

The Last, the Least, and the Lost *(Christmas Eve)*

Luke 2:8-20

[SLIDE 1] *Welcome and prayer.*

[SLIDE 2] Have you ever been to a sheep farm? When I was a teen, I accompanied my dad, a veterinarian, on a farm call to deliver some sheep. I have to admit, it was not my favorite place to go, although it was amazing to see lambs being born. Here's the thing about raising sheep: it's not exactly glamorous. And it's a hard job! Sheep need constant care. And while modern farmers may have pens and barns and fences and veterinarians, back in Jesus' day, being a shepherd was an outdoor job, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, with no paid vacation.

Lambs are cute and affectionate, but they are relatively defenseless and need constant supervision and care. They get lost easily. They can't find food or water by themselves. They get hurt. And frankly, they're kind of smelly. When you're a shepherd, you get to do all the dirty work, all the time. Birthing lambs, feeding lambs, washing lambs, shearing lambs...even slaughtering lambs.

[SLIDE 3] Shepherds didn't mingle with other people, for several reasons. Their sheep needed pasture, and I suspect the shepherds preferred to avoid regular society. The point is, shepherds were outsiders. Literally.

Shepherds belonged to a group I would call “the last, the least, and the lost.” You didn't usually go to the shepherds for fashion trends. You didn't go to them for the latest news or advice. You went to them when you needed sheep products, and that was it.

[SLIDE 4] Now, shepherding wasn't all that bad. In fact, it was a very sustainable and common lifestyle. Shepherds used their flock for food, drink, clothing, trading, and even shelter. But shepherds were excluded from regular life. They worked 24/7, lived outdoors and constantly traveled, plus they dealt with a lot of yucky and dangerous stuff, like wolves! Shepherds were not getting invited to any holiday parties.

[SLIDE 5] All of this makes the Christmas story even more amazing. The bible says that a “host of angels” showed up to give the shepherds the good news, that Christ was born. In the bible, a “host” is not the one who puts out the eggnog and hangs up your coat. A “host” is not a choir, even though the lyric

goes, “Sing, Choirs of Angels.” In this story, “host” means an army. A great company. A multitude. All the troops of heaven, standing in formation, ready to charge, shouting their battle cry.

It’s no wonder the first angel had to tell the shepherds not to be afraid. If a blazing heavenly soldier suddenly stood before you, you might feel the need to back away quickly. Next Halloween, if you want a really great costume, go as an angel and shout in a loud voice to everyone, “Fear not!”

[SLIDE 6] The contrast of characters couldn’t be stranger: all the host of heaven versus a bunch of lowly shepherds on the outskirts of town. What is the gospel telling us? The good news of Christmas first came to the lowly. Don’t ever forget that. In all of our Christmas busy-ness, in the shopping and decorating and cooking, remember this simple fact: The good news of Christmas first came to the last, the least, and the lost.

The announcement to the shepherds was incredibly unexpected. Just imagine this scene in heaven:

[SLIDE 7] The angels are all together, and Gabriel tells them, “Guess what, guys? We’re going to earth to announce the Messiah’s birth!”

The other angels all get excited and think, “Let’s see: there’s the temple, and the palace, and a few mountain tops, and, ooh, the pyramids. Let’s go there!”

But Gabriel says, “Nope. That’s not how we’re going to do it. We’re going to visit a few shepherds, on the outskirts of a small town.”

“Not even Rome, the Coliseum?”

“No, just Bethlehem.”

How could heaven contain itself? They had this secret, and they only got one chance to tell it. Well, they certainly made the most of it! This glorious flash mob of heaven broke out singing, “Glory to God in the Highest, and peace and goodwill on earth.”

[SLIDE 8] Can you imagine how the shepherds must have felt? First, the night was quiet, then suddenly, the sky was filled with radiant glory, and the next moment, it was dark and silent again. They must have been pinching themselves. Did it really happen? There was only one way to find out. They dropped everything, even left their precious sheep behind, and raced off to Bethlehem.

[SLIDE 9] Now, these lowly shepherds were given a sign to help them find Christ. “Look for a baby all wrapped up and sleeping in a feeding trough.” Not a miraculous sign, not an extraordinary sign. A simple sign. A sign of humility, something commonly found among the poor. A child, wrapped tightly in cloth, and lying in a manger. The lowly shepherds look for a lowly baby in a barn.

How amazing it must have been to see Jesus for the first time, to behold him as a newborn baby, in such simple surroundings. To see him there with his poor parents, who must have been initially surprised to see these shepherds and hear their story. Can you imagine the wonder of it all, to behold the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of the World, in a room full of smelly animals, a peasant couple, and bunch of lowly shepherds?

[SLIDE 10] At the beginning of his adult ministry, Jesus said something we should never forget. Quoting from Isaiah 61, he said, “The Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor.” (Luke 4:18). The gospel is good news for the poor. This is something we must know. The Christmas message is for all people. The last, the least, the lost...all of us. The angels did not visit the elite, they went to the lowest of the society. That means that there is no one too marginal, too far outside of society, or too poor. All can receive Christ as their Savior. He wasn’t born as some political leader or religious hero. He wasn’t born to simply be a miracle worker and heal the sick. He was born to save us from our sins. Jesus was born as the Prince of Peace, to bring peace to the world and peace to our hearts.

[SLIDE 11] Christmas is a season of excitement. We know that already. But what are we excited for? Have you stopped to consider the full meaning of Christmas? Do you know that this is good news for all people? Do you know that it started with the lowest in society? Tonight, can I ask you, like the shepherds, are you willing to drop everything and run to Jesus?

The birth of Jesus is more than a good story, or some excuse to have a big meal and open presents. Christmas is about Love, Joy, Peace, and Hope – all God’s gifts to us through Jesus. This is good news for the poor. It will always be. If you ever hear that the Christmas story is only good news for the rich, for the insiders, and for the “acceptable people”, you are not hearing the real Christmas story.

I can imagine the shepherds' voices echoing through the town. "Good news! Christ is born! Have you heard the news? Glory to God in the highest! Praise God!" The shepherds could not contain themselves. Heaven broke out into an angelic chorus. Good news! Peace to all!

Let us always remember to make Christmas good news to everyone, especially the last, the least, and the lost. After all, they had the honor of hearing it first. Amen.

Sing "Silent Night" with candles. Katja and I sing in German, first verse. Congregation sings 3 more verses.

Blessing: These candles remind us that darkness can never overcome the light. As we close our service, I offer you this simple poem as a reminder of the Christmas story:

This lowly shepherd saw the angels.

This lowly shepherd was afraid.

This lowly shepherd went to Bethlehem.

This lowly shepherd saw the babe.

And this lowly shepherd cried, "Glory to God!" all the way home.

May you go forth this night in the peace and hope that the good news is for you and for all. Merry Christmas.

(Sing "Go Tell in on the Mountain.")

MEMORY VERSE:

Isaiah 61:1 "...the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor..."

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

1. Who is your favorite character in the Christmas story? Why?
2. Who are the shepherds, i.e. the poor and lowly, in today's world?
3. When have you seen the gospel as good news to the poor?
4. When have you seen it be bad news?
5. How will you make the Christmas story good news again in your life and those around you?