

Luke 2:8-20

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Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 0 0] There are moments in our lives that are etched on our memory. Obviously, depending on our life circumstances, what those are will differ from one person to another. For many, the birth of a child is a memory that's very much etched on our memories. In my case, it's something I can't really understand, but I struggle sometimes to remember my son's names. Not the name, but who it belongs to. I know what the names are, it's just that I use them for any of the three just interchangeably. I don't understand why that is. It's just one of these mysteries. But though my memory is fragile in that regard, I do vividly remember the day of their birth. Now, what I'm going to say now is going to sound somewhat controversial, but I'm going to explain it. Samuel's birth was particularly memorable. Now, John and

Joseph are here. Don't be upset. It's not that Samuel was particularly memorable, but his birth or the circumstances of his birth were particularly memorable. I do really need to explain that. What I'm going to do is going to tell you a little bit about the circumstances of his birth and see if you could work out what was memorable about it. If you know a little bit about Edinburgh, it will help. So, there's a wee clue already. Well, Samuel was born in Edinburgh on the 20th of August, 1994. It was a Saturday, and he was born a few minutes before midnight.

Are you getting possibilities about what happens in Edinburgh at that time of year? The other thing to mention is that he was born in what was then Simpson's Memorial Hospital that no longer exists, but then it was the maternity hospital that was located just on the side of the meadows, on the city side or the city center side of the meadows. Again, if you know a little bit the geography of Edinburgh, you can locate the building. So, I wonder if any of you have worked out what accompanied Samuel's birth. Is there one or two people smiling? I don't know if it's a quizzical smile or it's a knowing smile. I can't quite interpret the smile, but anyway. Well, I'll tell you what it was. It was festival fireworks. As Samuel was being born, the fireworks exploded in the Edinburgh skyline. It was very dramatic, and it was quite a welcome, a sound and light show to mark the arrival of the young boy. I couldn't tell the story if it was here, but he doesn't come till next

Sunday, so I can. But that sound and light show that marked the arrival of a baby boy is as nothing compared to the sound and light show on the skies over the fields in Bethlehem some 2,000 years ago.

that marked the birth of another child, and not just a happy coincidence, but rather a show in the heavens that was a tribute to the one being born. And it was a show that was put on for a very unlikely audience of sheep and shepherds. I don't know what the sheep made of it, but we know something of what the shepherds made of it. And this evening I want to spend a little time thinking about the shepherds. And one of the realities of coming to a passage such as this, that is so familiar, you wonder, well, what is there here that you can profitably draw out that maybe isn't already so familiar to us? But I trust that there may be some aspects of what we're able to draw out, whether they be fresh for you, or even if they're not fresh, but they may serve to remind us of important truths. And the manner in which I want to think about the shepherds is to consider what they received and how they responded. These two corresponding aspects. They receive, but they also respond to what they receive. And that's the way we want to think about the passage, and particularly the shepherds that are spoken of in this passage. The first thing I want to suggest in terms of what they receive is that they receive what I'm calling a place of privilege. Now to grasp or to have a sense of the almost scandalous extravagance of the privileged place granted to the shepherds who were keeping guard of their sheep there as we're told, we need to have some notion of the place that these shepherds occupied in Jewish society at the time of Jesus's birth. As I'm sure you have heard explained on other occasions, shepherds at that time were considered very much the lowest of the low. At the risk of using rather unpleasant language, you might say that they were viewed as the scum of the earth. And that maybe sounds very harsh, but it's not far from the truth in terms of how they were viewed by others.

[5 : 54] Just give you one snapshot of how that found concrete expression in society. If there was a court case and witnesses needed to be called, a shepherd could not be called as a witness. I guess what people would say in those days, well, you know, he's shepherds. You can't trust a shepherd. Now I haven't explored the matter enough to come up with an explanation of why that was the case. It's simply stated by those who are in the know who have studied these things. They declare that that was indeed the case.

