

Jesus' Friends: The Unkempt Shepherds

[Luke 2:1-20](#)

The Christmas Pageant

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We've heard this story so often that it may surprise us to learn that these shepherds were not the pious, humble folk we see on our Christmas cards. On the contrary, like merchant seamen who spend their lives far from civilization and from civilizing influences, these shepherds were a pretty rough and ready lot. They weren't even especially religious. Well, how could they be? They worked 24/7/52, twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, making it virtually impossible to worship on the Sabbath. And because they were constantly on the move, driving their sheep from field to field, their children couldn't enroll in programs of religious education. So generation after generation of shepherds grew up outside the frontiers of society, suspicious of townspeople, and without much of a spiritual commitment.

Moreover, respectable people avoided shepherds, not only because they were irreligious but because many were dishonest. Here is what one rabbi had to say about shepherds: "Let no man make his son a camel driver, a shepherd, or an innkeeper, forasmuch as their craft is a craft of robbers."

Yet it was to such men, unwanted in polite society and estranged from organized religion, that God first broke the news of the Savior's birth. But since shepherds were persons with such unsavory reputations, what have they to do with us? We ARE polite society; we ARE organized religion; OUR reputations are unassailable. So what do the shepherds have to say to us?

Quite a lot, in fact. First, because THE SHEPHERDS WENTŚ "They went with haste," Luke says, "and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in a manger." Well, you say, of course they went. How could they not go, after such a display of angelic splendor? It's one thing to hear about the Savior, but that's only second-hand news, even if it comes from angels. Far better to go and see for yourself.

Today, many hear about Jesus, but never bother to go and see for themselves. Somewhere along the line, perhaps in a college philosophy course, or an article in Newsweek, or a PBS special, somewhere they picked up second-hand information that led them to believe that Jesus was a mere man, that Christianity was created by the Apostle Paul, or that all religious faith is (as Freud put it) "a defense against human helplessness." But they have never gone to see for themselves.

They may pride themselves on being well-read, but they never read the Gospels. They may think themselves unbiased, but they never gave Jesus a chance to prove himself. They may consider themselves liberal, but when it comes to Jesus they are as narrow-minded as the most rigid fundamentalist.

If you are still on the outside looking in, I urge you to go and see for yourself. You might start by reading the Gospel of Mark in the New Testament. It's the shortest of the four Gospels. It will take you one hour and ten minutes (I timed it myself last week). Read Mark, and then pick up Lee Strobel's book, "The Case for Christ." Strobel was a reporter for the Chicago Tribune who investigated the evidence and ended up believing in Jesus. You will too, if, with open mind, you go and see for yourself.

Second, THE SHEPHERDS WITNESSED. "When they saw this," Luke writes, "they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them." Last Wednesday morning I had breakfast with three youth outreach workers sponsored by World Vision in our inner city. There should have been four, but one was shot recently and is still recovering from his wounds. These young men are witnessing to Christ's power on the streets and in the schools of our city, and lives are being transformed. One of the four, Treasure Iwuoha, went to a high school principal to offer his services. She immediately put him in touch with a fifteen year old who, she said, was in a gang and was suicidal. Treasure got in tight with this young man, and learned that when he was four he had been riding in a car with his father when someone shot them both at close range. His father died and he was severely

wounded. For years he had carried a gun for fear that the man who killed his father would come after him, because he could identify him. Treasure invited the teenager to a summer camp run by Young Life. While at camp, the boy gave his life to Christ. When he returned home he got rid of his guns, got serious about school, and became active in his church. I sat for an hour listening to similar stories, stories of redeemed lives because four young men are witnessing for Christ in some of the toughest wards of DC.

And how can we witness in our worlds, worlds that are so different on the outside but just as needy on the inside? Clark Jones, director of this outreach program, told us, "Kids don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." That's no less true of our unchurched friends: They don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. So that's where our witness must begin. If we will listen to them, advocate for them, cry with them, put our arms around them, we will earn the right to share with them what we know about the Savior.

Third, THE SHEPHERDS WORSHIPED. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." They left behind no gifts as the Wise Men did. They couldn't afford gold, frankincense and myrrh. So they gave something of far greater value: the praise of their lips and the worship of their hearts. And it struck me this week that they didn't go to a synagogue or to the temple to worship. They returned to the fields, to their place of employment, and it was there that they glorified and praised God for all they had seen and heard.

Take worship to work with you when you leave the sanctuary today. During your travel time to and from work or school, turn off the radio and pray for the President and the Congress, for our troops overseas, and for peace in our cities and throughout the world. Once a day, pray silently for your colleagues. Find another believer and have lunch together. Better yet, find several believers and engage in Bible study once a week. Worship at work this week, and you will come to see things in a whole new light. The stress will still be there, the annoying interruptions, the irritating colleague down the hall, the in-box that never seems to empty. But the atmosphere will be altered, the air permeated with God's presence. A. W. Tozer said it: "We're here to be worshipers first and workers second. The work done by a worshiper will have eternity in it." Put some eternity in your daily schedule; take worship to work with you this week.

The shepherds speak to us, finally, because THEY WERE WANTED. They may not have been welcome in the finer homes and hotels of their day, but they were wanted in God's family. Their nonreligious lifestyle may have made them suspect among the religious establishment, but they were good enough for God.

Some of you may not think of yourselves as "religious." Perhaps you haven't been in church since last Easter. That's okay. You belong here as much as any elder or deacon. You may be keeping a low profile this morning because your life is all messed up. I say, in the name of the shepherds' God, "To you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord." You may be embarrassed because you don't know the Bible very well. Don't worry about it. The only thing you really need to know right now is that God loves you unconditionally. So then, fall in step with the shepherds: "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." You are wanted, and Bethlehem's Savior is just waiting to welcome you into the family.