

“Shepherds, Why This Jubilee?”

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If there was one word that people in the ancient Middle East would use to describe shepherds, it would not be “jubilant.” Shepherding was a tough, dirty job; it required people to live away from their homes, guiding their flocks to good grazing land in the arid Judean landscape and keeping watch over their flocks to prevent predators from attacking and devouring their sheep. Not only was the job difficult and dirty, but shepherding was a despised occupation at the time. Although the reference to shepherds in Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem evokes a positive, pastoral image for the modern reader and underscores Jesus’ association with the line of David (“*David was the youngest; the three eldest followed Saul, but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father’s sheep at Bethlehem.*” – 1 Samuel 17:14-15), in the First Century CE shepherds were scorned as shiftless, dishonest people who often grazed their flocks on other people’s lands and were not always reliable stewards of the flocks in their trust (Jesus speaks of this when he compares himself, the “Good Shepherd,” with “*the hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away ... the hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.*” – John 10:12-13). Shepherds were considered the lowliest and the least in Judean society; to paraphrase Willie Nelson, one would advise a parent “*Mama, don’t let your babies grow up to be shepherds!*”

Following his account of the Roman census that forced Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem where 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*” (Luke 2:7), the scene shifts to the outskirts of the city of David where “*in that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.*” (2:8). The total darkness that enveloped the shepherds matched the darkness that dwelled in their souls; watching over their flocks with the constant fear of ravenous beasts descending upon them, the shepherds were filled with questions as to how

their lives led them to this lowly station and if there was any hope of a brighter future for them. But what they did not know was that it would be to these humble shepherds to whom a sign of the birth of the Messiah would be given. Suddenly and without warning, *“an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.”* (2:9). While angels are often seen as a comforting, reassuring presence in modern usages (“angel on my shoulder”), the more common reaction to an angelic appearance in Scripture is one of terror and fear:

- “When Zechariah saw [the angel], he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him.” – Luke 1:12.
- “But the angel said to the women, ‘Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.’” – Matthew 28:5-6.
- “While they were perplexed about this, suddenly two men in dazzling clothes stood before them. The women were terrified and bowed their faces to the ground …” – Luke 24:4-5.

As common as is terror to an angelic appearance, so also is the first word spoken by the angels one of reassurance: *“Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people.”* (2:10); *“the contrast between the humble setting of the birth and the glory of the angelic announcement could hardly be more dramatic.”* (Alan Culpepper). The angel announces “good news” which will be “great joy” for all people: *“to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord”* (2:11). The birth of Jesus is a sign for all people – all Israel as well as all God’s people. The declaration emphasizes the fulfillment of Israel’s messianic expectations “today”; the long-awaited child has been born:

- “Therefore, God himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” – Isaiah 7:14.
- “For a child has been born to us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” – Isaiah 9:6.
- “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days.” – Micah 5:2.

The titles given by the angel all define Jesus’ role: a Saviour (*“But when the Israelites cried out to the LORD, the LORD raised up for them a deliverer, Ehud son of Gera”* (Judges 3:15). “Christ” (“Messiah”), and the “Lord.” The shepherds are

told that the “sign” that will identify this child is one that will be unexpected for the one who is the fulfillment of God’s promises: *“This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”* (2:12).

- “Luke is interested in the symbolism of the manger, and the lack of room in the lodgings may be no more than a vague surmise to explain the mention of a manger. This manger is not a sign of poverty but is probably meant to evoke God’s complaint against Israel in Isaiah 1:3: ‘The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its lord; but Israel has not known me, and my people have not understood me.’ Luke is proclaiming that the Isaian dictum has been repealed. Now, when the good news of the birth of their Lord is proclaimed to the shepherds, they go to find the baby in the manger and begin to praise God. In other words, God’s people have begun to know the manger of their Lord.” – Raymond Brown.

Before the shepherds can respond to the announcement, a great array of angels (reminiscent of the angelic appearance to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:1-5) appears in the heavens. It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and orators to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of a child who would one day become emperor. In that familiar pattern, but from heaven, comes the good news of joy and peace occasioned by the birth not of a king or emperor but of a child called Saviour, Christ, and Lord: *“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours?’”* (2:13-14). From the heavenly host a song rises in praise of God; praise for peace is again implicitly directed not to Caesar Augustus but to God, peace that will be *“among those whom he favours!”* While it was human beings who built an altar to the *pax Augustae*, the peace of Caesar, *“a heavenly chorus proclaimed the pax Christi, ‘On earth peace to those favoured by God.’”* (Brown). The peace proclaimed by the angels will be found not in a mansion or a palace but in a humble manger, fulfilling the prophecy that the child in the manger is the one who has been anointed by God *“to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”* (Luke 4:18-19; Isaiah 61:1-2).

As quickly as the angels appear in the night sky, they disappear, leaving the shepherds once again alone in the dark but no longer prisoners to the darkness. While the angel did not explicitly command them to go to Bethlehem and find the child in the manger, the shepherds know what they have to do: *“Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known*

to us. ” (2:15). They leave behind the darkness of the fields and travel to the light of the city of Bethlehem, the light that had exposed them to the derision and ridicule of the residents who looked down upon such lowly shepherds. But those dirty looks and snarky comments no longer registered with them, for now they were on a mission from the angel of God to find the child who was the fulfillment of the divine promise of a Saviour, Christ the Lord. The shepherds “*went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger*” (2:16). The child in the manger – not a common sight in any city, much less in the city of David – is the sign to them that they have found the child of whom the angel had spoken. As they look upon this child in this unusual crib, “*they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*” (2:17-18). The shepherds “*now join the chorus of witnesses, for they have seen and heard*” (Culpepper). The sign is as common as another baby born to the poor, to be found in a feeding trough. It is from these poor shepherds – not from kings or emperors, poets or orators – that Mary and Joseph hear the message of the angel and the heavenly chorus.

