

Causing Great Joy

(The Simple Shepherds' Point of View)
Luke 2:1-20 on December 20, 2020
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Please read Luke 2:1-20 before going further in this transcript.

Have you ever seen the TV show *Dirty Jobs*? The star of the show, Mike Rowe, has now become quite famous. If you haven't seen the show, Mike basically travels around the world exploring and discovering what everyday working people choose to do to make a living through good, honest, hard work. A recent internet search lists Mike's TOP 5 picks for the dirtiest jobs. They include: sewer inspector, snake researcher, cow inseminator, concrete chipper, and shark suit tester.¹ (Yeah, apparently that really is a thing!) When Mike Rowe records these TV episodes, he doesn't do it to make fun of the work or to tease the workers. Instead, he actually has a high level of respect, even admiration, for the men and women who do this work. Everyday people who go to work every day doing some of the smelliest, grossest, and difficult jobs in the world.² I share this to help us relate a little better to the shepherds in the Christmas story. Today, we're going to look at Luke 2, from their point of view. I can only imagine that being a shepherd was likely a pretty smelly, sometimes gross, and difficult job! Today, these simple shepherds will remind us of two important truths about Christmas.

Please open your Bible to Luke 2:8, "And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night." Luke 2:8 makes two things clear about the job of a shepherd. First of all, they did their work outdoors, right in the midst of their flocks. This wasn't even in a barn where they could muck the stalls, or anything like that. They lived outdoors because that's where the sheep lived. So they became pretty adept at navigating the landmines of sheep droppings and urine spray. A little sheep may look cute and cuddly to you and me, but I'm fairly sure that most shepherds had a slightly different opinion. In addition to all the manure and urine, there was probably also occasional blood from injuries and from the many times when the sheep would give birth right out there in the field. These shepherds lived right out in the open, right alongside the sheep, rain or shine. There was no indoor plumbing or flushable toilets. There were also no shower facilities; so whenever these guys went home, after a long stretch at work, they probably went home awfully stinky. The other thing that Luke 2:8 makes clear, is that their work was 24/7, day AND night. They didn't enjoy any of the comforts or conveniences of a 9-5 type of job.³ If they had, the sheep would have gotten eaten between the hours of 5 p.m. and 9 the next morning! Their job was to watch over the sheep.⁴ To protect them both from thieves and from predatory animals.⁵ Likely, they worked as a team, taking turns at night; one would probably watch while the others slept.⁶

It stands to reason that these shepherds were probably pretty physically tough. These were hardy folk; but they were also commonfolk, everyday people. These shepherds didn't rank among the elite religious scholars.⁷ They weren't particularly popular or influential in the centers of power and decision-making. They weren't trained speakers or practiced orators. They weren't trained historians or court reporters. I mention all of this because it begs the question: Then WHY IN ALL THE WORLD

¹ <https://parade.com/930988/amyspencer/mike-rowe-worst-dirty-jobs/>

² Two of the dirtiest jobs that I've worked at personally are dishwasher at a restaurant and seal coater. Seal coat is the cold tar that they put on your asphalt driveway to protect it. It actually wasn't that bad of a job, as long as you didn't spill a bunch of it on your skin or have one of the high-pressure hoses explode in your face. However, at the end of our season, some time in late October or so, there was one job that was probably the dirtiest one I can remember. First of all, my boss had me climb into the seal coat tank, which was an incredibly claustrophobic feeling. Then, I'd use a hammer and chisel to knock the crusty, hardened sealcoat off of the inside belly of the tank. It was a noisy, dusty, smelly job! I also remember, as a dish washer, that at the end of our busy summer season, we had to climb up and clean the grease hood above the cooking station. It was hot, greasy, and smelly work. I remember slicing my hands as I reached into the crevices to get all the gunk out. We used a cleaning agent that burned your skin on contact. Even with rubber gloves, it sometimes got into cuts or splashed in your eyes. Nasty stuff!

³ This was how they paid their bills. Shepherding was probably a family tradition, handed down as an apprenticeship of sorts.

⁴ It's entirely POSSIBLE that some of the sheep that they watched were destined for the temple sacrifice. "The flocks reserved for temple sacrifice were kept in the fields near Bethlehem throughout the year." (*The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:8.) These shepherds were shepherding in the same town where King David grew up shepherding his father's sheep. See 1 Samuel 17:12.

⁵ *The NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1703 footnote on Luke 2:8.

⁶ See discussion by John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20*, Word Books, Dallas, TX, 1989, p. 106.

⁷ Although, as shepherds, they probably had some pretty keen insights into what it means to follow the Lord as our Shepherd.

did God send the angels to THEM? Certainly, there MUST have been better candidates? People who could neatly and professionally write all of this down. People who had influence with the masses, who could communicate this story with a little more polish. I mean, after all, this is one of the most important events in the entire history of mankind! Why did God choose to reveal it to commonfolk, to some of the most simple, everyday people that you could ever meet.

