

Luke 2: 8-20; "Shepherds keeping watch", A sermon for the Christmas Season, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on December 17th, 2006, in the Morning Worship Service.

It seems entirely appropriate that God should give this, His great announcement of His Son's entrance into the world to certain poor shepherds. For Jesus is known to us now as the good Shepherd and the great shepherd of His people. And those who believe in Him are the sheep of His pasture. Why did God not send this message to the Sanhedrin; why did He not declare it to the scribes and Pharisees? It was because they were not true shepherds. They did not feed their flocks, they did not bind up the broken or heal the diseased or bring back the scattered. They did not seek for the lost, but with force and severity they dominated the Lord's people as it was prophesied of them in Ezekiel 34: 4. This was why God was well-pleased to give it to the simple shepherds- their reaction to this message has lessons for us; lessons about God, that His ways are not our ways. And lessons about men; that men may react in fear toward that which God would not have them to be afraid of. Let us focus primarily on the lessons which we can learn from the shepherds themselves. I believe that there are 4 observations which can be made concerning the shepherd's reactions to this heavenly message.

1st- Men have every reason to be afraid when they perceive the glory of God and His heavenly messenger.

Here are these shepherds out in the fields, and they are in the path of duty, watching over their flocks by night. They are watching for lions and bears and wolves and thieves, but are they ready for an angel? I think not. Ask yourselves how you feel when someone hides himself behind a door or a bush and then jumps out at you, and suddenly appears before you? That would be bad enough, but this was an angelic visitor and he was bringing the glory of the Lord with him. Angels are always the foreboding of a message from God. They are sent out to render service for the sake of those who would inherit salvation, but they are also sent out to render judgment for the Lord against sinful men.

There were 2 angels sent to Sodom to conduct Lot and his family out. These looked like men, but they struck the perverse men of the city with blindness when they would satisfy their lust on them. Now in the this situation there is one angel, but he comes surrounded by the glory of the Lord. I take it that this was a bright and shining light. It shone around them. They saw the light of God's glory as it is seen in heaven itself. It spoke volumes to those who beheld it, of the greatness and the majesty and power and the purity of God. The consciences of these men could not stand before this holy light, but they probably were asking themselves, "Has God come to deal with me for my sins?" "Will he bring my sins now to remembrance?" They were very frightened. "They were sore afraid," it says in the King James Version. When men behold the glory of the Lord, they readily see themselves for what they really are. They are mere creatures; small and defenseless before an infinitely holy and powerful God. I am not talking about close encounters of the 3rd kind or E.T. (the extra-terrestrial) This was not a science fiction story. God's glory is greater than we can believe. God is light, but His light would be ten thousands times brighter than the light of the sun. The Apostle Paul when he was converted on the Damascus road was struck with a blinding light like this. It says in Acts 22: 6, "Now it happened, as I journeyed and came near Damascus at about noon,

suddenly a great light from heaven shone around me." "And I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?'" "So I answered, 'Who are You, Lord?'" "And He said to me, I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'" "And those who were with me indeed saw the light and were afraid, but they did not hear the voice of Him who spoke to me." "So I said, 'What shall I do, Lord?'" "And the Lord said to me, "Arise and go into Damascus, and there you will be told all things which are appointed for you to do." "And since," he says, "I could not see for the glory of that light, being led by the hand of the those who were with me, I came into Damascus." The Glory of God is easily able to blind the physical eyes of men so that they have to be led around by the hand. "Holy, Holy, Holy, though the darkness hide Thee, though the eyes of sinful men your glory may not see..." It only took a few moments of looking upon God's glory and sinful Saul lost his eyesight. It took a miracle of God to restore it again. The same is true of people who do not know God, which is all of us, by nature. We are spiritually blind, our souls lie in darkness. The light of God's glory either blinds further or it illumines our darkness so that we can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. I pray that you will receive this truth this morning, that there is a glory of God which is beyond the pale of our human experience which is so great that we would all fall to the ground if God were to reveal it to us. And there is a glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ which drives away the darkness in our hearts by His glorious grace, that will save your soul forever. It is a glory not just of power and might, but it is the perfection of purity and the majesty of holiness and the greatness of Divine compassion. That is what comes to the sinful soul of man in conversion. Our God is the One who inhabits eternity and dwells in unapproachable light.

