

Advent Series – The Key Characters of Christmas  
December 17, 2006  
The Shepherds

Today we continue our preaching series for the season of Advent. Our focus today is on the shepherds, and I would draw your attention to Luke, Chapter 2, verses 8-20. You will find the passage in your sermon outline if it is helpful for you to follow along as I share with you the word for today from the very Word of God.

“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them.”

Here ends the lesson. Will you pray with me, please? Lord, astound us this day with the glorious good news of Christ, born for us, born for all. In His name we pray, Amen.

More than 20 years ago, when I was a young and foolish grad student, I did a summer internship in Long Beach, California. It was called “Clinical Pastoral Education”, and I spent that summer working more than full time in a hospital setting, at Beach Memorial Hospital. It was an incredible experience, which exposed me to the full range of opportunities hospital ministry holds, from the glorious moments of birth to the shattering experiences of unexpected death. It was one of the most poignant learning settings of my life.

The summer was drawing to a close. I had been there for 12 weeks, and on a Friday I finished up my responsibilities as a Chaplain at that hospital. I had an obligation in Ames,

Iowa that weekend, and so decided that rather than sleeping and leaving in the morning (Remember, I was young and foolish!), I would leave that night as soon as I finished at the hospital. So, at 5:00, I wrestled my last with the Los Angeles traffic and headed out through the desert, making my way back toward Iowa, and eventually on to Wisconsin. At about 3 a.m. (Some of you know what it feels like when it is 3 a.m. and you have been driving for 8+ hours without sleep!), I had the music blaring to keep me awake, the temperature set to frigid to keep me alert, and I could still feel myself nodding - slipping into that state where I wasn't fully awake nor fully asleep. I was roaring down the interstate (probably *slightly* exceeding the speed limit!) when, all of a sudden, I looked in front of me and there were elk on the highway! I was driving a Fiat 124 sport coupe (I seem to recall the Wall Street Journal naming it as one of the all time lemons ever built!), roaring down the highway, and there were these elk in front of me - they were larger than the car! And, as if I had plugged myself into 220 volts, the adrenaline that rushed through my body in that moment is indescribable. I actually brought the car to a stop as the elk ambled away. There was no accident, but it awakened me to such an extent, I don't think I slept for the next 24 hours!

I thought of that incident this week, while contemplating the shepherds. I mean, picture it: they were in the fields, right? (That is where they lived, tending the sheep.) All of a sudden, the heavens lit up with an indescribable, divine light and glory. For them it had to be the most shocking, startling experience of life - awakening them from their slumberous state. And it occurs to me that God intends to do the same with us, just as He did in this amazing account of the first recipients of the Good News. Think about it: who were the shepherds? Do you have any idea? I asked that question in my Bible study this past week. We were sitting having a lively conversation, and I asked in both classes, morning and evening, "Could you come up with any modern-day parallels to the shepherds of first century?" The best they could do (and it is pretty darned good!) is the homeless we see down in Kansas City when we travel through the Plaza and other areas. Consider this: the shepherds were unclean, they were literally homeless (living in the fields in very humble shacks or tents, at best), they were rather nomadic, they had no worldly possessions, and they were loudly despised by the respectable people of their day. They were considered unclean because they could not even make it to the temple to practice the rites of purification . . . and yet it was to them that the angels first appeared.

This is what is so astounding, but we have heard it so often that we have almost become inoculated to the amazing, astounding, startling news: that the proclamation of Christ's birth came first to first century homeless men! Amazing! What I suggest is embedded in the text is that Jesus awakened them by His birth - that His birth shook them and proved forever that God had never forsaken them. And these are the truths I want to explore with you today.

I suspect that, if we allow it, God would awaken and shake and remind us that by the grace of Christ we are never forsaken. Why do we need to be awakened? Truth be told, because we sleepwalk through life all too often. Oh, we are awake and marginally engaged, but it is almost as if our bodies are moving but our minds are shifted into neutral. You see it all the time, don't you? People are sitting and reading the newspaper

and conversations are happening all around to which they are oblivious; some people get so caught up watching television that they miss the really fascinating interaction happening in their own living rooms, in order not to miss the sitcom. An attorney friend of mine sent me some transcripts that were taken from depositions and actual trials - comments made by attorneys and witnesses in actual court cases. These people *must* have been sleepwalking. Are you curious? I knew you would be! What I will do is share the attorney's question and then the witness' response.