And that sounds strange to us. It sounds strange to us because, you know, we have a view of shepherds, I guess, molded by the Bible. Psalm 23, the Lord's my shepherd. We think of the manner in which God presents himself in those terms as a shepherd. And we think of Jesus as the good shepherd. So we have a positive view of shepherds generally. And I have to say, it seems strange that Jews wouldn't have also had that view. The evidence that I'm referring to would have been available to them as well, perhaps with the exception of Jesus as the good shepherd. But for whatever the reasons, that's the way it was.

From the perspective of any of the good citizens of Bethlehem, certainly of Jerusalem, angels, if they're going to do any appearing, and of course they don't do much appearing, but if they're going to appear, they're certainly not going to appear to shepherds. In fact, I imagine the shepherds would have agreed with that. If they'd ever thought of the possibility that angels might appear, well, they certainly weren't going to appear to them. It's not just that others would have doubted that or seen that as a ridiculous prospect, the shepherds themselves, I'm sure, would have shared that point of view.

But on that Christmas morning or afternoon or evening or whenever it was, the angelic host appeared to the shepherds. That in itself was a huge privilege that was granted to them. But I want to explore a little further this idea of the privilege that they were given. As I was reading this so familiar passage, one thing struck me that I hadn't consciously noticed before, and that was the very central place in the passage given to the shepherds. And let me just read verses 8 to 10, and as I do, just draw out or highlight the central place that is afforded to the shepherds. From verse 8, And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

Well, that's fair enough. That's just a factual description of what they were doing and where they were doing it. But then in verse 9 we read, An angel of the Lord appeared to them, to these shepherds. They were the focus of this revelation.

[9 : 05] The angel appeared to them. But then we continue reading, And the glory of the Lord shone around them, around the shepherds. It's not just that it was there. It's not just that it was part of the appearing of the angels. Of course it was. But no, we're told that the glory of the Lord shone around the shepherds. And they were terrified. And we carry on reading in verse 10, But the angel said to them, there's this message to be given. And the angel doesn't simply pronounce the message to whoever is there who might hear it. No, it's directed to them.

They're at the heart of this moment in redemptive history. And this, of course, also speaks of and points to the great privilege that is afforded to them. And then when we look at the actual message itself, there's something that we mentioned just in the passing to the children this morning, well, to everybody, but as we were speaking particularly to the children, in the message itself. In verse 11, today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. And the angel is speaking to the shepherds.

And the angel says to the shepherds, a Savior has been born to you. And in the morning, we noted that you might have expected the message to be a Savior has been born to Mary. She's the mother after all.

But no, a Savior has been born to you, your Savior. I wonder if the shepherds, even as they heard these words in their state of shock, whether there was a sense in which they were beginning to try and process that and said, to us? A Savior has been born to us? Shepherds? It can't be.

But it was. This message was directed to them, and it concerned them. It concerned the Savior who had been born for them. Of course, the Savior was for all people. But here, the angel is speaking to them.

[11 : 17] And to the shepherds, the angel says, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. The shepherds, the shepherds, the shepherds, the shepherds, the shepherds, the shepherds.

The shepherds then themselves were and indeed represented the central actors in the drama. We might say, but Jesus is the central character in the drama. And yes, of course, that's true. But Jesus came and was born for these shepherds, for sinners, for the scum of the earth, if you'll excuse the expression, for you and me. For these shepherds, they were granted on this occasion this place of great privilege. But the next thing I want to notice about what they received, and really it's a development of this sense of privilege, but I'm going to mention it in its own right. And it's what I'm calling an experience without parallel, what they received, the place of privilege that they were granted, but then also this experience without parallel. And just to take a step back, when we think of the birth of Jesus, we tend to think of it, and quite rightly, as an aspect of His humiliation, and using that word in its theological sense, the humiliation of the Son of God, and part of that being His taking on flesh, His being born in such humble circumstances. And theologians speak of that and other aspects of

His incarnation as Christ's humiliation. And of course, it's right to acknowledge that that is central to our understanding of the incarnation. Jesus has left the glory of heaven. He's veiled His majesty in this extraordinary birth, where even the circumstances are so humble. In the manger, His glory was hidden.

