

# **“The Shepard’s Faith?”**

## **Luke 2:1-20**

Christmas Eve  
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At Christmas pageants each year,  
    thousand’s of children put on bathrobes  
    to act out the part of shepherds.

We are accustomed to associating shepherds  
    with Christ’s birth.

We see them in Nativity scenes  
    we sing about them in carols,  
    but what are they doing there?

What role do they play?

Unfortunately, the meaning of shepherds  
    has become merely ornamental and sentimental.

In our imaginations they evoke lovely  
    pastoral scenes and fluffy little lambs.

What was Luke thinking about when he gave  
    a prominent part in the story of Jesus birth  
    to a group of nameless shepherds, as he puts  
    it “living in the fields, keeping watch  
    over their flocks by night” (2:8)?

Luke opens his gospel with a dedication to  
    a man named Theophilus.

There Luke admits others “have undertaken to set  
    down an orderly account of the events  
    that have been fulfilled among, just as  
    they were handed on to us by those who  
    from the beginning were eyewitnesses and  
    servants of the Word” (1:1-2).

In his narration of this remarkable event,  
    why does Luke select the shepherds  
    extraterrestrial encounter with angels  
    out of the many other sources he could  
    have included?

I think Luke was trying to teach his readers  
some important things.

As to the birth of Jesus, Luke succinctly states,  
“And she (Mary) gave birth to her firstborn son  
and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him  
in a manger, because there was no place for them  
in the inn” (2:7)

Today the “room in the inn” connotes homeless shelters  
and faith-based programs for those in need.

Of course, many sermons this Christmas Eve  
will remind listeners of how Mary and Joseph  
were poor, homeless, refugees, turned away  
by “heartless innkeepers because they lacked  
sufficient funds.

That message may be a helpful fundraising device  
for Lutheran Social Services, but it is not  
historically correct.

The point is that there is no room-that is, no  
place for them at the inn- for Mary to give birth.  
We’re not talking about a Holiday Inn here.  
In Luke’s time, inn’s were public spaces;  
Mary needed privacy.

Moreover, the stable allows Luke to make a  
profound point that many readers today overlook  
because we don’t think about the metaphoric  
potential of words.

The term manger is not just a bed of straw, a crib;  
it is an animal feeding trough.

Those who remember their high- school French  
will recall the verb manger, “to eat.”

The Italians bid guests to mangia or eat.

Mary places her baby where food is found.

How appropriate, for this baby will later  
“take the bread” saying, “this is my body  
which is given for you. Do this in remembrance  
of me” (22:19).

By locating Jesus in the manger, Luke is  
anticipating Jesus’ last supper with his disciples

on the eve of his crucifixion.  
Chew on this tidbit if you will, the name  
Bethlehem literally means in Hebrew  
“house of bread.”  
In fact, Luke’s gospel contains the most  
occasions in which Jesus eats a meal with others.  
Reading Luke should make one hungry,  
not just for bread, but for more of the story.

The scene shifts from the inn to the outdoors,  
where shepherds were living in the fields  
protecting and providing for their sheep.  
This is not wintertime, for at night both  
sheep and shepherds would freeze.  
It is a probably spring time and to these shepherds  
that an other angel, again appears.  
First Zechariah in the Temple of Jerusalem,  
then to Mary in her home in Nazareth in  
the Galian hill country, then back to Judea  
in the fields outside of Bethlehem.  
The divine messenger can appear anywhere,  
and so therefore can the message-  
from the temple, to home, to field.

If you read some commentaries addressing  
this scene, a number of ill-formed commentators  
rush in to explain how these shepherds  
represent the dregs of society and are  
examples of ritual impurity, and so they conclude  
that Jesus doesn’t care about purity laws.

That’s nonsense!

Shepherds are no more and less so ritually  
impure than any other regiment of society.

I would like to think that since Bethlehem  
is walking distance to Jerusalem,  
the sheep that these shepherds keep watch  
over are the flocks that will be dedicated  
for the Passover sacrifice in the temple.