Atty.: "Now, doctor. Isn't it true that when a person dies in his sleep he does not know about it until the next morning?"

Witness: "Did you actually pass the bar exam?"

Atty.: "The youngest son - the 20 year old - how old is he?"

Witness: "Um, he is 20."

Atty.: "Were you present when your picture was taken?"

Witness: "Would you repeat the question, please?"

Atty.: "She had three children, right?"

Witness: "Yes."

Attorney: "How many were boys?"

Witness: "None."

Attorney: "Were there any girls?"

Atty.: "How was your first marriage terminated?"

Witness: "By death."

Atty.: "And by whose death was it terminated?"

Atty.: "Can you describe the individual?"

Witness: "He was about medium height, and he had a beard."

Attorney: "Was this person male or female?"

Atty.: "Is your appearance here this morning pursuant to a deposition notice which I sent to your attorney?"

Witness: "No, this is how I dress when I go to work."

Atty.: "Doctor, how many of your autopsies have been performed on dead people?"

Witness: "All my autopsies have been performed on dead people."

Atty.: "All your responses must be oral, okay? What school did you go to?"

Witness: "Oral."

Atty.: "Do you recall the time that you examined the body?"

Witness: "The autopsy started around 8:30 p.m."

Atty.: "And Mr. \_\_\_\_\_ was dead at that time?"

Witness: "No, he was sitting on the table wondering why I was doing an autopsy on him!"

And here is one of my favorites:

Atty.: "Doctor, before you performed the autopsy, did you check for a pulse?"

Witness: "No."

Atty.: "Did you check for blood pressure?"

Witness: "No."

Atty.: "Did you check for breathing?"

Witness: "No."

Atty.: "So then it is possible that the patient was alive when you began the autopsy?"

Witness: "No."

Atty.: "How can you be so sure, Doctor?"

Witness: "Because his brain was sitting on my desk in a jar."

Atty.: "But could the patient still have been alive, nonetheless?"

Witness: "Yes, it is possible that he could have been alive and practicing law somewhere!" (Interrupted by laughter)

You know, some of my friends are attorneys and one of them is the one who sent that to me. The reason I share it with you today is that it is so easy to allow ourselves to slip into a state of less than full awareness and engagement in life. You know the problem with that? We miss what is most important. I see it all the time; sometimes, we simply go through the motions of life, and either because we are distracted or otherwise consumed, we miss the moments of true significance: the moments of love; the significant moment when a child says, "I love you" or actually invites us to be in conversation; the moment when a spouse comes home and is eager to talk, and all we can think about is reading the paper or watching the television; the moments when people we love are in a nursing home and left lonely and unattended; the moments when our lives become so frenetic with other pursuits that we neglect our friends, who are the greatest gift imaginable. It is as if we sleepwalk through life! And God would awaken us - and more than that, God would shake us! He desires us to be alive and alert, as if we were plugged into those 220 volts, feeling the adrenaline flow.

Did you see in the news recently (I think it was in the Kansas City Star) the story about the little boy who was walking his miniature dachshund? Did you see this story? He was walking his dog, and a hawk tried to snatch it. Can you imagine? As I recall, this little lad was about 8 or 10 years old. He actually fought off the hawk! He started swinging and batting at the bird that was trying to snatch his beloved little puppy, and he drove the hawk off and saved his dog. I read that and I wanted to stand up and cheer, "You go, boy!" What is it *you* are willing to fight for? What will it take to really shake you awake?

I recently read that today the fault lines in terms of socioeconomic status are falling along the lines of education. There was a time you did not need much beyond a high school education. In fact, my grandfather only had an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education and made himself a very successful individual. The times are changing, and if we don't create an

environment where all our children are given the opportunity to truly learn, we will inevitably consign them to second class status for the rest of their lives. Is that enough to awaken us - to shake us to actually do something?