And yet, the glory of the occasion does not remain altogether hidden, because, as we've read there on the outskirts of Bethlehem, heaven rolls out for an unexpected audience, this light and sound extravaganza of cosmic proportions. It's almost as if the angels can't remain silent.

in the face of what is happening. Now, of course, it's true that the angels do the bidding of God. They're God's messengers, and they say what they say, because God had given them the task to do so.

[14 : 13] They sing as they sing, because God had so directed them. And yet, on this occasion, you can almost imagine that they do so with unrestrained glee, as they witness this amazing occurrence that is taking place in Bethlehem. And what a display it was. We can only imagine.

This is something that words can't capture. Luke does his utmost to capture the scene for us. Of course, he himself was relying on others. And indeed, if he relied, as many would suggest, suggest on Mary to give him this account, she herself would have heard it from others, from the shepherds. And so, the account will have gone through perhaps a few intermediaries before it reached Luke. But even had he been an eyewitness, he would have struggled to capture what he saw in words. And yet, in a measure, we can try and imagine the scene that was played out there in the skies over Bethlehem. The doors of heaven opened for a few fleeting moments that the shepherds might see, yes, even be enveloped by the resplendent glory of God, an explosion of glory on the lowest of the low.

This is what is being played out here in what is recorded for us. As we go through Scripture, we find there are occasions when there are those who experience something of this.

Moses experienced something of this in a measure on Mount Sinai. The disciples who accompanied Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration, they experienced something of what we read of, this resplendent glory becoming visible. But I would wager nothing quite like this that is recorded for us here by Luke.

And who are the VIP guests with the ringside seats? In fact, the only seats. Well, it's the shepherds, this most unlikely audience for the delivery of this message and the revelation, the display of God's glory.

[16 : 50] This is what the shepherds received, a place of privilege, an experience without parallel. But even more importantly, they received a message, a message that I'm describing as replete with superlatives.

And I say that because what I want to focus on here is just that one aspect. There's so much that could be said about the message. There's an economy of words, but each one is worth exploring and considering, but we're not going to do that. All I want to do and all I want to draw out and point or draw your attention is to this aspect of the message, how it is, I repeat, replete with superlatives. Let's just notice what the angel says there to the shepherds. Do not be afraid. And then we continue.

I bring you good news. Not just news, but good news. This is good news that is being brought for the shepherds and for all who in due course will hear this good news. Of course, it's the same good news that we've read. Jesus declaring he had come to announce and to proclaim good news, the good news of God, the good news of salvation. Not just news, but good news. But then not just good news of joy, but good news of great joy. Joy wouldn't do it justice. It's good news of great joy. And not just for some, but for all. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. At every opportunity, there's an emphasis on the superlative, on the scale of the news, on the depth of the joy, on the breach of the good news. Good news of great joy for all the people. Of course, when we just are reminded of that very simple but very important reality that this is good news for all people, necessary and very happy application of that is that it's for you and me. We are included in these people for whom this good news is being declared. It's for you, this good news. But also an implication of that is that it is good news for us to share with others. Others need to hear. We cannot selfishly hold on to that news and say, well, it's great news for me. No, the angels would urge us to make this good news known to all. It is for all. Well, it must be made known to all.

But then perhaps most importantly, the message is about a Savior, but not just any Savior, but rather Christ the Lord. Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord. He's the Messiah. He's the promised one, the one promised from ages past. He has now come, and he has been born in Bethlehem. And he is the Lord where that name or that title carries the deepest significance, filled with the Old Testament sense of the divine name. It is God who has come in the person of his Son, Jesus. It is God who is the Savior of all. And so the shepherds received this message replete with superlatives, which takes us on to the second half of what we want to look at. And that is how the shepherds respond. How do they respond? To the privilege that they enjoy, to the experience that is theirs, and very especially to the message that they receive.

Well, the first thing that I'm suggesting is that they respond with excited and inquiring faith. I'm thinking of verse 15, having heard the message, having witnessed the angels, giving glory to God in the highest. We then read, when 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.

[21 : 17] That final thing that they say, let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about, is evidence, very solid evidence as to the nature of their faith. They not only believed the content of the message, but they were persuaded as to who the message had come from. An angel had delivered the message, and yet for them it was a given that it was God's message. This message had come from the Lord, delivered through the angel, but it was God who had spoken. And being persuaded that it was God who had sent the message, it was God's message, well, they believe it to be true.

