

Great Expectations: Jesus, Shepherds, and some Angels

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Date: 24 December 2017

Preacher: Rev. Aaron Roberts

- [0 : 00] If you don't know me, my name is Aaron. I'm one of the ministers here at St. John's. And I want us to spend just 10 minutes looking at Luke chapter 2. And this chapter, Luke chapter 2, is one of the best known and most loved stories in the Bible.
- It's the Christmas greatest hits text because it's got the angels, it's got the shepherds, it's got the manger, it's got Mary, it's got Joseph, it's got the baby.
- It's the passage that launched a thousand Christmas cards and kids books. But if you heard the passage read, did you notice this?
- Did you notice that the entire nativity scene is dealt with in just one verse? Of that chapter, just one verse is given to the nativity scene there.
- It's verse 7. So the whole nativity scene just gets one verse.
- [1 : 03] Why is that? Well, it seems that the focus of the story in Luke is overwhelmingly on the different responses to Christ's death.
- Ten more time space is given to reactions. God, it seems, is very interested in how we respond to the news of Jesus. So, let's have a look at some of those responses because I think they're held up as models for us.
- So let's begin with the shepherds. How did the shepherds respond? Well, first, a little bit about the shepherds. Because we know the story so well, I think the wrongness of the shepherds is lost on us, the wrongness of them.
- God has been born and the angels announce it to shepherds. It's not announced to the religious elite. It's not announced to the educated. It's not announced to the influential.
- It's not even announced to the middle class. But shepherds, shepherds were poor. They worked with animals. They slept in the fields. They worked on the Sabbath, which means they were ceremonially unclean.
- [2 : 06] They were just not really trusted back in those days. We're not talking about this particular group of shepherds. But in general, they weren't trusted. One scholar said this, they're not the kind of person you'd want your daughter dating.
- So these guys in that culture were serious outsiders. And yet it's to these folks that God announces the birth of a son, the savior of the world.
- So why them? God did this, not because he's sentimental, not because he likes a good underdog story. No, God is trying to tell us something about what he's doing in the birth of Jesus.
- And it's this, that through Jesus, God has come to save those people who don't deserve it. And we have this massive clue that this is what God is up to because God chooses to announce the birth of a son to people who have no status.
- See, by doing that, he's saying, what I'm up to here, it's all about grace. So how did the shepherds respond? Because that's what we're talking about, response. How did they respond?

[3 : 10] Two things, two things. First, they picked up and they moved. They went, they went to try and find this baby they'd heard about. I love it. They followed through on what God had said to them, which is key, isn't it?

Because if they'd have stayed in the fields, if they'd have heard the message and just sort of, you know, locked down for the night and just done nothing about it, the good news of Jesus would have remained just words to them.

They would not have encountered Jesus. But the shepherds did something. That's their first response. They did something. The second response was praise. Verse 20, the shepherds returned glorifying and praising God.

They were declaring to God, we don't deserve this and we love you. Thank you. So the shepherds had two responses, action and worship.

What about the angels? Because they had a response too. How did they respond? Well, so the angels deliver the news to the shepherd. Well, actually just one angel. One angel delivers this news to the shepherds.

[4 : 12] And then all of a sudden, you remember, there's this massive choir praising God, saying, Glory to God on the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased.

So the angels' response is worship to the news. Which is interesting, isn't it? These are not creatures that need salvation, but they praised.

And they praised God because God was doing something incredible. Well, think about this situation. So the angels come and they're not sent to Rome to speak to kings. They're sent to this backwater town to tell some sort of, you know, shepherds, some backwater shepherds, what God is up to.

And the message is this. You'll find Christ, not on a palace, you'll find him in a stable, wrapped in rags, lying in a manger, which is an animal's feeding trough.

So the angels praise God. Why? Because they are amazed at the length God will go to to save his people. That's why they praise.

[5 : 18] Now look at Mary's response. How did Mary respond? Well, the shepherds visit her and they share what they've been told. And then verse 19 says this. She treasured up these things, pondering them in her heart.

Treasured up, pondered. Very interesting words, treasured and pondered. Now the original text was written in Greek. And in Greek, these words, well, treasure first. The word treasure, it's a very emotional word.

