

12-27-2009 – Christmas Really Happened

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The trees may be gone, the presents have been opened, and possibly even forgotten about by now. The meal has been eaten and put away. The carols have been sung. The world goes on as if Christmas did not happen. But it did happen, and Christmas continues. Look around, the church is full of family and friends and laughter because the baby is still the savior. To a world still looking for joy and the world looking for peace, and individuals looking for purpose and life, the baby was born. Over 2000 years ago, God came and invaded this world in the form of a baby named Jesus. He grew, he lived, he died, and he rose from death. He still lives, and because of that, Christmas continues.

What I want to share with you this morning is how to take this Christmas event and let it be something that changes your life and the lives of others. To do this I want to look back into the Book of Luke, and see what we can learn from the scriptures...and in particular the shepherds that were one of the first to see Jesus. I want to see how we can make sure that as far as it depends on us, How we can keep Christmas.

Let's start in **Luke 2:8. That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.** ⁹ **Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord's glory surrounded them. They were terrified,** ¹⁰ **but the angel reassured them. "Don't be afraid!" he said. "I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people.** ¹¹ **The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David!** ¹² **And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." NLT**

So, we have the shepherds, who have just witnessed an angel of the Lord telling them the good news of Jesus and they are terrified. In the next couple verses the angel is joined by a larger group of angels singing the praises of God. I don't know about you, but if I saw that I would either be terrified-er, if that is even a word. I probably would have had to at least change my pants. But when the angels all left here is what they did next.

¹⁵ **When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."** ¹⁶ **They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in the manger.** ¹⁷ **After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child.**

Luke tells us that the shepherds "told everyone." They **shared** what they had witnessed. Shepherds generally came from the base elements of society, they were not very respected. If you can remember the story of David, King David, you will remember that he was a shepherd and was overlooked by his father and all his brothers when Samuel came into the house of Jesse to anoint the new king. The shepherd was the last one expected to be important or valuable.

In that day, they were so little trusted that a shepherd's testimony would not be accepted in a courtroom. Most shepherds were considered on a par with Gypsies, vagrants, and con men. Add to that the fact that shepherds were on the lowest rung of the economic ladder and had little or no formal education. It is entirely possible that these shepherds who heard the angels singing were illiterate.

Consider this. On that night in Bethlehem, outside of Joseph and Mary, the only people in the world who knew Christ had been born were the shepherds. He did not speak through prophets to kings, but through to lowly shepherds on a remote hillside outside a tiny Judean village. It wasn't a likely way to win the world. Certainly not the way we would have done it. If we had planned it, Jesus would have been born in Jerusalem, to a wealthy family, and attended by the high and mighty. We would have all of the 24 hour cable news networks on the scene, and I

am sure that Oprah would have been lining up for our interview if we had our way of announcing it. That way no one would doubt that the Son of God had come to earth. But God's ways and ours are not the same. He chose to reveal the news to the shepherds first of all.

After their initial (and understandable) fear, they responded in faith. They believed the angel, they immediately went to Bethlehem, and they found the baby Jesus. Everything was just as the angel said it would be. And what did they do then? They told everyone they met what they had seen and heard.

I wonder if we would have been as obedient? Would we have believed? Would we have gone to Bethlehem in the middle of the night? Would we have been as quick to tell the story?

They did what all Christians should do. They told others what they had seen and heard. They "told everyone" about Jesus...they shared their story. When you get down to it, that's all evangelism is. It's telling the good news about Jesus Christ to someone else.

What the shepherds did, we all can do. You need no authority, no permission, and no special training to witness for Christ. Simply tell what you know to be true. Talk about Jesus. Tell who he is and what he has done for you. Share your story and then invite others to come to Christ just as you did. The **Good news is for sharing**. That's what the shepherds did. That's what all of us are called to do. This is the first way we can all celebrate Christmas.

In verse 18 it says this. ⁸ **All who heard the shepherds' story were astonished,**"

I'm sure that "astonished", other translations use the word "amazed", is a mild word to describe the reaction of those who heard the shepherds. The story itself would sound incredible—the part about hearing an angelic choir in the middle of the night, not to mention finding the Son of God in a feeding-trough. It may have sounded crazy to some. And to think that God chose lowly shepherds as the first evangelists. But what does this mean to be amazed? I have a couple ideas here if you will just follow me for a bit.

As I see it, there are two kinds of amazement. The first has to do with temporary fascination over an unusual turn of events. If I promised that the Kansas City Chiefs were going to win the Superbowl this year or next year, that would provoke amazed laughter, to say the least. But unlikely as that is, it would not be supernatural in the literal sense. Terrible teams occasionally get lucky and win championships. It's unusual but not miraculous.

The second kind of amazement we could call "**Holy Wonder.**" It's a kind of awe that comes from seeing God at work in the world. In the deepest sense all the acts of God are grounds for holy wonder since everything he does has the stamp of the divine on it. To remember that Christmas happened, we need to be able to be amazed, to have a holy wonder about this world, and how God works within it. Last year when I stepped foot into the Grand Canyon, I was filled with an amazement of the beauty of it all. I had a "Holy Wonder" that came from seeing the beauty and creativity of this world. Go all the way back to Genesis and you discover that God created the entire universe out of nothing. He spoke and the stars flew into place. He spoke and the earth took up its orbit. He spoke and the rabbits and the geese and the otters began to scurry about.

You ought to be amazed at Christmastime. If you managed to go through this Christmas season without ever pausing to think about the wonder of it all, then you have missed the reason we celebrate Christmas in the first place.