We can picture these shepherds, under the stars.  
They are doing what people do at the end of the

day, telling stories, singing songs, praying  
to God for their health and safety or  
for the Romans to disappear or just a silent night.

It is to these shepherds that the angel appears  
with his expected “don’t be afraid” (2:10).

The angel then offers “good news of great joy  
for all the people” (2:10)

The Greek term for “good news” is also  
the word for “gospel.”

Where as in Mark (1:1) and Matthew (4:23),  
the term primarily relates to Jesus mission,  
for Luke the good news begins with his birth.

What good news will this new king, heir of David  
and Son of God bring?

To find the answer we must continue to read  
through Luke’s “gospel,” Luke’s “good news.”

For the shepherds, the immediate good news  
is universal, it is “joyous” for “all people.”

The sign the shepherds receive is not Matthew’s  
moving star or supernova.

It is those bands of cloth, the manger, and the baby.

The refusal to offer supernatural signs fits  
within Luke’s infancy stories.

The sign to Mary was the pregnancy of her  
barren cousin Elizabeth.

Once we figure out the sign, whether of a  
pregnant women, or a mother who has just given birth,  
of a newborn in a stable’s manger wrapped  
in bands of cloth, our next step is to work out  
the symbolism, or what the sign signifies.

If we can start looking for the light of the  
divine in front of our eyes rather than  
searching the stars we’ll be spiritually ready  
when we hear stories of sowers and seeds,  
vines and fig trees, yeast and fish.

Signs are all around us, if we take the time to look.

The celestial choir that appears to serenade the Shepherd’s

is usually translated “the heavenly host.”  
A better translation would be heavenly forces on warriors.  
This is God’s army.

Why do you think people fear them?

No wonder they can sing about “peace among those  
whom he favors” (2:14), for they are  
the peace-keeping force of the universe

When I first heard the term “Lord of Hosts”  
I thought it referred to Jesus as the host  
of a meal like the Lord’s Supper.

I had no clue that the hosts were God’s  
special forces!

The shepherds decide to go to Bethlehem “to see  
this thing that has taken place” (2:15).

The angels do not go with them.

The shepherds don’t find a baby that glows in  
the dark, or one fully verbal, even one with  
a complete set of teeth.

They see a baby, snuggled in his wrappings,  
they smell his body fluids.

There is nothing particularly special about  
what their eyes see; there is everything special  
about how they interpret what they see.

Luke tells us that the shepherds saw not just  
the baby but also “Mary and Joseph” (2:16).

For all the wonder of the angel Gabriel’s annunciation  
to Mary, we see Mary and Joseph as they are;  
tired, joyful at having arrived safely in Bethlehem,  
relieved to find a private place for giving birth,  
grateful for Mary to have a natural and safe delivery.

The shepherds report to Mary and Joseph what  
the angel said about the baby.

Luke tells us that she “treasured” all these words  
and pondered them in her heart” (2:19).

The signs will gradually unfold, not only to be  
treasured but also to be more fully understood  
as time passes.

Moreover, the visit of the shepherds,  
like Mary’s visit to Elizabeth, transforms

all the parties involved.

The shepherds function as a “sign” to Mary;  
they assure her, “yes,” what you experienced  
was not a hallucination; yes, no matter how  
unbelievable everything has been, believe!

The story of the shepherds ends in great and glorious  
joy, as the angel had promised: “The shepherds  
returned, glorified and praising God for all  
they had heard and seen, as it had been told them” (2:20).

Do you see what the shepherds were doing?

They were imitating the angels by glorifying God  
in the highest and praising him for peace on earth.

Beloved of God, this is what the gospel does,  
it brings us to faith in Jesus Christ,  
and this, in turn leads us to witness and worship,

First we come and see, and when we know for sure,  
we go and tell, glorifying and praising God  
along the way.

What is the gospel doing in your life?

Are you sharing your faith?

Are you praising and glorifying God with your life?

Or, are you still wondering about Jesus,  
pondering his gospel in your heart?

If so, then God is calling you to believe the  
angel’s message and follow the shepherds to Jesus,  
he will be born in your heart by faith

Then you will have a shepherd’s faith.

AMEN