

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia  
on Sunday, December 18, 1988, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

**LUKE 2:8**

“In the countryside close by there were shepherds who were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks.”

**“WHILE HUMBLE SHEPHERDS WATCHED THEIR FLOCKS.”**

Who would ever have dreamt that God would enter human life as He did? Born, not in a palace, but in a stable; coming into the world not to the sound of silver trumpets, nor to the fanfare of royal heralds, but quietly, unobtrusively, He arrived; so that life went on that day and the next as though nothing had happened that was in any way out of the ordinary.

And to think that the very first people to learn of His Coming — to discover this momentous fact that God had stormed the beaches of time — were humble shepherds, common folk, busy in the performance of very ordinary tasks!

There were many great and wealthy people in Palestine in those days. And there were lean ascetics who had left the joys of home and gone away to pray and fast in desert caves. And there were scholars of the most profound and varied learning. But it was not to any of these that the angels came.

G. K. Chesterton once said with his usual bluntness, that there are some things “too important to be entrusted to the educated classes.” Perhaps the music of the angels’ song was one of those things: sophisticated men and women might have interposed all sorts of questions, might have reasoned out excuses for delay, might have stood upon proprieties and waited for official sanctions.

The greatest news the world has ever heard was given to a group of ordinary shepherds. No doubt they were men of a devout and reverent spirit, touched with a sense of the mystery of things, as shepherds are so often to this day. Is it not to such simple and reverent souls that God still reveals Himself in amplest measure? How fitting it was, too, that shepherds should be chosen, when we remember how the 23rd Psalm begins — “The Lord is my Shepherd.”; and when we reflect that the Child born in Bethlehem was to be “the Good Shepherd” Who would give His life for the sheep. (John 10:11).

It is sad to relate that shepherds were despised by the orthodox “good” people of that day; because shepherds were quite unable to keep the details of the Jewish ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand— washings and picayune rules and regulations. Their flocks made far too constant demands upon them; and so, the orthodox looked down their noses at them as very “common” people.

But these shepherds were in all likelihood very special shepherds. In the great Jerusalem Temple, the central shrine of Jewish religion, every morning and every evening, an unblemished

lamb was offered as a sacrifice for sin to God. And to ensure that an adequate supply of perfect and unblemished offerings was always available, the Temple authorities had their own private flocks of sheep; and we know that these flocks were pastured near Bethlehem. It is therefore most likely that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. It is a lovely thought that those shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the very first people to see “the Lamb of God Who takes away the sin of the world”! (John 1:29).

Now, of what does the story of the shepherds remind us?

(1) **The place of duty, however humble, is always the place of vision.** It was when those shepherds were busy about their appointed tasks that they heard the music of the skies. I wonder did any of them stay at home that night, shirking their duty because of some party they wanted to attend? Or I wonder if any of them had slipped away off the hillside to spend an hour in one of the taverns down in Bethlehem? If so, then they missed the music; the Hallelujah Chorus was not for their ears; the joy of knowing that the world’s Redeemer had arrived, was not to inflame their souls. Those who heard the angels’ song were those who were in their place of duty.

There is an old story of a monk who, in his monastery cell, had a vision of the Lord. Then came the clanging of the monastery bell, calling him to his work — cleaning, gardening, wood-cutting, and the 101 jobs which awaited him every day. Must he leave the vision and go to the daily round and the common task? He went; and when he returned hours later, the vision of our Lord was still there, and He was saying — “If you had remained, I would have vanished: but you were faithful, and lo, I am still here!”

We are all tempted sometimes to escape from the drudgery of every day. So often it sets our nerves on edge; it seems so monotonous — the same old thing day in and day out. We crave for variety, for freedom and a sense of release. We seem to be missing so much by being bound to that exasperating daily routine. We long for a larger life. I suppose the shepherds felt like that many a time. But the angel music never comes that way. Heaven has never a song and Jesus has never a blessing for those who shirk.

I like those words in our text which tell us that these shepherds “were spending the night in the fields, taking care of their flocks.” It is strenuous enough watching sheep by day, but in Palestine how much more tedious and dangerous it is to care for them by night — when wolves prowl close by, waiting to pounce upon an unsuspecting sheep or lamb!

It is often when the sky is darkest, when frustration and disappointment and sorrow close down upon us that Christ comes very near, and we hear the music of heaven. If we remain at our post of duty, regardless of the cost, that is when the Lord comes in all His love and power to revitalize our lives. It was to men who were faithful to their appointed task that there broke the glory of the Lord. And that is still true!