It means to keep something, like keep a fire alive. It means to savor something. It means to relish something. That's what Mary did. But this word ponder, it's less emotional.

It's more cognitive. It means she's connecting the dots. She's heard the message and she's making sense of it in her mind. So Mary doesn't just listen to the news. She doesn't just receive the information.

She turns it over in her head. She tries to make sense of it. And as she's doing it, she's relishing it. She's enjoying it. She's treasuring it.

[6 : 18] Now there's a contrast in the passage that Luke wants us to notice. There's actually a whole other group of people in the story. We're supposed to compare Mary too. And they're easy to miss this group.

They appear for just a second in verse 18. Verse 18, I'll read it to you. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. So the shepherds come to Bethlehem.

They talk to Mary. And it appears that the shepherds tell a whole group of other people as well what they'd heard. So whilst Mary treasures what was told to her, these other folks wondered at the news.

In Greek, the word wonder means to admire. But it doesn't mean faith. It doesn't mean they really got it. They didn't do anything with the news. It's kind of like this. It's like, wow. And then on to the next thing.

In Luke's gospel, he uses this word wonder a number of other times later in the story. And it's always in places where there's a crowd has a positive brush with Jesus.

[7 : 23] But nothing changes for them. What a difference between them and Mary. What a contrast the passage wants us to see. And the great challenge for us is this at Christmas. It's bonkers, I know.

It's madness. It's so busy. But in the midst of that, let's treasure the news of Jesus. Let's ponder it. Let's think through the implications. Let's not just have a positive brush with the idea, a sentimental reflection on it.

Those are the responses of the passage. Now as we finish, let's just talk about the news. What was the news that the angels spoke?

What was the news that made the shepherds move? What was the news that made this angelic choir appear and praise God? And what was the news that made Mary ponder?

The news is verse 11. For unto you was born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord. Let's zoom in on this one word, Savior.

[8 : 23] Savior. It's the word the angels use, Savior. This is important, this word. It's really important because it sums up the genius of the Christian faith.

You see, every religion offers a path to salvation. And the path is this. The path says this. It says, do this and you'll be saved.

See, Christianity doesn't offer a path to salvation. It offers a Savior. See, Christianity is so different to other faiths.

It doesn't say, be meritorious. It doesn't say, be worthy. It doesn't say, do this and be saved. God says, I will send my son to do what you cannot do.

That's what a Savior does. That's Christianity. Christianity. That's the genius of it. Now, let me finish with a quick story to illustrate this. Dorothy Sayers was a mid-century English writer.

[9 : 28] She was a Christian. Really interesting woman. She was one of the first women to graduate from Oxford. By her own reckoning, she wasn't very attractive.

And she was most well known as a crime writer. Sayers wrote this long series, a long series of books about a guy called Lord Peter Wimsey, who was this detective who solved crimes.

About halfway through the series, Dorothy Sayers introduced a new character called Harriet Vane. Harriet Vane was one of the first female graduates of Oxford.

She was not very attractive, and she wrote crime novels. What are the chances, right? In the series, Harriet Vane meets Lord Peter Wimsey.

They fall in love, and they get married, and they solve crimes together. So brilliant. Now, here's what many people think. That Dorothy Sayers looked into the world of this book she created, and she looked at the man she created, who was a lonely man, and she fell in love with him.

[10 : 37] So she wrote herself into the story. Now, some of you are thinking, oh, that's so sweet. But do you realize this is the claim of Christmas, that God looked into the world that he created, the people he made, the world he loved, and he saw the mess we were in, and he knew it was a mess we couldn't get ourselves out of.

And so he wrote himself into the story. God wrote himself into the story. That is who the baby Jesus is.

The baby Jesus is God. It's God entering the world to rescue us. For unto you is born this day the Lord. That's what that means.

It means God came down to us because we couldn't climb up to God. It's the best news ever. Now, how will you respond to this news this Christmas?

That's the question, right? How will you respond to the news of this birth this Christmas? Folks, I hope it moves you. I hope you take action as a result like the shepherds.

[11 : 54] And I hope you praise God like the angels. And I hope you treasure it like Mary. Amen. Amen. Amen.