

Sermon for Sunday, December 21, 1980, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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WHAT THE SHEPHERDS GOT FOR CHRISTMAS
St. Luke 2:8-20

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

What are you getting for Christmas this year? I suspect there is not a person present this morning but that he or she is expecting a Christmas present of one sort or another. But let me ask you a question about what you are getting for Christmas. What will it look like a year from now--ten years--twenty years? Or let me put it another way. When you are dead and gone, will it have mattered very much what you got for Christmas this year? But let's turn the question around. What are you giving for Christmas this year? And ten years--or twenty years--from now, will what you gave have mattered very much or will it even be remembered?

Well, this morning I would like for us to think together about what the shepherds got for Christmas. What they got--and what they gave--mattered very much. It lasted for all eternity. How would you like to have a present like that this Christmas? How would you like to have--and to give--a present that matters--matters for all eternity?

There are a couple of things about the shepherds that appeal to me. First, they were pretty ordinary people. Had you seen them out in the field tending their flocks, you wouldn't have given them a second glance. Had you passed them on the street, you probably wouldn't have noticed them at all. And I suppose that appeals to me because I feel pretty ordinary, too. I'm not going to be written up in any history books and I suspect very few of us here this morning will even be a footnote in the parade of time. They were simple, common folk, doing their job, trying to get by. And most of us fit into that category. We can identify with the shepherds because we are mostly very ordinary people, too.

A second thing about the shepherds that appeals to me--and helps me identify with them--is this: not many big things happened in their lives. Is that true for you? Is there much that is really big that happens in your life? If you had to make a list of the really big events that have happened in your life, how many could you come up with? Well, as far as we know, the only big thing that ever happened in the lives of the shepherds was the night the angels sang to them. If anything else ever happened, we don't know about it. I can identify with that, can't you? I haven't been identified with many great earth-shaking events--as a matter of fact, I can't even think of one.

So the shepherds are a lot like us--they were very ordinary people who had never had very much of great consequence happen in their lives. And because they are a lot like us, perhaps it will be meaningful to discover what they got for Christmas. Maybe in the process we will discover what we might get for Christmas that will last a little longer than the next several years.

The first thing the shepherds got for Christmas was wonder. The Bible says the angel appeared to them and said, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the City of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord." And the Bible says, "they were

filled with fear." The word "fear" is a special Bible word. It doesn't mean "fear" as we commonly think of it. It means to be filled with awe, with reverence, with wonder.

Remember Moses when he saw the burning bush out there in the desert? The Bible says, "And Moses hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God." That means he had a sense of awe and reverence. Do you remember what Joshua said to the Children of Israel? He said, "Now therefore fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in truth." (Joshua 24:14) That means to have reverence and awe and wonder before God. Or as Ecclesiastes puts it, "fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man." (Ecc.12:13) And that means to have a sense of wonder, of awe before God. Do you know, the name of God was so reverent, so holy, that the Hebrew didn't dare pronounce it? In your King James Bible God is called "Jehovah". But there is really no such word. The Hebrew originally wrote without vowels and the Hebrew characters for God's name was not pronounced because it was so sacred. As a result, the exact pronunciation for God's name was lost. Some centuries ago a scholar put the vowels to another word for God to God's number one name and when you do that, it is pronounced "Jehovah". But there is really no such Hebrew word. Probably the proper pronunciation is the word, "Yahweh", but we aren't 100% sure. But the point is, God's name was so wonderful, so awesome, the Hebrew wouldn't even pronounce it.

Part of our problem of our world today is that we have lost our sense of awe and reverence and wonder. Did you see George Burns in the movie "Oh God"? God is depicted as a bumbling old man who isn't really sure what he is doing. That's a far cry, isn't it, from the Hebrew who wouldn't even pronounce God's name? So the first thing the shepherds got was a sense of wonder. I suspect you and I could use some awe and reverence and wonder before God this morning. We ought to stand in wonder before the creator of the universe.

So first the shepherds wondered. Secondly, they went. The Bible says of them, "the shepherds said one to another, 'Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'" And then the Bible says this, "They went..." Could we express it this way--in the light of what God revealed to them, they acted on it. Is that true in your life? Have you had some experience of God? Has there been some time in your life when you were intensely aware of God, a time when you were acutely aware of a presence? Well, what have you done about it? Have you acted on it? The shepherds could have stood around that night debating it, discussing the theological implications or the psychological import. They could have said "well, let's don't become religious fanatics." But they didn't do that. No, they acted. They responded decisively. The Bible says they went.

Are you doing that in your life? There is probably not a one of us here this morning but that at some time, in some place, God has been very real to us. But are we acting on that? Are we responding to that? Or are we waiting for the angles to come again--and again--and again? How many experiences will it take, how many comings must we have, how many visions must there be before we act on what God has revealed to us?

Yes, the shepherds wondered and then they went. Notice third that they witnessed. The Bible says, "And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child..." The shepherds lived in

a world that needed to know about Jesus. The shepherds lived in a world that needed a saviour. And because they knew what God had done, the Bible says they witnessed. Is our world today any different? Don't we still live in a world that needs to know of God's love? Don't we still live in a world that needs a saviour? Think of the people to whom you will be given presents this year. Will that present matter very long? Will it be ultimately significant? Well, you know very well it will not. But is there some gift you could give that would have eternal value? Yes, the gift of Jesus, the gift of sharing how much God loves. Well, that's what the shepherds did--they witnessed.

You know, I suspect most of us this morning have friends or neighbors or even loved ones for whom life is not going very well, Maybe it is a marriage that is strained to the breaking point--maybe a breakdown between parents and children. Maybe it is the loss of a loved one or some other desperate need in someone's life. Don't you know someone like that? What can you and I give that will really make a difference? Could it be that the greatest gift we can give would be to share what God has done at Christmas? Yes, the shepherds witnessed.

So the shepherds wondered, they went, and they witnessed. Then notice fourthly what they did--they worshipped. The Bible says, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen..." It would be interesting, wouldn't it, to know more about the shepherds. What their relationship to God before that Christmas night? What happened to them afterwards? Did they know about Jesus after he grew up? Did they realize he was the baby they had visited that incredible night? Did any of them become a follower of his? Well, we don't know the answer to any of those questions. The only thing we know for sure is that the experience they had that Christmas night changed their relationship to God. They had become men who worshipped--they glorified and praised God--because of what had happened to them.

You know, it is interesting to observe what happens to people after they have an experience with God. Those who keep on worshipping and praising God continue to grow and develop and mature spiritually. But the person who stops doing that--the person who quits being regular and systematic in worship, is the person who begins to fall away. Isn't that true in your life? If you come to church only occasionally, if you worship irregularly, doesn't your spiritual life begin to diminish?

Sometimes people begin to wonder why God doesn't mean more to them or why spiritually things don't seem so important. Usually it can be traced to the fact that they do not have a regular and systematic worship relationship to God. Well, that is one of the gifts the shepherds got for Christmas--they got a new dimension in their relationship to God for they returned, praising and glorifying the Lord.

What would you like to get for Christmas this year? What would you like to find under your tree that will last for all eternity? Where do you think the shepherds are today? I think they were special to God and because of what happened, I think God was special to them. And in my heart I believe the shepherds today are in heaven with Jesus. That's what they got for Christmas--eternal life. What will you get for Christmas? Would you like to get what the shepherds got? You can, you know.