Luke 2:10 says, "...But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people." I think we've found our answer. **The shepherds remind us that... 1) Jesus came to save commonfolk**, just plain, everyday people. People... like you and me. THIS is why God sent His angels to a bunch of stinky shepherds out in the middle of nowhere.⁸ Normally when a baby is born, the first people to hear are the relatives and close friends. But the first ones to hear the good news of Jesus' birth, were common shepherds, "people who represent all people."⁹ In other words, the earthiness and commonness of the shepherds helps ground the Christmas story in this important reality: Jesus came to save commonfolk. 1 Corinthians 1:26 reminds us, "Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth."¹⁰ This isn't meant to offend us, it's meant to remind us and encourage us, that we are included in God's loving plan. Jesus' focused much of his ministry on commonfolk, like fisherman for example. (Now THERE'S a dirty, dirty, stinky job!) He pursued those who lived humble, simple lives. He didn't need for there to be anything particularly special or notable about them.¹¹

We learn more about this good news in Luke 2:11, "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Luke 2:11 clarifies that Jesus is all 3: Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The combination of these three titles is unique. In fact, this is the only place in the entire New Testament where Savior, Christ, and Lord all appear together.¹² Lord means that Jesus has sovereign authority and divinity. Messiah means that Jesus is the Anointed One; the appointed heir to David's kingly throne. Savior means that Jesus is our rescuer; he delivers us from sin. Back in Matthew 1:21 the angel had told Joseph, "...you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." In fact, BOTH Joseph and Mary were told to name their son, "Jesus."¹³ Jesus is the Greek form of Joshua, which means, "the LORD saves."¹⁴

But the shepherds didn't know that His name would be Jesus. Jesus wasn't given his name publicly until v. 21. All the shepherds knew was what the angel had told them in Luke 2:12, "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Now, it was quite common for babies to be wrapped in cloths, but lying in a manger was NOT so common. Shepherds were very familiar with mangers; after all, they were feeding troughs for animals. A manger must have seemed like an awfully peculiar place to find someone who they were just told was Savior, Messiah, and Lord. Needless to say, this must have greatly piqued their curiosity! So, after listening to this huge group of angels sing "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests,"¹⁵ the angels left, and the shepherds said to each other: "Well fellas, I'm going back to bed! I can't believe those angels came and woke me out of a sound sleep! Who's got the next watch?" OK, that's NOT what they said; but they COULD have. The shepherds could have responded to this incredible news by doing... nothing. "Hey, that was cool and all. But I sure am glad those angels left. That was just freaky! I'm not really into all that spiritual 'God stuff.'" The fact is, not everyone is curious or even interested in God. And that's really too bad, because Jesus coming to earth presents an opportunity for all people to find GREAT JOY.

⁸ "the major point is heaven's testimony to simple folk. The shepherds... represent humankind." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 225.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 213.

¹⁰ Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus had a tendency to eat with sinners and lowlifes. He hung out with prostitutes, drunkards, and thieves. In fact, because that was His pattern, Jesus was even accused of being a glutton and a drunkard. See Matthew 9:10-13 and 11:19.

¹¹ In fact, Jesus is known for saying things like: "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and "Blessed are the meek." Matthew 5:3-5.

¹² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 216.

¹³ See also Luke 1:31 and 2:21.

¹⁴ See *The NIV Study Bible* text note on Matthew 1:21, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, 2011, p. 1590.

¹⁵ "Heaven addresses earth about Jesus' significance." Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 220.

We learn what the shepherds actually did in Luke 2:15-16, “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”¹⁶ Mary, in particular, may have been a little alarmed by their visit. I can imagine her thinking to herself (or even saying out loud): “WHAT are all of these shepherds doing here! Can a lady PLEASE get a little privacy around here! After all, I just gave birth in a barn!” The Nativity Set was getting a little crowded! I wonder if Mary may have even prayed, “Lord, couldn’t you have sent me someone helpful, like a nurse or a midwife? Why did you send these smelly old shepherds!?”

But there was a significant reason, for why the angels told the shepherds to go and find this baby “lying in a manger.” Luke 2:17-18 tells us, “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the SHEPHERDS said to them.” **Jesus didn’t let the lives of these commonfolk remain common.** He gave them an incredible story to share with others. He gave them a mission and a testimony. In other words, this Good News about Jesus would only cause GREAT JOY for ALL the people, IF those people had an opportunity to hear about it.¹⁷ So, these simple, commonfolk shepherds were given a mission to deliver a message that would “cause great joy for all people.”¹⁸ If commonfolk shepherds, who carry a hint of manure and urine, can share the good news, then so can you and I.

