

Sermon for Sunday, November 30, 1975, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"SOME LEFT-OVER CHRISTMAS FROM LAST YEAR"

St. Luke 2:1-20

Text: "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them." --St. Luke 2:20

A broken toy in the basement, a frayed and battered doll in the corner, a tie with some food spots that won't come out, a dress a size too small and even tighter now, a family picture of friends stuck in the front of the family Bible, a copy of last year's card stuck in the files, ornaments carefully labeled and stored in the closet, gathering dust--these are the sort of things most of us have left over from last year's Christmas. A few fading memories--another year gone by--these are the left-overs from Christmas a year ago. Is that the way it is with you? Maybe it is a good thing that Christmas comes once a year; by the time a new Christmas comes we don't have much left over from the one a year ago. And when you stop and think about it, is there very much you can put your finger on that you have left from Christmases past?

When Jesus was born we are told that the angels of heaven could not restrain themselves and burst into song. The Bible says, "And suddenly there was with the angels a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is well pleased!'" So it was that the shepherds said, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." So it was that they made their way to Bethlehem and to the manger. Yet, when Christmas had come and gone, when they returned to their flocks, I would like to suggest to you that they had some left-over Christmas--indeed, enough to last them a lifetime. What was there about the shepherds that made them so different?

Did you ever stop to wonder why the shepherds were chosen by God to receive the announcement that the Savior had been born? In the social structure of the ancient East, shepherds were not important. As a matter of fact, most people thought poorly of them and they were not even able to testify in a court of law because their testimony was considered unreliable. And shepherds were poor--they had little to offer. Yet, when we remember the Old Testament, we are reminded that shepherds played an important part in God's plans. It was a shepherd of Ur named Abraham whom God called to be the founder of a new people to be known as the Hebrews. It was to a shepherd of Midian to whom God appeared in a burning bush and called him by name, "Moses, Moses." And when the first kings of Israel were chosen--Saul and David--the Bible tells us they were shepherds, too. And far back in time, when a Hebrew poet sat down to write about God and to try to describe Him, he wrote, "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want..."

Let me suggest three reasons why God might have chosen the shepherds to tell them what had happened in Bethlehem that night. In the first place, they were honest enough to admit their need of a savior. Shepherds have a lot of time to think. Out under the blue sky and bright sun by day, or lying beside a dying campfire at night, listening to the quiet sounds of the evening, the sleepy movement of the flocks, watching the darkness of the sky with stars punching holes of brightness through the canopy of black, a man has a lot of time to think. And out there in the rawness of nature where things are simple and uncomplicated, a man becomes terribly conscious of his own finiteness and insignificance. Out there he sees himself as he really is. He is profoundly aware of his poverty, both materially and spiritually. Yes, the shepherds were honest enough to admit they needed a savior.

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A second reason the shepherds were told of the birth of Jesus is because they were humble enough to receive Him when He came. We Christians have glamorized the stable in which Jesus was born. Have you been in a stable lately? Probably the only clean thing in the whole place was the fresh hay in the manger where Mary laid her newborn child. But the shepherds were humble enough to receive Jesus. Giovanni Papini was an Italian author and poet. Until he was 38 years old, he was a professed atheist. At that point in his life he was converted and accepted Jesus as His Savior. His considerable writing talents were dedicated to his Savior and he wrote a book that was translated into English under the title of The Life of Christ. He writes there of the shepherds and says, "The shepherds offered what little they had, that little which is so great when offered with love. They carried the white offerings of their craft: milk, cheese, wool, the lamb. Even today in our mountains, where one finds the last dying traces of hospitality and fraternal feeling, as soon as a wife is delivered of a child, the sisters, wives, and daughters of the shepherds come hurrying to her, and not one of them empty-handed. One has three or four eggs still warm from the nest, another a cup of freshly drawn milk, another a little cheese, another a pullet to make broth for the new mother....Themselves poor, the old-time shepherds did not look down on the poor." And then he concludes, "A poor man was born among them and they looked on him with affection and lovingly brought him their poor riches."

Can you imagine Herod stalking in royal regalia across the barnyard with his royal train dragging in the mire? Can you see the religious leaders, picking their delicate way across the filth of the barn to peer into the manger? No, they were not humble enough to receive Jesus as He came. Would the circumstances of His birth suit us today? Would it be fine enough, important enough, acceptable enough? Are we truly humble enough to receive Him? You know, we like impressive things--we like sophisticated, dramatic, important events. Are we really honest enough to admit our need of a Savior and are we humble enough to take Jesus?

A third reason the shepherds knew about the birth of a Savior was because they were close enough to God that they could hear the angels sing. How close to God are you? Close enough to hear the angels? The Bible says that an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds and that the glory of the Lord shone round about them. And the angel said, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy..." And when you have good friends, don't you want them to be the first to know when you have good news? Maybe that's why God wanted them to know--they were good friends, close to Him. If there were a birth of a child who was the Son of God here in our city tonight, are you such a friend of God, are you so close to the Father, that He would want to share the good news with you? Yes, how close are we to God? Can we hear the angels sing?

There is one final thing I want to call to your attention. It is our text for today. The Bible says, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told to them." All the excitement was over now. The fear they felt when the angel first appeared was gone--the decision to go and see what had happened was behind them--the thrill of seeing the newborn baby was but a memory. Indeed, Christmas had come and gone. Yet, they had some Christmas left over--enough to last them for a lifetime. And what was left? Well, they went back to doing the same old thing in the same old way, except there was a difference. And that difference was that they were praising and glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. Yes, a new dimension had been added to their lives--the dimension of joy, the dimension of praise. Do you have any Christmas left over from last year? Do you have joy? Do you have praise? Are you praising and glorifying God for a Savior? Indeed, is there any left-over Christmas in your heart?

You see, when you are honest enough to admit you need a savior, when you are humble enough to accept Jesus, when you are close enough to hear the angels sing, close enough to God that He touches your heart to know that Jesus is born to be your Savior, then time may come and time may go, but you will be praising and glorifying God. There will always be some left-over Christmas in your heart.