- “The shepherds belong in the story not only because they serve to tie Jesus to the shepherd king, David, but because they belong on Luke’s guest list for the kingdom of God: the poor, the maimed the blind, and the lame.” – Fred Craddock.

The message that the shepherds proclaim to Mary and Joseph is the confirmation of the things that had been spoken to them in the fields by the angels: the child is the Messiah. The words of the prophets had been fulfilled in an even more wonderful fashion than could have been imagined. The Lord, the Saviour of God’s people, had been born. The whole creation would celebrate, but at first only the lowly shepherds know what had happened in Bethlehem. The result of their proclamation is that “*all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them*” (2:18), indicating that the birth of this child in this unusual place had already drawn a crowd, all of whom were amazed – with one exception: “*But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*” (2:19). The woman who had given birth to her firstborn son in a stable in a strange city and had laid him in a feeding trough instead of the cradle that Joseph had lovingly made for him in Nazareth remembered the words of the angel Gabriel who had announced the birth of her child and who this child would be not only for his mother but for all people of the world:

- “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign

over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – 1:31-33.

Mary then pondered the meaning of what happened when she visited her cousin Elizabeth, a woman much older than her who was also carrying a child whose birth was also foretold by the same angel. When Mary entered her home, the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaped for joy; Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, *“Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”* (1:42). In response, Mary sang a song of celebration, proclaiming *“my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.”* (1:46-49).

- “Mary is the only adult in the infancy narrative who will last into the public ministry and even into the Church … Thus, Luke knows that Mary must have sought to interpret these events surrounding the birth of Jesus and ultimately have succeeded, for she became the model Christian believer.” – Brown.

Once they have fulfilled their mission in sharing the experience they had in the fields and the angelic proclamation surround the child lying in the manger, Luke reports that *“the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”* (2:20). Nothing had changed about their physical circumstances nor their station in human society; but they had been transformed, for they had seen and heard the angels’ voices and knew that their proclamation was good news for them and for all people; they were the first to hear the Christmas angels proclaim that *“to you is born a Saviour, Christ the Lord.* They may have been lowly shepherds in the eyes of others, but in the eyes of God they were holy and precious recipients of the great gift of Christmas, the child who *“for us and for our salvation came down from heaven”* (Nicene Creed).

- “The little word ‘you’ should make us joyful. For to whom does the angel speak? To wood or stones? No. He speaks to human beings; and not just to one or two, but to all the people … Thus, we should receive him joyfully, as here the angels say: ‘To you is born a Saviour.’ Is it not a great and marvelous thing that an angel should come from heaven with such good news? Is it not a wonder that afterwards so many thousands of angels are filled with overflowing joy, which makes them desire that we should also be glad, and should receive such grace with thankful hearts? And therefore, we should write this little word (with flaming letters) in our hearts: ‘To you!’ and should

joyfully welcome the birth of this Saviour.” – Martin Luther, Sermon for Christmas Day 1544.

The mission of the shepherds continued into medieval times, when French shepherds had a tradition of shouting to each other on Christmas Eve across the hilltops “*Gloria in excelsis Deo!*” – “*Glory to God in the highest!*” – as they watched their flocks in the southern hills of France. It was a reminder that the arrival of the Saviour, Christ the Lord, bringing “good tidings of great joy” and the fulfillment of God’s promise of true, deep spiritual joy (“jubilee”) for all the people, not just a fleeting happiness. It signifies the start of God’s saving work bringing freedom, peace, and hope. The beloved carol “Angels We Have Heard on High” was inspired by the tradition of the French shepherds as it serves as an invitation from Christians to others to come celebrate Christ’s birth with them. The carol begins in a festive spirit, but then in the second stanza asks why there is such a celebration: “*Shepherds, why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be which inspire your heavenly song?*” A ‘jubilee’ is “*any season or occasion of rejoicing or festivity, rejoicing or jubilation*” (dictionary.com). While “jubilee” has its biblical roots in the Torah’s commandment for a time of “*liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants ... a jubilee for you: you shall not sow, or reap the aftergrowth, or harvest the unpruned vines*” (Leviticus 25:9-11), the “jubilee” that the shepherds bring to Bethlehem is the good news that transformed their lives of darkness and despair into lives filled with “*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them*” (Luke 2:20). The jubilee of the shepherds invites all of us to “*come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing,*” that our darkness may be transformed into the light and our despair into radiant joy:

- The shepherds came in a hurry to see what all this excitement was about. Something very important had taken place, even though so very few knew about it. A humble birth, humble beginnings, but oh, so glorious! And He brings it even today ... to our messes, to our chaos. He comes in the middle of our broken lives and humbly invites Himself in. He never forces His way, but with arms outstretched He offers the hurt, the lost, and all the weary wounded a place to find rest and salvation. He gives life, hope and peace in a troubled world.” – C. Michael Hawn and Jenna Larson Williams.

No, shepherds were not known to be a jubilant people; but the good news brought to them by the angel made them a most joyful, jubilant people; for it was to these lowly, despised shepherds that God chose to bring the good news that remains the great joy of this holy night and good news for all people in all times and places: “*To you is born this day in the city of a David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord!*”

Like those jubilant shepherds, may we “*come adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the newborn king! Gloria in excelsis Deo!*”

Amen.