

“The First Christmas Rush”¹ (Luke 2:8-20)²

Good morning. My name is Shai, which means “gift.” Every Christmas I like to reflect back to years ago when God granted me the gift that changed my life. But first let me give you a little background on my life. I was a shepherd by trade. I used to eek out a living tending sheep in the land of Palestine. As you can imagine, shepherding was not the most glamorous occupation. But it was what I did to provide for my family. You see, I’m not especially bright like most of you. I’ve never had any formal education and I can’t read or write. I am most definitely not leadership material. My parents saw little potential in me so from an early age, my father trained me in the only skill he knew—shepherding.

Most parents didn’t aspire for their child to be a shepherd. It wasn’t a profession that was highly esteemed.³ Let’s face it, there’s not a lot of money in shepherding.⁴ Furthermore, it’s monotonous and lonely work. You spend most of your time outdoors, exposed to the elements. There are no fences or barns. Our sheep graze in the open countryside. We have to lead them to green pastures to eat and still waters to drink, walking every step of the way.⁵ Predators are a constant threat. It’s the shepherd’s job to protect his flock from snakes, bears, wolves, and the occasional prowling lion. There have been a few occasions when I thought I was dead meat fighting off those beasts. Being a shepherd is risky business.

Shepherding is also a very stinky business. Nobody ever said it, but we could always tell that most folks didn’t want us around. Part of the reason was the way we looked and smelled. If you live and work outside with livestock there’s not a lot of time to trim your beard, wash your face, or clean your clothes. When you spend a lot of time with sheep you begin to smell like them. [Enter into the congregation for some comic relief, let them touch my face, smell my breath and armpits.] You may not know this, but sheep are filthy animals. The wool that you see ready to be sold or made into clothes has been cleaned thoroughly. A sheep in the field is a nasty and dirty beast. You can imagine the reaction of people in town when a few of us would stop in for supplies. They’d gladly take our money, but we could tell they wanted us to leave ASAP. I guess I can’t really blame them.

I must also confess I’m not much of a theologian. Don’t get me wrong, my parents told me the stories of our forefathers like Abraham, Moses, David, and Esther. We sang the Psalms like all good Hebrews and occasionally visited the synagogue to hear the rabbi’s teach. But that was the extent of it.

What hurt me, though, was the attitude of the religious leaders toward us. Although we had a dirty job, my job had an important religious significance. I was a part of a special group of shepherds who raised the lambs used for sacrifice in the temple at Jerusalem.⁶ We worked diligently raising those sheep. We picked out the best male lambs for the priests. They had no spots or blemishes. We never pawned off blind or crippled sheep. We figured that God deserved the best, so that’s what we gave Him.⁷ Our efforts went unrecognized by the priests and the religious people. In fact, they often sneered at us when we brought the lambs they were going to use into the Holy City. The priests paid us and then the Temple guards drove us out as quickly as possible. I guess they didn’t want grimy shepherds cluttering up the place.

The religious people also looked down on us because we weren’t able to consistently attend the temple services and feasts. We wanted to, but we couldn’t. Shepherding was a 24-7 job. It’s like they never saw the connection. We could present them perfect lambs to sacrifice, but only because we worked so hard at our jobs. Because we worked so hard we couldn’t be possibly be present at all the religious celebrations. We were also considered ceremonially unclean. The Pharisees had set elaborate cleansing rituals for those who wanted to be admitted to participate in temple worship. Even if we had the time off we could never be clean enough for them. The priests, the scribes, and the Pharisees looked down on us. I began to wonder if perhaps God did too.

Then one night, God Himself drew near to a lowly shepherd and revealed a priceless gift. I know this sounds crazy. Some of you may think I was counting sheep in my sleep, but I can assure you this really happened. Shepherds are not gullible daydreamers. We are earthy men who have little to do with fantasy. God chose hardworking men to be the first witnesses that His Son had come into the world. It was late one night in early winter.⁸ I remember the season well because that's when the rains come to our land. The barren fields of Judea become lush with vegetation for a few weeks during December and January. All of the shepherds gathered their sheep together in a meadow just outside of Bethlehem. We assembled them into one big flock for protection and so that we could enjoy one another's company. Some of the men would sleep while others talked, told stories, or played their flutes and lyres.

That night a strange silence fell over the men and animals. Those who were resting simultaneously awakened from their sleep. In an instant an enormous human-like figure materialized near the sheep. His clothes were brilliant white, like snow, except brighter. Every shepherd left his post to get a better look at the strange visitor. We had our clubs, slings, and swords ready, just in case. He was huge, but we had him outnumbered. The sheep just lay there, calm and at rest.

