**Witnesses: the shepherds – Luke 2:8-20**

**Intro**

One of the mostly fun - yet sometimes incredibly frustrating - things about being in a relationship with someone, is in learning about their likes/dislikes. Beyond just learning about that person that we care so much about, one of the key benefits of learning this stuff, is that it also helps us to express love and concern for them as we learn what things they appreciate. And of course, learning what things they *don’t* appreciate also helps keep us out of trouble.

And so, as I’ve gotten to know my wife over the years, one of the things I came to learn about her early on is that – when it comes to choices in movies – after films with Ryan Gosling or Sarah Jessica Parker in them (which, honestly, I really struggle to appreciate) my wife loves legal dramas. And that’s a love we both share for sure. Man, you give me Pacino, Deniro, Denzel Washington, or Matt McConaughey in a courtroom drama - we’re getting popcorn and slurpees and sunggling in! In fact /there was a time in my life when I would have absolutely loved to pursue a law degree myself.

I mention all that for the simple fact that we are beginning a new series today that we’ve entitled “Witnesses: encounters with the newborn King” which will actually take us through to the end of the year. And each Sunday, we’ll be looking at different people in the story of Jesus’ birth – mostly from Luke’s gospel – and – in effect – calling them as witnesses in a court case; calling them to give testimony as to what they saw, or heard, or experienced. Each one – like in many court cases – witnessed the *exact same event*, and yet /they experienced it in very different ways and with very different conclusions. And the case that is being tried/ really/ is whether or not this baby truly is who the bible says He is, viz. God in human flesh. And that’s significant b/c if Jesus is just some baby born in a nowhere town 2000 years ago, then who cares? But if He’s more than that – and each of the witnesses we’re calling to the stand are going to testify that He is – then we can learn a great deal from the way these people were transformed by their encounters with this newborn King.

And I think that’s appropriate /especially when you consider the beginning of the book of Luke, where Luke states that the whole point of this book is to draw up an orderly account of the message of the gospel through “careful investigation” of numerous eyewitnesses, so that – Luke says – this man Theophilus who has commissioned this account – and by extension you and I – may know the certainty of the things that have been taught. So, Luke has investigated the claims about Jesus and interviewed eyewitnesses over a number of years in order to draw up this account that we have in the gospel of Luke. And we believe, as well, that the Holy Spirit also guided both those investigations as well as the writing of these accounts.

Now, think for a moment about what a witness is in a court case. I spoke to our resident legal expert in the congregation Michelle to be sure I was understanding this correctly. A witness is someone who is called by either the defense or the prosecution , in order to help prove (or dis-prove) whatever is being decided on in the court case. And they are to give a sworn account account of whatever it is that they saw/heard/experienced as away of helping to prove the case of either side. They first submit to deposition/examination for discovery outside of court, and then that testimony they give is written down and used in the actual court case where a judge or a jury decide the outcome.

And so in a very real sense, we will be examining the written depositions that Luke and Matthew present in the gospels as evidence supporting the claim that Jesus is who the bible says He is.

So that’s what we’ll be looking at for the next 5 weeks. And this morning the first witness deposition we’ll be looking at, is of **the shepherds** found in Luke 2. And right out of the gate, what’s interesting about talking about these guys first is that - in ancient Israel anyways - shepherds could not give testimony in court. These guys were the very bottom of the social ladder; they were outcasts in society; ceremonially unclean according to Jewish tradition and considered untrustworthy and unreliable. And yet /// when God chooses to announce the birth of the Saviour of the world to mankind, He doesn’t come to the King, or to the religious leaders or even to the upper crust of society //// He comes to these guys; to shepherds. And I think that’s *incredibly* significant and also *very* revealing as to how it is that God operates.

B/c – just like the shepherd in our passage this morning – whether it’s b/c of some moral failing/some perceived lack of gifting/or even a lack of societal standing – **we can wrongly assume that God is no longer concerned with us or that He could use us for any purpose in His Kingdom.** And what we see in our passage this morning is that no one is beyond the hope of usefulness in God’s mind. Even the most unlikely have a purpose in God’s Kingdom.

So – if God chose to announce the birth of His Son to these shepherds – I think that makes their testimony admissible in this case. And I want to look at their testimony this morning in just two ways: I want to look at **the angelic announcement** and then **a satisfied curiosity (x2).**

So if you’ve closed your bibles, open them again with me to Luke 2:8 and we’ll investigate this testimony together.

