

“What Difference Does It Make?”

In the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, who was born a babe in Bethlehem, grace to you and peace.

There's a big question we need to wrestle with tonight. But before we do that, I want to check in with the shepherds in our Christmas story. They were down-to-earth guys, dear hunters who drove around in old pick up trucks. They'd probably love to go ice fishing if the Dead Sea ever froze over (which it doesn't), but you get the picture – ordinary guys with ordinary challenges – like the challenge of their business.

You know, in Nativity scenes the shepherds are often pictured with sheep that look pretty cute and cuddly. Well, sheep may be cute and cuddly, but they're also not too bright and being a shepherd was a hard way to eke out a living. A lot of bad things could happen to sheep, a lot of bad things did happen to sheep. And these shepherds also had their share of struggles at home. Being a shepherd with didn't always make for the best family life. Some struggled with addiction, some with depression, and none of them were getting rich – they were all living close to the edge. We're talking survival made here. And, of course, there was all the other stuff: accidents, disease, sin, and death. Not to mention the state of their world. Bethlehem and the surrounding country was occupied by the Romans who could be ruthless, and often were. We don't usually put Roman soldiers in our Nativity scenes, but they were there – with their swords at the ready. So like I said the soldiers were down-to-earth guys who faced down-to-earth challenges.

But then one night, something extraordinary happened to these ordinary guys. An angel came out of nowhere and they were scared out of their gourds (they didn't have many visits from angels, these shepherds). But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you, you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

“To you”?! To these ordinary characters on the margins of society? To these ordinary stragglers who may not have been all that regular at the synagogue? “To you a Saviour is born,” the angel amazingly and shockingly declares to the shepherds. And then the angel was joined by a huge choir of angels and they sang to these shepherds like they had never been sung to before: “Gloria in excelsis Deo.” So, the shepherds ran to the stable and they found Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in the manger. And they told everybody they met about the angel and the child and “all who heard it were amazed.” Finally, they went back home and as they went, they praised God for all they had heard and seen. Can you hear them praising God in their down-to-earth, loud, toughened, slightly out-of-tune voices? It must have been something to hear.

Do you think these ordinary guys ever had a night like this before? No way! It was indeed a powerful night, a miraculous night, a holy night. But now back to the question we need to wrestle with. What difference did this night really make?

Luke tells us that afterward they went back home to their sheep. Were their sheep any different? No, they weren't. Their sheep still got lost, still got stolen, still got attacked by wolves. And was life at home suddenly Father Knows Best? I don't think so. And were they now magically immune from addiction, debt, bankruptcy, depression, disease, accidents, grief and every other kind of ordinary problem they faced before they heard the angels sing to them? No, none of that happened. It was a great night, but after they went home they still had to deal with the same old problems, they still had a hard, hard life, so, again. What difference did it all make for these ordinary shepherds?

Well, my friends, all this leads to a more pressing question. What difference does this night make for us?

I love worshipping Christmas Eve and so do many of you. I love it with all my heart. I love hearing the old, old story and singing the old, old songs. I love it when we turn out all the lights and sing “Silent Night.” It never ceases to be a thrill. Yes, it is an extraordinary night indeed, a holy night. But what difference does it make?

After you leave here, will your household suddenly turn into Leave It To Beaver? “Will you suddenly be immune from the threats in the world – immune from disease, financial woes, addiction, worry, anger, cynicism, apathy, depression, death and everything else? No, you won’t. I wish you could be, but you won’t be immune from any of that. As good as this extraordinary night can be, you will leave here facing the same old stuff as when you came. And will the world suddenly be free of its struggles? Will the bloodshed and the oppression and the hunger and the environmental destruction and the bigotry and the suffering from earthquakes and floods suddenly vanish when we turn out the lights and sing “Silent Night?” That is our prayer, as it is every Christmas Eve when we gather, but will it happen?

So, whether we’re looking at ourselves or the world, the question is still the same. What difference does it make? This holy night as wonderful and powerful as it is, what difference does it make?

Well, let’s go back to the shepherd, for a minute. We never hear from them again. They disappear from Luke’s Gospel, but I’ll tell you what I believe about the shepherds. I believe that holy and extraordinary night did make a difference in their lives – a huge difference. Yes, they went back to the same old sheep, but I don’t believe they were the same old shepherds. I believe they were shepherds who now knew that God was deeply embedded in their lives to give them strength, to give them courage, and to empower them to shine the light of Christmas hope in the midst of their ordinary world. I believe these down-to-earth shepherds were sought out and reached by a down-to-earth God – in Jesus, a literally down-to-earth God who would never leave them alone.

No, family life did not turn into Father Knows Best, but maybe now in their families, the shepherds knew they were not alone in their striving to be faithful. Maybe now they knew that God was present in the midst of the daily lives of their families to bind wounds, to empower forgiveness, and to open hearts to one another.

No, the temptations and the addictions did not disappear, but maybe now they knew they could let go and let God continually set them free – every day, one day at a time. Maybe now they knew God would daily strengthen them to face their struggles – and to pick them up when they fell.

And, yes, death still had its say, but maybe after this night – maybe even before Easter – they had some hope that when it came to death, that God would make a way where there was no way. And maybe, after this night, they knew that no matter how they failed, that they were still loved. And maybe, after this night, they would find a way, each in their own way, to make a difference, not to cynically give up on a world, because God had not given up on the world.

Now hear me out, this was no fairytale and it had no fairytale ending for these shepherds to be sure. They went back to a hard, hard life with real and persistent struggles. The challenges in their life were as real after they visited the stable as before. But they did not go back home alone. They went back different shepherds, embraced shepherds, hopeful shepherds, fired up shepherds, freed shepherds. I am convinced of that. After this night, their lives were never the same.

Friends, my blessed friends. Hear this well.

My hope for you is that because of the birth of this child named Jesus, life will never be the same for you as well. My hope for you is that this night will be more than a sentimental escape from the “real world.” Indeed, what difference would a sentimental escape make?

No, my hope is that you also know in your heart of hearts that God is deeply embedded in your lives. My hope is that you know that our down-to-earth God has indeed made a home in our down-to-earth lives. My hope is that you know deep in your soul that the God who took the risk to become one of us, has entered your life and is with you every step of the way – even the last step.

I think the shepherds know something of that.

My brothers and sisters in Christ. I hope that as you leave here tonight, that you too know a reason to let the light of Christmas shine in your hearts and shine in all the world. Blessed Christmas to you all. AMEN.