They believe the message. There is genuine and sincere faith on the part of these shepherds. But also, we can notice how this faith has two striking features. You can maybe identify others, but the two that I want to notice is that this faith we could describe as both excited and inquiring.

They're excited about the news that they've received. Now, you might say, well, of course they're excited. Who wouldn't be, having been witness to what they were witness to, that we've tried to, in a measure, convey, but of course we can't convey the wonder of it. But, you know, in the measure that we can try and place ourselves where they were, you would say, well, of course they were excited.

You know, you'd have to be a stone not to be excited by witnessing what they witnessed. And yet I wouldn't quickly, for that reason, dismiss it and say, well, of course they were excited.

That's no big deal. You can't say, well, we are going to be as excited as they were. And I think we can't dismiss it so quickly because ultimately and at heart, what produced their excitement, and that becomes clear from what follows, wasn't in the first instance, though it was obviously part of it, the manner in which the message was delivered, but it was the message itself. It was the message that generates in these shepherds this great excitement. And as I say, the evidence of that is their desire to go and to see what they had been told had happened, and then in turn to tell others about it. And in that regard, I think we can apply that to ourselves.

[23 : 40] You know, we can't say, oh, well, we're not as excited as they were because, well, you know, the manner in which we hear God speaking isn't nearly as dramatic and as exciting as it was for them. But we do hear God speak. God speaks to us today. He has a word for us. He speaks to us day by day. And that in itself is cause for excitement. Perhaps the issue for many of us is that we aren't listening as we ought, and because we're not listening, then the response isn't of excited faith. Well, their faith was an excited faith, but it was also an inquiring one. Because what do they do?

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, let's go to Bethlehem. Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.

There's a little word that, actually, for those of you who have in your mind the authorized version translation of this, it's let's go now to Bethlehem. And there is that sense of urgency in the words of the shepherds as they speak among themselves. And of course, that's confirmed in verse 16 when we read, so they hurried off. Of course, that's the excitement, isn't it? Let's go now. And they hurried to go.

And what is it that they want to do? Well, they want to establish, they want to inquire, they want to see what it is that they've been told about. It's not so much to see if it's true, because they're persuaded that it is true. But nonetheless, they want to see with their own eyes. They want to establish the reality of what it is that they've been told and heard. And that's important for us also, that our faith should be an inquiring faith. The Christian faith is grounded in historical facts, certainly what purport to be historical facts. And it's important for us to inquire into those facts, to be persuaded as to their historicity that these things did indeed happen. You see, if they didn't happen, then there really is no point being here this evening. You know, have a night in front of the telly, go out for a meal. There's so many things you could be doing this evening. If these things didn't happen, then really, what's the point? We need to have an inquiring faith that explores and discovers and is ever more persuaded for our own faith to be a solid faith, but also that we might present and defend the faith in our dealings and in our conversations with others. You know, the shepherds, when they spoke to others, were told how they went on and told others. Imagine had they not gone to Bethlehem. Imagine if they'd gone to others and said, well, we heard this angel, and the angel spoke to us, and the angel said that a Savior had been born. And people say, well, what's that all about?

Well, no, it must be true, but did you see yourself? Well, we didn't. No, we haven't seen for ourselves. This wouldn't have carried the same weight, but they could say, no, we went and we found the baby just as the angel had said. Then the message that they bring is a much more rigorous and coherent one.

[27:10] They respond with excited, with inquiring faith, but of course, they respond with a story to tell. In verse 17, we read, when they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. And I'm struck by three aspects of the storytelling, and I'll just mention them without going into detail in any of them, really. The first thing to say is a very obvious thing, but an important one, is they do tell the story. They have a story to tell, but they tell it.

They tell it. They tell it would seem anybody willing to listen. They tell the story. And the importance of that, and the commendable that that was, in a sense, is heightened when we remember what we were mentioning at the beginning about how people viewed the testimony of shepherds, something that they knew. They knew what people thought of their testimony, of their reliability of what they would tell. And yet, even though they knew that there would be doubters, well, it's only shepherds who are telling this. Who's going to believe these shepherds?