Why are men more interested in UFOs than in the true and living God? Is it not because they do not want their reality ruled or limited by the rule of God over them? Is it not true that most men would rather think of the possibility of Martians ruling over them rather than the Lord God Almighty? Man wants to sinfully create his own world of endless possibilities without ever coming to terms with God who has made everything he sees and knows. Oh sinful possibility thinkers. God doesn't deal simply in possibilities. He has created all of them. God is the God of tangibility in substance and reality, in time and space on this earth and in all the Universe. And He has made life full of things to wonder at, and to marvel over. I would not be at all surprised if what men claim to be UFOs turns out to be none other than angelic activity.

These shepherds knew that there was a God; that He is infinitely holy and pure, that He is all seeing, all wise, all knowing and they sensed the dread that any man feels when in the presence of God's glory. Oh that each unconverted heart here would experience a sense of the glory and the greatness of the Lord today. Only He can shine into your hearts to give you this saving knowledge and change of heart. "For it is God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." (2 Corinthians 4: 6)

2ndly- Men have no reason to be afraid to consider the message of Christ, for it is good news to all those looking for a Savior. (Verse 10-14)

The angel says, "Do not be afraid," and he means it. Why? It is because he brings "good tidings of great joy which shall be for all people." It is news of the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. The gospel is good news, it is the best of news to our fallen race. But they were greatly afraid. It is possible to be so aware of the Divine majesty that we fail to see how He can show us any mercy. If we see God as a God of strict justice, if we see

Him as a hard task master and hating sinful men, we have not rightly conceived of His goodness and His love, that He is full of compassion. We must understand, as these shepherds came to understand, that although we need to fear God, and even though we need to reverence His majesty and respect His holiness that we ought not to have a slavish fear of Him, a paralyzing fear of Him. It is this conception of God which keep us from ever thinking that we ought to come to Him, or that we can be saved from our sins at all. Listen to C.H. Spurgeon on this. "This fear in some men puts them out of all heart of ever being saved." "Thinking God to be an ungenerous being, they keep at a distance from Him, and if there be some sweet attractions now and then in a sermon, some gently meltings of conscience, the good desire never matures into the practical resolve." "They do not say, 'I will arise and go to my Father,' because they do not know him as a Father, they only know Him as a consuming fire." "A man does not say, 'I will arise and go unto a consuming fire.'" "Nay, but, like Jonah, he would fain pay his fare, regardless of the expense, and go to Tarshish to flee from the presence of the Lord." "This it is, that makes calamity of being a man at all to most men, that they cannot get away from God, since they imagine that if they could but escape from His presence they would imagine that if they could but escape from His presence they would then wander into bliss; but being doomed to be where God is, then they conceive that for them wretchedness and misery alone remain." The soft warnings of mercy and the thunderings of justice are alike powerless upon men so long as their hearts are seared and rendered callous by an unholy dread of God."

I wonder if tonight there are those here who feel that they cannot come to Christ? You see yourselves as too sinful and you believe that God has only the intent to destroy you; that He is your enemy. Away with such a devilish notion. Here is good news of a great joy: Christ has come into the world to save sinners like you. The good news is a source of great joy to all the people of the Jews and today all the people of the world! A Savior is born. God would not have you to be afraid as Herod was afraid. It says that he was troubled over the birth of Jesus. God would not have you to dread the birth of Christ the Lord. He would have you to know that His birth is something to rejoice over.

Listen all you who have not joy and peace today. Listen all you who have no hope. All these things are to be found in this child and what He came to bring. You must not think that the thrills of sin are the joy of which I speak. Let that joy be turned into mourning. The Lord never gave them their joy. The true joy comes from believing this gospel and finding it to be true. The joy is sins forgiven and obtaining a righteousness which is not our own but Christ's. This joy is finding a new heart within ourselves with the seed of holiness planted in it. This joy is the prospect and the sure hope of heaven. This joy is in knowing God and dwelling with Him forever. You have no reason to be afraid to consider the message of Christ's birth, for it is good news to those looking for a Savior.

My 3rd observation regarding the reaction of these shepherds to the heavenly messenger is this: Men have every reason to come immediately and behold Christ as their Savior.(Verses 15 and 16)

The angel, after he preached to them this sermon bids them go to Bethlehem and see Christ. He says to the shepherds that this will be the sign given you. "You will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." Would there be any other babe at Bethlehem lying in a manger? Could there be any greater sign that God has humbled Himself to identify with the lowest man or the most sinful man? The Lord

of glory in an animal's feeding trough. How low does the love of God reach to save sinners? Low enough that any of you here today may look upon Him in astonishment and say: "This God-man has become identified fully with us who are poor, us who are crude, us who are like brute beasts in our sin." And if we be animals, brute beasts before God, the best thing that we can do is feed upon Christ. He is given for sinners.