Ok, so let’s begin by looking at:

1. **The angelic announcement – vs. 8-14**

This deposition by Luke may have began, perhaps, with the question, “Can you tell us about your whereabouts on the evening of December 25th AD1?” (I’m not at all interested – BTW - in debating with anyone about whether or not Jesus was actually born on December 25th. The bible doesn’t say, and history tell us that December 25th started to be the day the western church celebrated Jesus birth around the 4th Century under the emperor Constantine) So, let’s just go with that for now. So, “Shepherds, can you tell us about where you were on the evening of Dec. 25th?”

Look at vs. 8 with me and we can begin to see their answer. Luke writes **(READ vs. 8)** Now “fields nearby” means near Bethlehem in the region of Judea. And these shepherds were – big surprise – keeping watch over their flocks of sheep through the night. What’s interesting is that we see that these guys truly were outcasts of society b/c the bible tells us these shepherds weren’t just up late, working the night shift; look again at vs. 8, it says they were “living out in the fields” keeping watch over their flocks. And generally, for this “night watch” the shepherd would gather the sheep into some enclosure or a cave even, and then lie down at the entrance so that – presumably – any predator would have to go through them to get to the sheep.

So they’re out in the fields near Bethlehem tucking in for the night with their sheep. Next Luke may have asked, “Can you tell us what you witnessed then?” And here, we see the answer to that question in vs. 9 – 15; look with me there. They say in vs. 9 **(READ vs. 9)** So, w/o any warning whatsoever, an angel appears to these guys, and – it says here – “the glory of the Lord shone around them.” Now, glory of the Lord here means the shining brilliance/brightness of God’s presence, and this is shining all around them as this angel appears to them.

* In Exodus there is this amazing moment where Moses asks to see the glory of God, and God says, “yeah, ok” but then He says, “but in order to do that I’m going to have to put you inside the cleft of a rock and cover you with My hand, or you would never survive the encounter!”

So what that means here is that these shepherds must have also been divinely protected *or* what they are seeing/experiencing is not the full measure of God’s glory revealed to them; otherwise they would never have survived either. But even what they do see of God’s glory shakes them to the core and they are terrified.

Now, of course, in vs. 10 the angels tells them not be afraid. I’ve never really understood how the angel expects that to happen when he’s just appearing out of nowhere with light shining everywhere.

* I know, for me, I honestly get kind of a sick pleasure in sneaking up on people and terrifying them (probably something wrong with me).

But here, I think the intent of the angel’s words is, “You don’t have to be afraid.” And the reason is - the angel says, is b/c he hasn’t come to destroy these guys but to give them “good news of great joy.” The Greek word, actually that is used for “good news” is the verbal form of *euangelion* which means “the gospel.” So the angel says in effect, I’ve come to give you a gospel of great joy that will be for all people. So the news is not just for these shepherds alone, but for “all the people.”

And as we think about the gospel message of God sending His Son to the earth to live and die and rise again for our sins, that is a message that we also believe is for all people and for all time. As we said before, that is certainly one of the points of giving this announcement to the lowest in society, to show that none are excluded and the hope of the gospel is extended prodigally to all who will receive it.

“And what did the angel say to you?” Luke may have asked next. And then here in vs. 11-12 we see how they reply; look with me there. The angel said **(READ vs. 11-12).** So the angel tells them that in the town/city of David (which is Bethlehem) “a Saviour has been born” and that He is “Christ the Lord.” Ok, tow things to say here:

1. Only once in all of Matthew, Mark and Luke, and then once is John’s gospel, is Jesus referred to specifically with the term “Saviour” although the Name Jesus is specifically and Anglicized version of the Hebrew Name Jeshua which means “the Lord saves.”
2. Calling the baby “Christ the Lord” is a whole powder-keg of terminology packed into a small package. “Christ” is the Greek form of the Hebrew “Messiah” – the promised Seed in Genesis 3 who would come and defeat the serpent and sin that separates us from relationship with God. “The Lord” is the Greek version of God’s own Name YHWH given to Moses at the burning bush.

So, the combination of these terms gives the highest of titles and honor to this baby born in Bethlehem. He is “Christ the Lord”/the promised Messiah and God Himself in the flesh.

Next, the angel also tells them in vs. 12 where they can find this baby in Bethlehem; a helpful addition to his announcement. He says the sign that will let them know they have the right baby, is that He will be wrapped in swaddling clothes (not that helpful at all) *and* lying in a manger (*much* more helpful). The reason – perhaps for us city folk – may be entirely lost on us today, but this would have been an easily identifiable sign for these shepherds. B/c – although everyone swaddled their babies in those days, *no one* kept their baby in an animal feeding trough in a barn.