I have also been reading about sexual promiscuity among teenagers. Do you realize that among teenage girls, those that are sexually active are *three times* as prone to depression and suicide as those who are not? Isn't it time we wake up and tell the truth to our young people about purity and marriage and saving themselves?

Another subject about which I've read recently is binge drinking at our colleges, and it is quite terrifying! It has become the norm, rather than the exception, for students to "binge" drink, and the beer companies are complicit in all of it. Among college students, the statistics indicate that it is quite common for students to binge drink *four times a week*; usually Thursday, Friday, Saturday and one other night a week! Young people are dying because of the toxicity of alcohol, and they are much more susceptible to alcoholism at these young ages, before their neurological systems have completely developed. Essentially, they are being drawn into circumstances that prove to be ultimately tragic. Is *that* enough to shake us out of our indifference?

Divorce today occurs among almost 50% of those who get married. And yet, the attitude so often is that one of, "Whatever . . ." We ignore the trouble signs in their early stages, when the dissolution of marriage can be so preventable; it is only when things have reached the disastrous point that we declare the marriage "dead on arrival". What will it take for our society to be awakened and shaken to the reality that faces us? Sadly, the prospects for 10, 20, 30, 40, 50 years from now are absolutely frightening! While I won't live to see the state of marriage in our culture in 50 years, my children and my children's children will, and the legacy we leave will be determinate for them.

You see, the Good News of the gospel is intended to awaken us - to shake us - from our complacency with life as it is, and to remind us that we are never, ever forsaken; that God loves us and is present with us. The real miracle of Christmas is that God sent His only Son, Jesus Christ, to become a babe - not to conquer our hearts, but to melt them and transform our lives.

I am convinced that when we get to heaven we will be surprised by the company we keep there. I believe we will be astounded at the nature of God's grace. Someone sent me a prayer this week, worthy of keeping in mind during this holiday season:

"Heavenly Father, help us to remember that the jerk who cut us off in traffic last night is a single mother who worked 9 hours that day and was rushing home to cook dinner, help with homework, do the laundry, and spend a few precious moments with her children.

Lord, help us to remember that the pierced, tattooed, disinterested young man who can't make change correctly is a worried 19 year old college

student, balancing his apprehension over final exams and his fear of not getting his student loans for next semester.

Remind us, Lord, that the scary looking bum begging for money in the same spot every day (who really ought to get a job) is a slave to addictions that we can only imagine in our worst nightmares.

Help us to remember that the old couple walking annoyingly slowly through the store aisles - blocking our shopping progress when we are in such a hurry - are savoring this moment, knowing that, based on the biopsy report she just got back last week, this will be the last year they go shopping together.

Heavenly Father, remind us each day that of all the gifts You give us, the greatest gift is love, and that it is not enough to share that love only with those we hold dear. Open our hearts to all humanity. Let us be slow to judge, quick to forgive, and filled with patience, empathy, and love for all. Amen.”

I grew up in Warsaw, Wisconsin. Frank Lloyd Wright was one of our famous sons; in fact, he had relatives who lived in Warsaw not far from my house, and he built them a “Wright house”. In fact, in Monroe, Wisconsin, there was a family in my congregation that had a Frank Lloyd Wright home. There wasn’t a 90 degree angle in the entire house! Think about that . . . You see, Frank Lloyd Wright’s whole philosophy of architecture was one of organic architecture, where the landscape and the construction blended in such a way that they were almost indistinguishable. I believe that what God intended to do at Christmas was to create “organic Christians” - who almost become inseparable from the society they inhabit, from the circumstances in which they dwell; who live in such a way that life and love become indistinguishable. For that to happen, it will require that we awaken from our slumber; that we be shaken from our stupor; that we break free of the complacency, the indifference, the “Whatever . . .” attitude; and finally engage in life and love. That will only happen when we begin to look at one another and the world through the eyes of Christ - then it will truly be Christmas. Amen?

Pray with me, please. Lord, thank You. We read Your Word and it awakens our spirits. Lead us into the life You intend, loving and serving in the name of the One we call Lord. In His name we pray, Amen.