(2) **What interested Heaven was something which all the world disregarded.** Caesar Augustus, the Roman Emperor, the proud ruler of a vast empire, the strong man of his age, never dreamt that in far-off Bethlehem, a Baby lay in a manger-cradle Who was to change the face of history, and alter the calendar from B.C. to A.D. Even in Bethlehem itself, the crowds had not

the slightest inkling that anything out of the ordinary was taking place in their midst that night. People were in the town from all points of the compass. Many of them had travelled long distances; and one subject alone was on their lips; they were all talking about Caesar Augustus and his tax.

But I don't think that the shepherds on the lonely hillside, as they listened to the singing of the angels, could catch a single whisper of the topic which was absorbing the travelers in every home in Bethlehem. The theme which was agitating everybody was not the theme which agitated Heaven. The world thought only of taxation: Heaven thought only of salvation — “for unto you is born this day a Savior, Christ the Lord!” (Luke 2:11). Nobody gave a thought to Jesus' birth, and Heaven that night thought of nothing else!

You see, what the world makes much of may be very insignificant in God's eyes, and what this world neglects or despises may be all—important from God's standpoint. To grasp that is one secret of fine living. It helps us to readjust our scale of values.

I never tire of using the illustration which the late Archbishop William Temple gives in one of his books. “This world,” he says, “is like a store window into which, one night, some mischievous person crawled, and changed all the price labels; so that in the morning, valuable articles had the cheap price ticket on, and the inferior commodities bore the expensive labels!”

God isn't interested nearly as much as you think, in your bank account, or your finely furnished home, or in your social connections; or even in your peace of mind; for even a thoroughly ungodly person can have “peace of mind” of a sort. What God is intensely anxious about is whether or not you are absolutely honest and sincere and kind, full of goodwill toward others, seeing the best in people and not the worst: whether or not you are pure in thought and clean in speech, and free of pride or jealousy, or selfishness or greed. And above all, He is passionately interested in what you do with His Son, Whom He gave to die for our salvation.

The shepherds and the angels would say to us this morning — “Get your sense of values right!” The world didn't know about that little Child born that night in the humblest of circumstances; and even if it had known, it wouldn't have cared. Countless instances might be cited to prove that God's regenerating Presence is often unsuspected by a hostile world. God is continually intervening in human affairs, intervening lovingly and savingly; but the world is too often obsessed by other things.

It was on a Sunday in November 1793 that the French Revolutionaries, having plundered churches, and brutally beaten many bishops and priests, proceeded to enthrone an actress in the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, as “The Goddess of Reason.” “No longer,” they boasted, “is there any religion but liberty; no longer any God but the people.” Yet, during that threat to Christianity, which created such widespread dismay, the Lord was preparing the greatest spiritual counter-offensive in history! For upon the very next day following the revolting scene at Notre Dame, William Carey, the first Christian foreign missionary of modern times, landed in India to commence his renowned ministry as God's chosen instrument and pioneer of world-wide evangelism.

What a heartening thought for a distracted world today! God is at work! Ours is that sublime and urgent task of assisting Him in His almighty counteroffensive against evil in our own lives, and in the world. How true the reluctant admission made by a Soviet Commissar when he exclaimed — “Religion is like a nail: the harder you hit it, the deeper it goes into the wood.”

(3) **The angels may depart, but Jesus Christ remains.**

In a little while the hillside was all dark again; but the Baby was still lying in the manger. The angels departed, but Jesus didn't! Perhaps the loveliest name in the Bible given to our Lord is the name “Emmanuel” — God with us! He has never left His world.

For many of us Christmas is a sad time. It is a season when tender memories crowd in upon us: for we remember those angel faces that we have “loved long since and lost awhile.” The angels have departed — oh yes — but for us, as for the shepherds — Christ remains, a living Presence, our Savior and dearest Friend, “the same yesterday, today and forever” (Heb. 13:8); the One Who becomes more real, more precious, more indispensable as year succeeds year. He is no longer a helpless Child in a cradle; He is the risen Master, Lord of all life, Who imparts to us who love Him the strength to live life with courage and dignity and grace.

“Oh, dear Christ of Bethlehem, and Calvary, and the empty tomb; how hopeless and distraught life would be for us if we did not know Your Presence, Your Peace, Your Power each passing moment!”

Jesus is here this very moment — to forgive our sins through His shed blood on the Cross, to break the power of sin in our lives, to rob death of its sting; to prepare for us a place in Heaven; to put meaning and purpose into life; to give us a poise and a radiance which enables us to live at peace with the world, with ourselves, and with our Maker.

With such a Savior living within us, and promising never to leave us nor forsake us, cannot we all enjoy a wonderful Christmas?

“Oh come, let us adore Him, Christ the Lord.”

**AMEN.**