What happened next is difficult for me to describe even today, many years afterward. As I approached the man in white I knew he was no ordinary human being. Every hair on my body was standing on end. I was shaken, but also intrigued. Before any of us could reach our dazzling visitor something like a bright light shone all around us. It wasn't an earthly kind of light because it wasn't blinding to the eyes. The light was pure and intense. I could feel it penetrating my body into the joints and marrow to the very depths of my soul. I was overwhelmed by the power of this light and within it I sensed a presence. In my spirit I knew that this was the radiant glory of God. This was the fire of His presence that I'd heard about in the ancient Hebrew stories.

The experience was not as you might imagine. Those who stand in the presence of the living God understand His overwhelming holiness. I felt as though blisters were erupting on my soul. In those moments I recognized my own filthiness. It had nothing to do with the manure on my sandals or the sweat stains on my tunic. I was a sinner in the presence of a holy, righteous, utterly pure God. On the one hand, I wanted to run and hide. I felt naked and afraid. Yet, on the other I sensed the presence of eternal love and grace. I fell to my knees and then on my face.

My senses would have been overcome completely if the angel had not spoken.⁹ The warmth of peace filled my heart as he said, **“Do not be afraid;¹⁰ for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people”** (2:10). God had a message for us—for the whole world. He had not come to judge us, but to reveal good news.

Then the angel spoke about the purpose of his appearing. He said, **“Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”** (2:11). After 400 years of silence God spoke. Our people had been waiting for this moment. Generations lived and died looking forward to the coming of this Deliverer. The time was at hand and God made His announcement to us—shepherds in the field. That didn't make sense. I concluded that He must have already informed the religious leaders in Jerusalem. They were probably already celebrating.

The angel concluded his message by saying, **“This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger”** (2:13). There was nothing unusual about the first part of the sign. All good mothers wrapped their babies in swaddling clothes in those days. It was the method used to keep the newborn warm and protect their limbs from injury. The snug wrap of the cloth strip made the babies feel secure, like they were still in their mother's womb. The second part of the sign was a puzzle. The Messiah had been born and He was lying in a feeding trough? God's anointed Savior sleeping on a bed of hay and cow saliva? I didn't understand, but I took him at his word.

As if my mind weren't spinning already, suddenly, as far as the eye could see, a vast multitude of angels appeared. It's kind of misleading to say they appeared. It was as if my eyes had suddenly gained the ability to see what was already there. There must have been millions of them, brilliant like lightening and various in form—some not even human in appearance. With one voice they cried out: **“Glory¹¹ to God in the highest, and on earth peace¹² among men with whom He is pleased”** (2:14). I would have gazed at them all night had they not just as quickly disappeared from my sight. The first light of dawn was breaking when we finally came to our senses. Almost immediately it was agreed that we'd go find this Christ child. I had a pretty good idea where to find Him. I figured His parents were there to register for the census decreed by his pompousness, Caesar Augustus. They probably hadn't factored in the magnitude of the crowd in Bethlehem. They probably weren't able to find a place to stay and spent the night in a stable. There was only one lodge in Bethlehem and it had a stable attached to it.

Several of us were about to run off to Bethlehem when the voice of reason rang out from one of the shepherds. He simply asked, “What about the sheep?” We puzzled over this for a moment, but then one of the older shepherds came up with the solution. He reminded us that if God had taken the time to announce this glorious event, surely He'd watch over our sheep so that we could see the Messiah.¹³ That was good enough for me and a number of others. Actually I could have cared less about the sheep at that point. Yet, unbelievably, some of the shepherds were far more concerned over their sheep than visiting the Savior. A handful decided to stay. To my knowledge they never even attempted to see the child. They seemed totally unaffected by the angels and their message.

Those of us who made the journey to Bethlehem that morning found everything just as the messenger said. There was the baby, wrapped up snug and warm, sleeping peacefully in the feeding trough. My suspicions were right. The baby's parents, Joseph and Mary, had made an 80-mile trip on foot from Nazareth. Neither their relatives nor the lodge had room. They made do with the stable. The new mother, who couldn't have been more than sixteen, told me the baby's name was *Jesus*. A common name, but it means “God saves.”

A small crowd from the lodge did come and investigate when they heard Jesus crying from the stable. As Mary nursed Him we explained to everyone the vision and the message God gave us. They were all amazed.¹⁴ Some believed and praised God on the spot. Others looked skeptical. They drew near to us as if listening, but then left unconvinced. No doubt they were sniffing for the smell of wine on us.

We huddled around the baby for just a little while. When it was clear that child and mother wanted to sleep we returned to our sheep. In one night everything had changed. My doubts were replaced with faith and my frustration with joy. I returned to shepherding with a peace that I was loved by God and had a part in His purposes.