How can we regain that lost sense of wonder? By watching children. Everyone else seems jaded and harried during Christmas. We all have so much to do. But Children, especially very young children, seem to have a different sense of time around Christmas. The looks in their eyes are the looks of amazement. They wonder about what is to come. Children may or may not know about the child Jesus, but they know that something is different, and they have such an anticipation about Christmas. In scripture we are told about having a childlike faith, and I think that being able to still have a sense of "holy wonder" is essential to remembering that Christmas happened.

The next verse has something that we can use as well. ¹⁹ **but Mary kept all these things in her heart and thought about them often.**

She kept all these things in her heart. I see that almost like making a list so that you will not forget anything. It's what you do at the end of a very busy day and you want to make sure you don't forget anything that has happened.

Some translations use the word "pondered". Mary pondered what she had heard. She pondered all the things that were in her heart. And I think that pondering goes deeper than "wondering." I know we don't use the word ponder very often. We don't get up in the morning and ponder about getting a cup of coffee, or ponder about what is on the newspaper's front page. We think about things. But I just love the word ponder.

To ponder means, to take the events as you have laid them out in your memory and then to go beneath the surface, go beyond the mere wonder of it all, to try to understand what it all means and why it happened the way it did.

No doubt Mary went back to what happened to Zacharias and Elizabeth and the birth of John the Baptist. I'm sure she thought about what Gabriel said, and how Joseph responded when she told him she was pregnant, and then the amazing dream Joseph had. She must have recalled the long, arduous journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, and all the events of the birth itself, including the surprise visit of the shepherds. She certainly had plenty to think about. No doubt she continued to wonder why God had chosen her, and I'm sure she pondered what was ahead for her newborn son.

Now here's the thing...pondering is hard work, which is why many of us never get around to it. And yet this is the perfect time of the year to do it. What better time than the end of December to ponder what God has been teaching you? To look back over the last 12 months and consider the ways and works of God in your life and in the world around you? That is what I did this last week. I un-plugged for a couple days. I looked back over the last year to see where God was working in my life. I did some serious soul searching. And I want to challenge you to do the same.

Here is a simple exercise that may help you do some serious pondering before 2010 arrives: Set aside at least an hour of uninterrupted time. Find a quiet place. Don't forget to turn off the TV, the radio, and the CD player. Begin with a prayer asking God to show you the things he wants you to learn. Make a "Top Ten" list along these lines: The Top Ten things that have happened in your life in 2009. Those things can be events that happened to you personally or things that happened to others that had a major impact on you. Those things can be good or bad, victories or defeats, it doesn't matter. Make the category as broad as you like.

As you look at your list, ask God to show you what patterns are at work. What is God teaching you? What lessons seem to come up again and again? What have you learned about yourself (positively and negatively) this year? This might take some time, and might even be difficult to do. But try it.

Next, focus on the Lord. What have you learned about God's character this year? Ask the Lord for insight as to where he might be leading you in the year to come. Use all of this as the basis for some personal prayer requests as you enter 2010. I believe if you do this exercise with an open heart, God will meet you and show you fresh insights that will give you insight about the past and hope for the future. Mary pondered what God had been doing in her life. That's a helpful practice for all of us to follow.

Let's continue on in the scripture. **"20 The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them."**

The final verse tells us that the shepherds were profoundly changed by what they had experienced. What a difference a day makes. On the day before Christ was born, they were in the fields tending their sheep. On the day after he was born, they were back in the fields once

again. Only this time their hearts were filled with praise to God. They glorified the Lord.

Now I know that glorifying is not an everyday word for us as well. But when you “glorify” anything when you recognize its true value. To say that the shepherds “glorified” God means that having seen Jesus in the manger, they were overwhelmed by God’s power, his grace, his goodness, his wisdom, and the amazing miracle of the Incarnation. They simply couldn’t stop talking about what they had seen and heard.

And note where they did it. The text does not say that they glorified God in the temple, though that would have been appropriate. No, it says they “returned” to where they had been. Back to the tiring and unappreciated work of caring for sheep. That is, they were back where they were when the angel found them in the first place. Having seen the Babe in the manger, it was time to go back to work.

And so they did. And so must we. Christmas eventually ends for all of us. Soon enough we will take down the tree, pack away the ornaments, and either use our gifts or take them back to the store to be exchanged. In a few days the children will go back to school and life will return to normal.

But will we be changed by Christmas? Or will it be business as usual in 2010? For the shepherds, life would never be the same. Oh yes, the work was the same but they were different. They went back with new zeal, new joy, and new love for God in their hearts.

People sometimes wish they could keep the Christmas spirit all year long. They speak of it as if the “magic” of these days comes only once a year. But it depends on what “magic” you are talking about. If you mean the tree and the gifts and the mistletoe and the chestnuts roasting by the fire, that indeed comes only once a year. But the greater truth of Christmas is meant to warm our hearts all year long.

Would you like Christmas to last all year long? It can if you will do what the shepherds did. Go back to where you came from. Back to your office. Back to your classroom. Back to your neighborhood. Back to your job. Back to your family duties.

Go back to the humdrum of daily routine. And as you go back, glorify God and praise him. That is what the shepherds did. Christmas didn’t change their circumstances, but it changed them deeply and profoundly. And because it changed them, it changed the way they approached their daily work. Yes, they still had to deal with cranky sheep and sometimes they had to step in sheep manure, but that hardly mattered now. They had seen the Christ child.

Have you seen Jesus this year at Christmastime? If you have, then go back to what you were doing before and take the memory of Christmas with you. Glorify God and praise him as you go about your routine and you will find your days filled with joy. How shall we celebrate Christmas now that Christmas is past? Let’s follow the inspired outline in Luke 2:17-20. Sharing the good news that Christ has come. Wondering at God’s amazing plan. Pondering the works of God. Glorifying God in our daily lives.

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