

The First Christmas: The First Visitors

(Advent 2021)

Scripture (told in drama)

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." ¹⁵When 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." ¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. (Luke 2:8-18)

Message:

Time magazine notes that Katie Larson was a little too young to get it – to understand.

Her dad Brian had just slipped a blue and white striped shepherd smock over her head. "Look at you," he says. "It's perfect." But Katie, 2, doesn't think so. (Two years ago, she had been the Baby Jesus; at that age she didn't stress about her costume. Now she begins to cry. "Do you want to hold this cute little baby sheep?" Brian asks, waving a stuffed toy before his daughter's beet-red face. Still no sale.

Katie's brother Tyler, 6, is more at ease with all this. He obligingly pulls on the robe, cord belt and headdress worn by dozens of predecessor shepherds over the years at the First Presbyterian Church in Arlington Heights, Ill.

"Now what do shepherds do?" asks pageant director Phyllis Green. "They protect their sheep," he says promptly. His older brother Drew, who at 8, has

two years more experience under his shepherd's belt, chimes in, "And the angels come."

As if on cue, from a Sunday School classroom upstairs wafts the sound of 70 angelic young voices rendering a shaky but clearly heartfelt version of *Away in a Manger*.

Across the United States, similar scenes unfold as small children progress from incomprehension to playtime participation to the beginnings of actual Christmas understanding thanks to Children's programs which range from modest cardboard-camel presentations to near professional productions playing to thousands of people.

No performance, not even those working with prefabricated scripts and scores provided by Christian entertainment companies will be exactly like another—mostly because no two six-year-old shepherds are alike.

But none will be precisely like the New Testament Gospel accounts, either. A fact that causes concern for almost no one. Marilyn and I attended a "live nativity" last Sunday night that continued to promote a false narrative. Thankfully, the most important part usually comes through clearly: God came to earth in the form of a baby to show just how much he loved us. And yet, at some point, it is helpful to get the details right; it deepens our understanding and relationship with God.

THE EXAMINATION

As we look at those details, we are again going to test your Christmas knowledge – this time, about the first visitors who came to see Jesus.

1. An angel appeared to shepherds in the town of Bethlehem to announce the birth of Jesus. (**True or False?**)
2. Gabriel, God's announcing angel, said to the shepherds: "*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord....*" (**True or False?**)
3. Being a shepherd in Israel, the first job of King David, was an occupation held in high esteem in Judah. (**True or False?**)
4. Shepherds were usually in their early teens. (**True or False?**)
5. Both boys and girls were shepherds - tending sheep in the fields. (**True or False?**)
6. Bears, wolves, lions, and leopards lived in the wilderness region where shepherds tended their flocks. (**True or False?**)
7. Shepherds were guided by the star to the place where Jesus lay. (**True or False?**)

8. A choir of angels sang to the shepherds: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.*” (**True or False?**)
9. Before returning to their sheep, the shepherds told other people about Jesus. (**True or False?**)
10. The primary reason Bethlehem became a center for raising sheep was because of the abundance of green grasses and foliage nearby (**True or False?**)

Let’s examine some of these questions together...

THE EXPLANATION

There was something very public about births in the ancient world.

There were no hospital maternity wards where only the father or immediate family could visit. There was no looking through a nursery window trying to figure out which baby is yours. There was no breathing on the child through sterile, antiseptic masks.

In Jesus’ day, the birth of a baby was a reason to **celebrate**. It was also a whole community event – especially in small towns like Nazareth or Bethlehem. It often initiated a time of feasting among the relatives, friends and neighbors—all of whom would crowd in to see...and hold...and breathe on the newborn child.

Since Mary and Joseph were far from their Nazareth home in Bethlehem under special circumstances, the festivities would have been quite different—even if they had friends and relatives in Bethlehem.

Strangely, the only guests mentioned in Scripture who came to celebrate Jesus’ birth were **shepherds** and, a bit later, **wise men**.

Shepherding was not only the oldest vocations of the ancient Hebrews, it was also one of the most prominent vocations in Bethlehem.

Shepherds and tax collectors were at the **bottom** of the social ladder (on the opposite end of the economic and status continuum from magi). Shepherds earned little income from their work; their work required little skill – even though it could be dangerous; their responsibilities demanded long hours.

Shepherds frequently infuriated the rabbis by their manner of life. They were considered **spiritually unclean**: they dressed improperly, their hands were soiled with dirt, blood, and manure, and they violated the dietary laws (it is hard to cook kosher in the desert).

They didn’t keep the holy days. Sabbath, holy days, and feast days are all the same “out in the fields;” sheep need attention every day, all day.

And while shepherds (and even their sheep) were welcome in the outer temple; the shepherds (and their sheep) were not allowed in the inner court to **worship**.

Shepherds were not allowed to testify in court; their word wasn't considered trustworthy. They were assumed to be thieves - stealing anything/everything not nailed down.

