reminders and fake news meant to polarize you and turn you against each other while others pocket piles of money every time you take the bait.

But again there we were, just keeping watch over our flocks by night. Life was pretty simple. I mean do you realize what kind of world you live in? You've got all this technology. But it's so much more complicated than my world I think. And I wonder if because of that you've lost a sense of wonder. If you've lost the ability to truly be impressed. I mean how much of life you take for granted, how much of it feels kind of ho-hum because you're always in such a hurry? Do you even know how to wait patiently? Are you impressed by anything anymore? I mean fresh fruit in the middle of winter. Are you kidding me? King Solomon couldn't have imagined eating like you do. High definition TV's streaming video in 4K with

whatever kind of entertainment suits your fancy on demand? Face timing family who live hundreds, even thousands of miles away. You've got airplanes that fly, cars that are now beginning to drive themselves, and remote control drones with cameras that some of you might even get as a Christmas gift. Yet because of all this I wonder how many of you will open up presents tonight or tomorrow morning and say, "Wow, thanks!" even though what you're thinking is, "Meh, not that impressed."

Think about it. What would your reaction be to seeing a little baby lying in a manger surrounded by farm animals and two poor tired looking parents? What would you say? Would you be impressed?

I wouldn't normally have been either, but I was! Because I've to come learn something really important—that this is where God chooses to hide his impressive glory, right there...cloaked in incredible weakness. I've come to learn this is where you'll find the extraordinary...right there in what seems like the ordinary. Don't miss it because there in this tiny helpless human child lying in the manger is at the same time the Son of the mighty, Most High God! Human DNA yet Deity itself. God's Son deployed on a mission to save sinners like you and me out of unconditional love for us all. God's Son come down to bring us peace!

You know how I knew that? Because one moment I was alone with my thoughts and a couple other sleepy shepherd coworkers on a dark winter's night when all of a sudden, surprise! The sky was ablaze with light and then booming with the voice of an angel! And the thing you need to understand is that this brightness was more than just a mega LED spotlight. It was the radiance of God's own glory. More impressive than anything it was terrifying until the angel moved in to calm our fears. **"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord."** In other words, this great news of a Savior was not just for the pious, not just for the elite or the wealthy, but for everybody—Jew and Gentile, peasant and king, for sheep-sitters, city slickers, and you who live in the suburbs.

And then? An entourage of angels appeared in the sky! More glorious than any fireworks display you've ever seen. And you know what they sang about? Peace. **"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."**

How many people have died unnecessarily fighting each other in the 2,000 years since the angels sang this song about peace? Have you seen the pictures of Syria? Devastating. How many marriages have unnecessarily died with spouses belittling or besieging each other when they could've put down their verbal weapons of marriage destruction but refused because of stubborn pride? How many have people have pulled away from God altogether because of hidden prejudices or because they harbored guilty pleasures and dark secrets that remained unconfessed? How many people have ruined their careers or families by seeking peace at the bottom of a bottle or with a needle and a syringe instead of through worship and prayer and seeking God in his word? How many of you right now long to know that there is a gracious God before you can come clean and confess your sins who loves you unconditionally and who has done everything already so that you can be at peace with him so that when you die, no matter when that day might be, you can know that heaven is your home?

I longed for it too. We all do, don't we? But I found it there, right there in that unlikely place where God wanted me to, tucked away in the manger—hidden away from the rich and famous, the powerful and prideful. Friends, what I want more than anything else, what God wants more than anything else, is for you to find it there too. To find peace. Peace tonight brought to you by the Prince of peace, your Savior,

lying there swaddled up in the manger just as the angel said. Don't miss out though just because it's hidden there. Remember, this is how God works. He hides his glory in weakness. He cloaks the extraordinary with the ordinary. Think about it.

God's Son made his grand entrance into the world and who would find out first? Us lowly, lonely shepherds. Haven't you ever wondered why? I mean if you were God wouldn't you have called a press conference and issue credentials to all the biggest news personalities and hyped it up? Wouldn't you have made a YouTube video or gotten the endorsement of some famous celebrities or athletes to announce the news? At the very least if you were going to send the top-ranked angel choir to sing the Gloria in Excelsis wouldn't you have picked the most populated place on the planet? And yet God picked us lowly shepherds and the angels sang their most beautiful song about peace in the unpopulated countryside surrounding Bethlehem.

Why? Friends, listen carefully. God's gift of a Savior is for everyone. But those who are too busy, too full of pride, too smart for their own britches, too self-sufficient or too self-righteous will not receive it. You see, God only fills up the hungry. He only quenches the thirsty. He only lifts up the lowly. He only binds up the broken. He only forgives *sinner*s. He only surprises with peace those who are painfully aware that they cannot find it on their own. And so friends, if that's you and you're hungry...God wants to fill up your soul tonight. If you're hurting...God wants to mend your heart. If you're fighting...God wants you to know that peace is still available...it is available for all. It is available for you. For your marriage. For your family. And it comes to you as a free gift in the very form of God's one and only Son.

God's love for you sent Jesus to earth to be born in a manger. God's love for you drove Jesus to the cross to die a brutal and horrific death in your place. God's love for you rolled away the stone from the tomb. And, just as important, God's love continues to provide for you today. He gives us peace. God is calling us all of us to himself the way he always does, through a simple message about his Son—no matter who you are, no matter what you've done, no how much money you make, no matter what the condition of your relationships status is right now, no matter what your political perspectives are. There is room for you at the manger. Do you see how much God loves you? Here you can find peace.

You know what delights your Father in heaven? When you worship wide-eyed with wonder. When you put down your stubborn pride. When you lay aside the harsh and angry words you've become accustomed to using at home. When you lay bare your soul and say, "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." Because then you can unwrap the Christmas gifts Jesus came to bring—the gifts of forgiveness, peace and joy!

And when you've worshipped wide-eyed with wonder in the presence of your Savior, then you can't help but also be excited to share that peace with others. That's right. I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, but God has called and equipped you to share the good news about Jesus too. And as a lowly shepherd let me assure you, you don't have to be articulate, just *available*. You know the best sermon I preached wasn't this one tonight, but the one on that first Christmas Eve when I simply couldn't contain my joy. I didn't have it all figured out, yet I knew without a doubt that Jesus had it all covered. <sup>17</sup> **When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child,** <sup>18</sup> **and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.**