These men counseled together and said, 'Let us go straight to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.' There was no delay in their response to the angel's message. If this was for them, then they must go and see. If this was true; of what vast importance it was. These shepherds had just heard a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest..." How it glorifies him that Christ is born; that He is just and the justifier of the one who believes in Jesus. How glorious it is when men are declared perfectly righteous in God's sight for Christ's sake. Come and see it yourselves. How great a peace that is made between God and men, and between men who are estranged from each other. Men will beat their swords into plowshares in their fight against God, if they will only come to Jesus Christ. Christ will establish peace by the blood of His cross, between you and God. God will not come out against you as an enemy if you believe in Jesus. The greatest conflict is not between men and other men. The greatest conflict is between God and man over the issue of sin. God has determined to destroy forever all sinful men. But men believe that sin is their real good and they cling to it. Christ must be born into the world to do this gracious work to reconcile God and man. These shepherds made haste, it says. They dropped everything they were doing and came straight to Bethlehem. They didn't stop to worry about their sheep or how they would be cared for. They didn't stop to debate or reason how the wolf would be kept from them. They committed all to the care of God whose good pleasure it was for them to come and see His Son. Will you not also do this today in regard to coming to Christ yourself?

Why will you delay coming to Christ? Will you think of a hundred reasons why you should not come right now to behold Jesus and to see that He will be a Savior and Lord to you to care for you and help you and bring you to God? The shepherds decision was the right one.

And then 4thly- We observe with regard to these shepherds, that: Men have every reason to speak to others about what they have seen to be true concerning Christ. (Verses 17-20)

Our text says that when they had seen Jesus lying in the manger, which was the sign given them by the angel, then they made known the statement which had been told them. They didn't hide the fact that these things had been told them. They spoke out and confessed and declared what they had heard. I wonder how many persons that may be here today really do believe, but you will not say it out. You believe that Jesus died for sinners and that you are a sinner. You have received the Christ of the Scriptures and yet, you will not try to write out your testimony and be baptized. You will not confess Him publicly. There is such a thing as a sinful silence; when Christ has done such great things for you, but you will not confess Him. But you say, "I am afraid that I will not persevere to the end." This is a legitimate fear but groundless because faith is based upon a promise, not upon your perfect performance. And the promise is that Christ will not only save but He will also keep. You say to me, "But I am not sure of my salvation." Perhaps this is true, but Baptism is based upon your confession of faith in Christ, not the full assurance of hope. Are you sure of Christ; that He has said what He said, and has

accomplished everything relative to your salvation on the cross and by His righteous life? Are you sure of yourself that you are a sinner and that you cannot save yourself? Are you sure that you believed in Him? Then you may legitimately rest your soul upon God's word and Christ's promise to you that the "one who comes to Him, He will not cast out." Ultimately, this is the greatest form of assurance you will need to make public confession of Christ. If your faith is sincere and your desire to obey God is real, then public confession in the waters of baptism is the step of obedience that you need to take. For it is a step of obedience and yet some are not taking it. You say to me, "What about false faith?" "I may not have a true faith." Your being worried about a false faith is not your believing the true gospel. You may worry continually about it and never actually believe because you want to see something change in you before you believe in Christ. No one is ever saved by pretending to believe; but no one is ever saved by worrying about whether they can see all the changes that regeneration brings at work in them before they believe. You are commanded to believe in Christ and the gospel in order that you might see these blessed changes. To wait and to worry and to question and to doubt in regard to whether you have saving faith is not believing the gospel. It is playing mind games with your salvation that God never asked you to play. He asks you, yea He commands you to believe in Him, so that you might find peace and rest for your soul. You will only hinder yourself from coming to Christ by the other way. Christ says often to doubting souls, "Be not afraid, only believe." Here in the passage that we are studying we find that the shepherds came to look upon the Christ immediately and after they had seen Him, they "made widely known the saying which was told to them concerning this Child." Men do have every reason to speak to others about what they have seen and heard to be true concerning Christ. Will you be silent this Christmas when you are with unbelieving relatives? Will you be silent about the greatest thing in this life, the greatest thing in the world, the thing that will affect their life more than anything else in this life and into an endless eternity? Oh, take the shepherds for your cue. Pray for grace to speak a word about the reason that Christ has come into the world; to save sinners. Do not bear about a hidden Jesus in your life for fear of men. God is pleased with an open and instant confession of Christ, provided that you really have believed. Glory to God for the message of the angel. Glory to God for the faith of these shepherds. Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men of His good pleasure. God is pleased with faith in His Son. May each of you have that saving faith even as the shepherds did.