But the shepherd took good care of the sheep he or she was assigned; or they would not be a shepherd for long. The shepherd and the sheep spent day and night together; they knew each other well. Sheep would only follow a shepherd they recognized; they'd ignore strangers. A simple call from their shepherd and the entire flock would follow the shepherd's lead.

The shepherd was responsible for the **care** of their sheep. Adult Bedouin usually delegated the care of flocks to young (pre-teen and early teen) boys AND girls.

These herdsmen would protect their sheep from **bears, wolves, lions** and **leopards** that roamed the Negev wilderness and from would-be robbers and thieves by skillful use of their staff and sling—as well as a metal-studded club about a yard long.

The shepherd scouted for adequate **food** and **water**, for **green pastures** and **quiet waters**—and then led the sheep to them. Shepherds were also responsible for shearing the wool and aiding in lambing.

At night, the shepherd would usually bring the sheep into the **fold** underneath a house, into a nearby pen, or an enclosure or cave in the wilderness (sheep tend to wander more at night in the darkness). The shepherd would then lie across the opening of the fold—acting as a **gate** to protect the sheep and prevent them from straying. (This is likely the image Jesus is portraying as he describes himself as the *gate* or *door* to the sheep fold; **John 10:9**)

The Bible is full of references to sheep and **shepherds**. The **Patriarchs** (Abraham [the father of the Jewish nation], Isaac, Jacob), **Moses** [the great lawgiver], and **David** [the king who would establish Israel's national identity; **1 Samuel 17:28**] were all shepherds.

In the Old Testament, **God** is acknowledged as Shepherd (**Psalm 23**). In the New Testament, **Jesus** calls himself the *Good Shepherd* (**John 10:1-30**). Early Church leaders were called pastors (**cf. Ephesians 4:11**). The terms pastor and bishop are both derived from the ancient words for “shepherd” and “overseer/guardian.” In fact, the bishop's *staff* is actually a *shepherd's crook*. These shepherd images helped the Israelites to understand their relationship to God and their dependence on him.

The **Angelic Announcement** has a fascinating context. The announcement of the birth of Christ-the-Lord as **Good News** of **Great Joy** stands in vivid

contrast to the annual announcement of Caesar-the-Lord's **birthday** as the "good news" (*euggelion*—from which we get *evangelism*) for the world.

The Roman Empire considered it *great news* to remind people of the ascendancy of their king and his reign over the known world. His annual announcement would go something like this: "*Son of God, Lord, Savior of the World, and the One Who has brought Peace on Earth.*"

The angels, in the shadow of the Herodian, proclaimed: "*Here is the news of really great joy – joy for everyone; not just in Caesar's town, but joy in David's town. The real king's birth date is now. The king of kings has arrived...and with him a new kingdom bringing real peace (not just the pax romana).*"

The announcing angel was then joined by others to **praise God** (their praise was for God—not the shepherds) and they **said** (Scripture never says they sang) "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests*" (**Luke 2:10**).

Initially, the shepherds would have been frightened by the sight of angels, but then they were invited to visit the child! Their next thought, if this child is truly the Messiah, his parents will surely turn us away if we try to visit. They'd figure there was a slim-to-none chance they would be welcome.

The angels, actually the One who wrote the script for the angel's announcement, anticipated this anxiety and so the angel told them they would find the baby wrapped in cloths. Only peasants, like these shepherds, wrapped their children in cloths. Then they were told the baby would be lying in a manger! That is, he was not born in a governor's mansion or a wealthy merchant's guest room. They would find the baby in a simple two room home peasant home like theirs. That was really Good News! This was their sign – a sign for lowly shepherds – that this child was for them.

With this special encouragement, the shepherds **hurry** to Bethlehem to find the child in spite of their "low degree" (**Luke 1:52**). We don't know if anyone stayed behind to watch the sheep while they were gone to see the Christ child. But taking the sheep along would not only have significantly delayed their arrival, it would also not been appreciated by the people of Bethlehem.

But like the sheep they led, these shepherds accepted what the angel had to say as the Word of God, and they were quick to obey. They headed to Bethlehem. They left everything behind to seek Jesus. Imagine that kind of faith!

They left praising God for *all* they had heard and seen. "The word "*all*" obviously included the quality of the hospitality they witnessed upon their arrival. Clearly, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby in perfectly adequate accommodations, not in a dirty stable. If they had found a frightened young mother and a desperate Joseph in a dirty, smelly stable,

they would have said, “This is outrageous! Come home with us. Our family will take care of you!” The family would have been moved in minutes. The honor of their village would have required it. The fact that they walked out without moving the family and praising God means the shepherds felt they couldn’t offer the baby-blessed couple better hospitality than had already been extended.

It is no coincidence the perfect lamb who was born to be sacrificed for the sins of the world would have as his first visitors—shepherds. Shepherds know a perfect lamb better than anyone. Afterwards, Luke says, “**they spread the word** [evangelized] *concerning what had been told them about this child*” and “*all who heard it were amazed*” at what these shepherds were saying.