It’s funny, in most nativity scenes or kids Christmas plays, the manger is always this, like, golden box with immaculate hay and light shining out of it. This is not at *all* what we should be thinking of.

Occasionally, we have visited some friends of my wife’s family out in Sumas Prairie who have a cattle farm there, and I gotta tell you – without being unnecessarily graphic – if you could avoid it in *any* way or had *any* other option, you would not be putting a new born baby down on *anything* in that place, let alone where the animals are eating from.

And the same is true here for these shepherds. They’d be like, “The baby is *where?!?* Oh ok, no problem finding that!”

And then in vs. 13-14 – as though the announcement of the angel needed any confirmation at all – God now tears open the night sky and a whole host of angels appears praising God and saying, “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace toward men on whom His favour rests*.” Interesting to note – BTW – that “host” is actually a military term; and so what you have here is actually an army of angels bringing an announcement of peace.

But more than confirmation even, I think what we have here is simply the prodigal, excessive, over-the-top celebration of all of heaven at the birth of Jesus.

You know like when you go into those stores that sell fireworks around Halloween and they have all those boxes of fireworks, but then – behind the counter – is like this massive box of fireworks that’s like $10,000 that no one ever buys? Well, what we’re seeing here is that – for the birth of Jesus – God the Father bought the big box. He went all out for this celebration.

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And although there’s a lot we could say already here from this testimony, my encouragement to you here is just to let the way God celebrates the birth of His Son inform the way you celebrate it this year and every year. And look at me – that doesn’t mean spending money. What I mean is that – if you know what the birth of Jesus means and what He came to accomplish for us – shouldn’t that make His coming something we celebrate with the same amount of joy and praise that the angels did?

And I absolutely understand that – for a lot of people – Christmas is actually a really difficult time filled with a lot of hardships and/or memories of some really difficult things or of people who are no longer here. I don’t mean to take anything away from that or to dismiss any of that hardship or pain. But what I do mean is that - of the event of Jesus coming *itself* – we ought to celebrate all the same wonder and hope of this most humble of comings of our Saviour. Besides, my guess is: if we were to strip away all the stuff we do at Christmas that has nothing to do with celebration of the coming of Jesus, there’d be a whole lot less going on.

Ok, so that’s **the angelic announcement** part of the shepherd’s testimony. Next I want us to look at:

1. **A satisfied curiosity – vs. 15 -20**

“Wow” Luke may have said. “What an unbelievable experience! Can you tell us what you did next?”

And we see in vs. 15 what they say. Look with me there. We read **(READ vs. 15).** So the angels had left – and let’s be honest here – likely after cleaning up a bit and changing some clothes – the shepherds say to one another, “We have *got* to go check this deal out!” Their curiosity is piqued in the most astounding way and they simple *need* to go and see if this thing they’ve been told about is true. But, really interestingly, look at how they describe the message they just heard. Look again at vs. 15. They say they want to go see this thing that has happened, “which *the Lord* has made known to us.” So the shepherds understand this announcement as – yes - coming by the agency of this angel, but as coming ultimately from the Lord Himself. God is the One who has made this known to them and they are convinced of that!

And we see in vs. 16 then – look with me there – that when they get into Bethlehem, they find Mary and Joseph and the baby *exactly* as they were told they would find Him, lying in a manger.

And then we see in vs. 17, that these lowly, outcast, shepherds now become some of the very first evangelists after their encounter with Jesus. Look at what Luke records in vs. 17-18 they **(READ vs. 17-18).** So they’re telling Mary and Joseph and *anyone* who will listen to them about what they saw out in the fields as well as how it was then confirmed when they went to check it out for themselves. And then in vs. 20 they head back to their flocks – probably so caught up in the moment that all of a sudden they were like, “*Oh crap! The sheep*!!” and running back to their flocks still out in the field. But they still head back – look at vs. 20 – **(READ vs. 20).** So, along with being changed into evangelists, they are also transformed into worshippers by this encounter with Jesus.

And I think you very often see that kind of passionate, evangelistic fervor and excitement from those who have just met Jesus for the first time. They have this unhindered, joyful desire to tell anyone and everyone about what Jesus has done for them. I’ll never understand why it is that we lose that same joy and desire to share the hope of the gospel.