Even though they could have anticipated the skepticism or the unbelief of many, we're told that the people who heard were amazed, but amazed is a slippery word. What does that mean?

In what sense were they amazed? Were they amazed in different ways? I don't know. The point is, they tell the story. That's the only point I'm making. The other thing to mention is that they tell the story that they had received. That's what we're told. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. It's what they'd been told. They relay what they'd been told. There's no extra marks for originality in telling the gospel story. Indeed, it is a bad thing to do. We're not called to be original. We tell what we have heard. We pass on what we have received. By all means, let us be original and creative in the manner of delivery.

Was it last Sunday or a couple of Sundays ago, we were thinking of the Friends of the Paralytic and how they were very original and creative in bringing their friend to Jesus. And that, certainly there's room for that. But in terms of the message, we tell what we've received. We tell what we've heard.

[29 : 36] Nothing more, nothing less. That is what these shepherds did. But then the other thing, and it's at the heart of it, is that the story they tell is about the child. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child. The story they tell is all about Jesus.

You say, well, of course it was about Jesus. But just think about them. Think about what they had witnessed, what they'd experienced. They'd experienced this amazing sound and light extravaganza.

It was just spectacular. It was exciting. That was part of what they'd experienced. And then they went to Bethlehem. And the scene there in Bethlehem really isn't that exciting. You know, it's a mother and father and a child. At some levels, it's a lot less exciting than what they'd experienced in the fields.

But what did they tell? I'm not saying they didn't tell people about what they saw in the fields. But at the heart of what they told, is what we're told here, is they told what they'd heard about this child. No doubt the message of the angels, because that was about this child. But it's the child, it's Jesus, who is at the heart of the story that they tell. And the application of that is so evident that I won't labor it. How do they respond? They respond with a story to tell. And then finally, we can notice how they respond. The shepherds respond with grounded and unceasing praise. I'm describing their praise as grounded on the basis of what we read there in verse 20. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. What they had seen and heard was the content of their message, of their story, but it was also the grounds of their praise. What they had seen, what they had heard, this is the foundation. This is the basis of their praise to God. They're glorifying and praising God.

But then also, and finally, their praise was unceasing. I'm struck by what is said there at the beginning of verse 20, the shepherds returned, comma, glorifying and praising God. And I just posed the question, where did they return to, not told explicitly, but I think it's pretty obvious where they returned to. They returned to the fields. They returned to the sheep. That was their calling.

[32 : 20] That was their job. That's where they returned. To this job that was deemed the lowest of the low by most of their countrymen. They returned to their seemingly dull and drab and inconsequential and certainly undervalued existence. That's where they returned to. But they returned transformed.

They returned glorifying and praising God. You see, it's not what you do. But rather, how you do it and for whom that you do it that gives meaning and significance to our life and our activity. For these shepherds, they had to return to where they had to go and labor and provide for their families. But the manner in which they return is so different, so transformed, glorifying and praising God. And no doubt they continued to do that as they went about their lives and what remained of them. Well, let's just draw things to a close for ourselves.

The shepherds, what they received and how they responded. Well, we too, very evidently, are a deeply privileged people. We too are the bearers of a message replete with superlatives, good news of great joy for all people. And for us, the response is one that ought to follow the pattern of the shepherd of the sheep. That we would tell the story and praise the one of whom the story speaks.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you for the record that you have given to us of the coming of your Son, Jesus, and indeed the circumstances that surrounded His coming. We thank you for what we can draw from this record for ourselves as a source of instruction, as a source of encouragement, but also as a source of a challenge. We do acknowledge that we are a deeply privileged people, privileged in so many ways. And we also recognize that with privilege comes a responsibility. And we pray that as we are those who have received, as we are those who have seen and heard in our own lives and experience, and as we have delved into the Scriptures, so as we receive, as we have heard, so help us to tell. And help us to tell to all who will hear, and indeed those who are unwilling to hear. And that you would be the one who would use that story that we tell to bring others to faith in your Son. And these things we pray in His name. Amen.