However, I was perplexed to learn that none of the religious leaders had visited. Jerusalem was only six miles away. Where were the priests and the scribes and the Pharisees—the good religious folks? I found out later that none of them ever showed up. When the child was a toddler some wise men from the East arrived to honor our Messiah, but not one Jewish leader welcomed Him.¹⁵ Did God not reveal this event to our religious leaders?

Even after all these years, the question still surfaces in my mind: why? Why did God reveal Himself to me? Why did He announce the birth of His Son to a band of grubby shepherds and not the religious elite? It seems to me that we were just part of a bigger pattern that night. Why was the Messiah born in a cattle stall and not a palace like the son of a Caesar? Why did Mary give birth to the Savior in a little town like Bethlehem and not the holy city, Jerusalem? Why did God choose the Jewish people for the lineage of His Son? The Romans had more military power, the Greeks were renowned for their wisdom, and the Egyptians took the prize for art.

The only answer I could come up with was this: *God reveals Himself to those who are humble enough to receive Him.* Something those angels said sticks out in my mind. They chanted: **“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased”** (2:14). The angels promised peace with the birth of that Child, but it was not the kind of peace that means no war and conflict. If that was the case, then God failed miserably and history bears it out.

No, the kind of peace that angel was talking about was peace with God. God was offering forgiveness and a right relationship with Himself. He was also offering peace within ourselves. No matter what dark valley you have to walk through God is still there, like a Shepherd with His sheep. He’s there even when we can’t see Him and He’s leading us in the path of His purpose. That’s real peace, and it comes to those with whom God is pleased. He is pleased with those who are humble enough to receive Him. God is pleased with those who see their need for Him by providing for them. He is pleased with those who seek Him by letting them find Him. He is pleased with those who take Him at His word by saving them.

I’m starting to sound like one of the rabbis now. Like I said before, I’m no theologian. I’m uneducated. In the eyes of the world I’m nobody at all...but not to God. When He saw fit to send His one and only Son to earth He announced it to me—a shepherd. I’m living proof that you don’t have to be sophisticated for God to reveal Himself to you. *You just have to be humble enough to receive Him.*

Transition: I’d like to hand the rest of our time over to your pastor. He has a few words that he would like to share with you.

Thank you, Shai. The Bible teaches that the Messiah came to be both the Good Shepherd¹⁶ and the sacrificial Lamb of God sacrificed for the sins of the world.¹⁷ The gospel is for the simple, not for the sophisticated. The gift of Christmas is this: Jesus Christ came to earth to be born of a virgin.¹⁸ Over the course of His life He never sinned.¹⁹ He perfectly fulfilled God’s law.²⁰ At the apex of His life and ministry He willingly died on a cross of execution for the sins of the world.²¹ Jesus died in your place...as your substitute.²² He gave up His life so that you could live with Him forever. All that He asks is that this Christmas, you receive the free gift that He offers. Today, believe in Jesus Christ as your Savior.

Scripture Reference

Luke 2:8-20

Psalm 23

John 10:1-18

Luke 15:3-7

Ezekiel 34

1 Peter 2:25; 5:1-4

Revelation 1:4-7

Study Questions

1. How do I view myself? Regardless of my status, education, talent, and appearance, do I exude genuine humility? Read Proverbs 29:23; Isaiah 66:2b; James 4:6, 10; and 1 Peter 5:5-6.
2. How have I been guilty of favoritism? Do I prefer certain classes of people above others? If so, how can I begin to work on this area of my life? Read James 2:1-13.
3. Have I spread the good news of Jesus this Christmas season? If so, how have I shared Christ? If not, what will I do this next year to be more faithful?
4. Why are American Christians so enamored with the spectacular? How can we develop God's simplicity in our lives? Read 1 Kings 19:9-13 and Psalm 46:10.
5. How do I envision Jesus today? Do I still picture Him as a baby in a manger? In what way(s) have I underestimated Jesus? How will I increase my vision of the Lord Jesus this next year?

Notes

¹ Halford Luccock, a professor at Yale Divinity School (1928-1953) called this “the first Christmas rush.”

² Much of this sermon comes from Larry Elder, “A Sheppard’s Story” (Luke 2:8-20):

<http://sermoncentral.com/sermon.asp?SermonID=59985>.