THE ELUCIDATION

1. An angel appeared to announce the birth of Jesus to shepherds in the town of Bethlehem. (trick question; **False, they were “out in the fields”**)
2. Gabriel, God’s announcing angel, said to the shepherds: “*Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord....*” (**False; an unnamed angel**)
3. Being a shepherd in Israel, the first job of King David, was an occupation held in high esteem in Judah. (**False**)
4. Shepherds were usually in their early teens. (**True**)
5. Both boys and girls were shepherds - tending sheep in the fields. (**True**)
6. Bears, wolves, lions, and leopards lived in the wilderness region where shepherds tended their flocks. (**True; still do**)
7. Shepherds were guided by the star to the place where Jesus lay. (**False - should be easy**)
8. A choir of angels sang to the shepherds: “*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.*” (**False, no “singing,” they “said;” Luke 2:13**)
9. Before returning to their sheep, the shepherds told other people about Jesus. (**True; Luke 2:17**)
10. The primarily reason Bethlehem became a center for raising sheep was because of the abundance of green grasses and foliage nearby. (**False - because it was close to Jerusalem’s Temple**)

First, Jesus’ incarnation is now **complete**. At his birth, Jesus (and Mary and Joseph) was welcomed into a **peasant’s** home. These people did their best to enfold him – and it was enough. At his birth, common people sheltered him.

Even the wise men came to the house. As Jesus grew, and even as an adult, the common people came to him gladly.

Second, don't miss that the shepherds were invited, welcomed, encouraged to **come** and **see** Jesus. In fact, Scripture notes they are the first visitors. The unclean were judged to be clean. The outcasts become the honored guests. The words of angels were proclaimed to the simplest of all.

On Easter, we often greet one another with "He is risen." The response is, "He is risen indeed!" What if we turned "Merry Christmas" (which is a step better than "Happy Holidays") into:

Greeting: The Savior is born.

Response: He is born in a manger.

Third, I've always envisioned (based on pictures I'd seen) that the shepherds were driving their sheep into lush, green fields. I got that completely messed up.

Good shepherds in Israel don't **drive** the sheep, they **lead** them – often along narrow paths and over rocky hills. The shepherd goes before his flock: "This is the way. Follow me..."

The "green" pastures are in reality sparse tufts of grass springing up in an very stony landscape. Sheep depend on the leading of the shepherd to find sufficient grass for grazing. At this time of the year, after the harvest, they are "cleaning up" the fields.

When we understand the shepherd, the land and the culture, his words become clearer: "I am the good shepherd, I am the way...This is how to live. Follow me."

Sheep **follow**. They don't lead. But neither do they just stay put. They go; they follow. We, like sheep, are to follow the shepherd, follow the example he sets, walk in the paths the Shepherd selects. No matter how difficult, how narrow, or how treacherous the path, Jesus reminds us, "I've walked it first. I go before you; but you must follow me like a **disciple** follows their **rabbi**."

Picturing God's green pastures as rich Michigan farmland where everything is available in abundance taints the real picture of Christian living. Acres of lush grass mean life will be comfortable, easy, luxurious. That is seldom our live experience. Life is hard. No one knows what we'll be dealing with even over the next few days—or, for that matter, in next few minutes (any more than sheep know they'll have enough grass to eat tomorrow). One phone call can change everything.

All we have is what is sufficient for this moment—and what we have is sufficient if we really trust the Shepherd. It is imperative to keep our **eyes** on the Shepherd—because grazing in green pastures and drinking by quiet waters requires following the shepherd. Without Him, we'll die.

We need to learn to live for each moment, trusting and depending on God for what lies ahead. The Christian life is a moment-by-moment process seeking and trusting the Lord's provision and presence.

Like sheep, we find it difficult to distinguish a dangerous cliff from a safe path or deadly floodwaters from a quiet pool. We have messed up; *"we have all, like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way."* (**Isaiah 53:6**). We are, by nature, emotionally and spiritually **hungry** and **thirsty** people. We long to be significant, fulfilled, and purposeful—all God-given desires, but we often take the wrong path.

As the sun set in the Judean hills, with the confusing tangle of trials, cliffs, and dry riverbeds, it often became difficult to follow the shepherd and increasingly easy to misstep, fall or wander away.

When these moments arrive—when we lose a parent, spouse, or child; when we face pain, suffering or disease; when we fear the unknown, or even in the midst of a difficult day - we need the **leading, comfort, and protection** of the Good Shepherd.

Only keeping our eyes on the shepherd provides his immediate comfort, the soothing sound of his voice, and the protection of his presence...and the assurance of his peace that the angels promised to the shepherds on the hills outside of Bethlehem.

Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me. (Psalm 23:4)

Jesus, our **Passover** lamb, born among the **Temple** flocks of Bethlehem, visited by shepherds, is our **strong** and **faithful** shepherd. God chose to announce his son's, our Savior's, birth to **lowly** shepherds—maybe because they understood the importance of **following** the Shepherd's voice, maybe because they knew a perfect lamb and a Good Shepherd when they saw one.

Are we ready and willing to follow His voice where ever he leads?