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But what I want to highlight here is the **reliability** of the message that was given to these shepherds. They were not seeking this newborn King. But they were told this amazing message about His birth and then – look at me – when they got to the stable, what they found was *exactly* what they had been told. There was no surprises; no “wellllll, ok … it’s not *exactly* a baby in a manger, it’s an alien in a space pod” or whatever.

And this is one of my chief complaints with preachers of a prosperity gospel. This kind of, “Come to Jesus and all your problems will be solved.” “Come to Jesus and you’ll have cars and houses and you’ll never get sick or be hungry anymore.” And it is a lie. It is false. When/if you actually get up and go to the “stable” you are *not* going to find what was promised. It’s just not there. And how disillusioning; how searing to the heart towards Jesus, is a false message of hope to someone desperate to find it?

So, as you go about your life – and I pray telling people about the hope found only in Jesus – remember that you don’t need to make Jesus more attractive or more desirable than He already is. He doesn’t need you to pump His tires or improve on His PR campaign. The *very* best PR we give Jesus is when we faithfully tell people about what He did for us, and then, live lives that show that we have actually been transformed by Him. The gospel is what transforms people; not how well you tell it!

**Conclusion**

 So that’s the first of 6 witness testimonies we’ll be looking at in this case; submitted for our approval and consideration. And /really/we’re going to see something different with each of these witness accounts each week, b/c – as we said – even witness accounts of the same event often produce a wide variety of testimonies and reactions.

But, as we look at the shepherds in particular today/ I want us to consider two things from this morning’s testimony: one is a more of a challenge and the other is an encouragement.

First, do you remember how a few weeks ago when we went through our core values series and we walked about “Everyone is a minister”? If you weren’t here, or just don’t remember, we were looking at what the apostle Paul says in 2 Cor. 5 about how - as reconciled children of God - we are now Christ’s ambassadors here on earth; that part of our job now as Christians is to rep Jesus well through lives transformed by the gospel.

And my challenge to you from this passage is simply this: when people (Christian or not) encounter Jesus in you on a regular basis, what does He look like to them? Does He look like a gracious, compassionate Saviour; come not to be served, but to serve? Or does He look more like an angry, hair-triggered judge ready to condemn people at every turn?

I ask that simply b/c I wonder if – beyond the surprise of the angel’s appearance – these outcast, despised shepherds were not also terrified b/c they were expecting nothing but judgment from God? If *every* *one* of their interactions with God through the religious leaders in particular, and pious Jews in general, was negative and condemning, how much *worse* would they have been expecting this interaction to go; face to face with an angel of the Lord? And it makes me wonder if that isn’t why - immediately after telling these shepherds not to be afraid - the angel told them that what he had to tell them was “good news of great joy.” Jesus Himself said – right after that famous verse in John 3 that Christians love to quote – “God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through Him.” If that’s the Jesus God sent, then shouldn’t the Jesus people see in us look like Him? No, not a Jesus who’s cool with sin, but a Jesus whose mission is saving not condemning? Make sure the Jesus people see in you actually looks like Jesus.

Second, I want to encourage you this morning from this passage by thinking about *who* it is that God gave this message to /and *who* it is that’s been transformed by this encounter. Remember, these shepherds are at the absolute bottom of the social ladder and – let’s be honest – living out with the fields all day with sheep, they probably looked and smelled like it too! And yet, God chose to give the birth announcement of His Son ////to *these guys*; and their testimony is now recorded for all time in holy Scripture.

And you need to know that this is God’s pattern all through the bible; taking the most unlikely of people and using them in the most extraordinary of ways. Using unexpected people as His heralds and as His evangelists. Think of the woman at the well - outcast by society b/c she was now on her 6th husband/ and yet // transformed by an encounter with Jesus, and now running through the streets evangelizing the very people that rejected her. Or Zaccheaus – hated by everyone as a tax collector; transformed by an encounter with Jesus and now demonstrating a radically transformed life. Or the apostle Paul – a man who once persecuted and killed Christians// one encounter with Jesus /and then/ the greatest missionary the world has ever seen. God chooses the weak things in this world to shame the strong, says Paul; the foolish things to shame the wise. So that none of us //// *none* of us/ could ever boast before God or anyone else.

If this baby born in a manger 2000 years ago, truly is who the bible says He is – and that’s what these witnesses have come to give testimony to – then that means that your encounter with Him/ will be no less transforming than it was for these witnesses.

The point from the testimony we looked at today is that God has a purpose and a plan for all of us; for wicked sinners, and self-righteous religious people alike. Even the most unlikely have a purpose in His Kingdom. So that certainly includes you/ and I know /that definitely then includes me too. Thanks be to God.