³ Some commentators point out that shepherds were “loathsome” to the Egyptians (Gen 43:32; 46:34) and they were also poorly thought of by their own brethren.” Geldenhuys writes, “Shepherds were despised people. They were suspected of not being very careful to distinguish ‘mine’ and ‘thine’; for this reason, too, they were debarred from giving evidence in court” (Strack-Billerbeck, in loc.). Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1950), 115, fn. 1. Bock argues that shepherds in the first century were *not* despised. He suggests that this negative reputation for shepherds is later than the first-century Judaism. Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 87. Elsewhere Bock writes, “The shepherds are often characterized as representing the ‘downtrodden and despised’ of society, so that the first proclamation of the gospel is said to have come to sinners (Hendriksen 1978: 149; Godet 1875: 1.130; R. Brown 1977: 420 n. 38). The evidence for this view draws on material from rabbinic Judaism (SB 2:113-14; *b. Sanh.* 25b; Midr. Ps. 23.2 on 23:1 [= Braude 1959: 1.327]). But here are two problems with reading the shepherds as symbols of the hated. First, the rabbinic evidence is late, coming from the fifth century. More importantly, shepherd motifs in the Bible are mostly positive. The NT (Luke 15:4; Mark 6:34; Matt. 18:12; John 10; 1 Pet. 2:25; Heb. 13:20; Eph. 4:11) portrays shepherds in a favorable light, even describing church leaders with this figure. In the OT, Abraham, Moses, and David were all shepherds at some point in their lives. Thus, the presence of the shepherds is not a negative point. Rather, they picture the lowly and humble who respond to God’s message (1:38, 52; 4:16-18; Fitzmyer 1981: 408). Darrell L. Bock, *Luke Volume 1: 1:1-9:50*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapid: Baker, 1994), 213-214. See also I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Exeter, Eng.: Paternoster, 1978), 108.

⁴ God loves to call the poor and the lowly (Luke 1:51-53; 1 Cor 1:26-29).

⁵ See the familiar Psalm 23.

⁶ It is most likely that these shepherds were in charge of the flocks from which the Temple offerings were chosen. It is a lovely thought that the shepherds who looked after the Temple lambs were the first to see the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke: Daily Study Bible series*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1956), 17. Morris notes, “The idea that these shepherds were raising sheep that the people would offer as Passover sacrifices in a few months is possible but not capable of verification.” Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to St. Luke: Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1974), 84.

⁷ See Malachi 1-2.

⁸ Although many scholars dispute a Christmas season birth of Christ, Hoehner convincingly argues for this. See Harold W. Hoehner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1977).

⁹ The angels praised God at Creation (Job 38:7), and now they praised Him at the beginning of the new creation.

¹⁰ “Do not be afraid” (“Fear not!”) is one of the key themes of the Christmas story (Luke 1:13, 30, 74; cf. Matt 1:20).

¹¹ The whole purpose of the plan of salvation is “glory to God” (see Eph 1:6, 12, 14). God’s glory had dwelt in the tabernacle (Exod 40:34) and in the temple (2 Chron 7:1-3), but had departed because of the nation’s sin (1 Sam 4:21; Ezek 8:4; 9:3; 10:4, 18; 11:22-23). Now God’s glory was returning to earth in the person of His Son (John 1:14). That lowly manger was a holy of holies because Jesus was there!

¹² The Hebrew word *shalom* (“peace”) means much more than a truce in the battles of life. It means well-being, health, prosperity, security, soundness, and completeness. It has to do more with character than circumstances. Life was difficult at that time just as it is today. Taxes were high, unemployment was high, morals were slipping lower, and the military state was in control. Roman law, Greek philosophy, and even Jewish religion could not meet the needs of men’s hearts. Then, God sent His Son!

¹³ These shepherds seem to have been godly men, men who were looking for the coming of Israel’s Messiah. All the others of those who were directly informed of the birth of Messiah in Matthew and Luke were described as godly people, and so it would seem to be true of the shepherds as well. After all, news of His coming would not be “good news of a great joy” (v. 10) unless they were seeking Him. The haste of these shepherds to the place of Christ’s birth (vv. 15-16) also testifies to their spiritual preparedness and eagerness for the coming of Messiah. Bob Deffinbaugh, “The Birth of the Messiah” (Luke 2:1-20): http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=1009.

¹⁴ Deffinbaugh writes, “I personally feel that it was the arrival of the shepherds which finally brought all the inconvenience and unpleasant circumstances of the birth of Jesus into its true spiritual light. What had once appeared to be only a sequence of unfortunate events, now is revealed to be the hand of God working through history to accomplish God’s will.” Deffinbaugh, “The Birth of the Messiah.”

¹⁵ John writes, “He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11).

¹⁶ Cf. Ps 23:1; Ezek 34:23; John 10:14.

¹⁷ Isa 53:4-6 and John 1:29.

¹⁸ Luke 1:26-35 and Matt 1:18-25.

¹⁹ Isa 53:9; John 8:46; Heb 4:15; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 3:5.

²⁰ Matt 5:17-20.

²¹ Jesus was approximately 33-years old when He was crucified.

²² Rom 3:21-25 and 2 Cor 5:21.