The shepherds remind us that...

2) God wants commonfolk to spread the Good News about Jesus. People... like you and me. Luke 2:18 says, “and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Luke 2:19 notes a different response from Mary, “But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.”¹⁹ Each of these reactions is understandable. It’s important for us to sincerely reflect on the message and meaning of Christmas.²⁰ It’s a LOT to think about; we all need some time, to take it all in. You see, Mary also heard what the shepherds were saying, and even though she had unique role in all of this, she was still mulling things over, pondering how it all fit together.²¹ So it’s certainly reasonable, for you and me to take some time, to sort this all out in our own hearts and minds.

But eventually, each one of us needs to decide what our personal response will be. At some point, we need to move on from more than just treasuring and pondering. More than just celebrating those happy Christmas feelings and “hallmark moments” each year. One author puts it this way, “The Christ who was born into the world must be born in your heart.”²² Jesus really did come into the world to save us. Do you believe that? Consider these familiar words from the Christmas Carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem:”²³

“How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given;
so God imparts to human hearts the blessing of his heaven!
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,
where meek souls will, receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.”

¹⁶ John Nolland brings up an interesting point that one might wonder how the shepherds knew EXACTLY where to find Jesus. (*Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20*, Word Books, Dallas, TX, 1989, p. 109.) I mean, yes Bethlehem was small, but not THAT small. Certainly there were hundreds of mangers around. They weren’t even given Joseph’s and Mary’s names! Can you imagine the shepherds going round from house to house? “Excuse me, have you, by any chance, happened to see a baby lying around here, in a manger? He’s uhm... He’s the Messiah and we were hoping to see him....” Somehow or another, the shepherds did find Jesus, along with Mary and Joseph.

¹⁷ See Romans 10:14-15.

¹⁸ Were these shepherds really the best spokesmen? Apparently, God thought they were.

¹⁹ Also note Luke 2:51 and Mark 3:20-21. Luke 7:20 is also interesting.

²⁰ “The idiom *pondering in her heart* does not translate well into English, since in English one would normally speak of pondering in one’s mind. However, the idea of the Greek is essentially the same as the English idiom *mulling things over*.” Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 223.

²¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, Baker, Grand Rapids, MI, 1994, p. 226.

²² He begins this quote: “It is not enough to peek in the manger and say, ‘Oh, how [cute]... [Christmas] gives me such good feelings.’ The truth is, even if Christ were born in Bethlehem a thousand times, but not within you, you would be eternally lost...”

R. Kent Hughes in *Luke: Vol. 1*, Crossway, Wheaton, IL, 1998, p. 89.

²³ Words by Phillips Brooks, 1868. Traditional English melody arranged by Ralph Vaughan Williams 1906. *The Worshipping Church: A Hymnal*, Hope Publishing Co., Carol Stream, IL, 1990, #154.

So how about it? Will you receive Christ into your life today? Will you meekly and humbly admit your need for a Savior? If you do, I'm certain that it will cause GREAT JOY, both for you and for those around you. Jesus' birth was 1st announced to simple shepherds. None of them were anyone particularly special, and yet they were SO important to God; SO important that he made sure that they had ample opportunity to discover this GREAT JOY for all people. Why not put your faith in Jesus as your Savior today?

The shepherds put their faith and confidence in what they'd heard after they investigated it and experienced it personally. And then, their sincere and genuine faith resulted in two particular responses:

They shared this Good News with others.

They glorified and praised God for all the things they had heard and seen.

Luke 2:20 tells us, "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."²⁴ Just as they had been told, back in verses 11-12, they found the Savior who had been born Messiah and Lord. Just as they had been told, they found him wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.²⁵ The shepherds didn't just happen to be in the right place at the right time that night. Rather, God sent a group of angels specifically, intentionally to them. He wanted them to be among the first to hear this news, to investigate its accuracy, and then to proclaim it to others. In other words, the shepherds didn't just witness a really cool "angel sighting." Nor did they simply snoop around the manger to gawk at the little baby Jesus. They placed their faith in the facts that were presented before them. And then, they responded by witnessing to others and by glorifying and praising God.

Dear Friend, today, you are invited to join in the absolute best parts of the Christmas story. So why not respond to this Good News about Jesus, in the very same way that the shepherds did?

- > Receive it and believe it in your own heart.
- > Share this good news, so that it will continue to cause great joy, for all kinds of people!
- > Spend this week glorifying and praising God, for all of the things that you have heard and seen!

²⁴ We could summarize it this way: the message came DOWN from heaven, the praise went UP from the shepherds. John Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 1-9:20*, Word Books, Dallas, TX, 1989, p. 108.

²⁵ These details about the shepherds' role in the Christmas story, reflect Luke's ongoing commitment to write an orderly account of his investigation into Jesus. See Luke 1:1-4.