

Sermon for Sunday, December 6, 1981 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D. Pastor  
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ROADS THAT LEAD TO BETHLEHEM  
"The Road The Shepherds Took"  
St. Luke 2:8-20

Text: "When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.'" St. Luke 2:15

Why did the angels appear to the shepherds? Why not to farmers? Why not to night watchmen? Why not to priests on duty at the temple? Why not to the merchants? Why not to innkeepers? After all, the shepherds were not important in the social structure of that day. No one thought highly of shepherds and because their testimony was considered unreliable, they were not permitted to testify in a court of law. So why did the angels appear to the shepherds?

I have been pondering over that question lately in a way I never have before. The shepherds are somehow central to the Christmas story and there must be a reason. Surely it was more than random chance that the angels appeared to them. Surely behind the coming of those angels to the shepherds there had to be some special reason.

Let me share some historical information with you. Just outside the town of Bethlehem, on the way to Jerusalem, was a small tower. It was called Migdal Eder, which means simply "tower of the flock." When shepherds grazed their sheep in a particular field frequently, sometimes they would build a small tower. That way, standing in the tower, they would be protected from the elements and they would have a better view of their sheep in order to keep more careful watch over them. Now, this particular tower was significant. The sheep kept in that particular field were to be used for sacrifice at the temple in Jerusalem. (Note: According to the Jewish Mishnah, a collection of laws passed down for centuries orally and finally written down by Rabbi Judah the Prince sometime after 135 A.D., the sheep kept in the vicinity of Bethlehem were destined for the Temple for sacrifice) So everybody knew about Migdal Eder. As a matter of fact, the prophet Micah once called Jerusalem the "tower of the flock". Spiritually speaking, that made sense. Jerusalem with its temple was the center of Jewish religious life. As such, it was indeed a tower of the flock that looked over the flock of God. (See Micah 4:8)

Now, we don't know how long the Migdal Eder had been there. Probably a long time. At least ever since the Jewish temple had been moved to Jerusalem and probably before that. It's first mention is very early. In Genesis 35:21 we are told that Jacob's wife, Rachel died in Bethlehem and he buried her there. Then the Bible says that Jacob (now called Israel) went on a little further beyond the tower of Eder to make camp. (Genesis 35:21)

So, anybody going to Jerusalem from that direction passed by Migdal Eder. It reminded them of the temple of Jerusalem because here the sacrificial lambs were kept. Because of that, a tradition developed that when the Messiah came, it would be revealed from Migdal Eder, the tower of the flock. That means that the angels fulfilled the promise of God and the birth of the Messiah was, indeed, announced from the tower of the flock.

But this means something else, also. It means these were no ordinary shepherds. No, they were the shepherds who kept the sacrificial lambs for the temple. Doesn't it seem appropriate that these special shepherds would be the ones to be told about the real, the true, the final sacrificial lamb? Do you remember what John the Baptist said when he first saw Jesus? He said, "Behold, the lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world." (John 1:29) Yes, it does seem appropriate that those who kept the sacrificial lambs would be the first to know about the true lamb of God.

There is a third thing that comes to mind as to why God revealed the birth of the Messiah to shepherds. You see, in a very real way, the shepherd is an image, a picture, of how God relates to the world. The Old Testament is full of representations where God is described as a Shepherd. I suppose the one we are most familiar with is the 23rd psalm. Do you remember how it goes? David wrote, "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..." and he goes on to describe how God watches over him and takes care of him as a shepherd looks after his sheep.

Over in the 34th chapter of Ezekiel God speaks and he describes himself as a shepherd. He says, "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad, so will I seek out my sheep; and I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered..."(Ezekiel 34:11 and 12). And then God goes on to add, "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and will make them lie down...I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the crippled, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will watch over..."(verse 15 and 16).

So God is often described as a Shepherd. But do you also remember what Jesus said about himself? He said, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." And then he goes on to add, "I lay down my life for the sheep." (John 10:11,15) So Jesus is called the good shepherd. Over in Hebrews (13:20) the writer calls Jesus "the great shepherd of the sheep." And do you remember how Jesus is described in I Peter? We read, "By his wounds you have been healed. For you were straying like sheep, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Guardian of your souls." (I Peter 2:24,25--see also I Peter 5:4)

Since Jesus is represented as the good Shepherd, it does seem appropriate that shepherds would be the ones to be told of his coming. But there is another fascinating bit of information we ought to think about. Do you remember where the angels told the shepherds they would find Jesus? They were told he would be found lying in a manger. Why there? Why didn't they just say the shepherds would find him in room 56 at the Bethlehem Ramada? Or why not just say he would be found in a stable? Why did they specify a manger? Had you ever thought about that? Well, consider this: what is a manger? It is simply a trough where animals feed. When sheep were kept penned up, or when the grass was inadequate in winter time, the shepherds used the manger to put food to feed the sheep. Ponder this amazing thing: God, the Good Shepherd, has placed in the manger the spiritual food to feed his sheep. No, surely it was no accident that the shepherds found the baby lying in a manger.

Do you remember the last supper Jesus had with his disciples? It was the feast of the Passover. The passover went back to the time when the Jews were

prisoners in Egypt. The Pharaoh wouldn't let Moses take the Hebrews away, so God did one final, awful thing to force Pharaoh to let them go. One night the Hebrews were to kill a little lamb. With its blood they were to mark their doorpost so the Angel of Death who came that night would see it and pass over that home. They were to eat the lamb in a hasty meal and prepare to leave Egypt. So, for centuries they had remembered God's mighty act and all those years they had celebrated the feast of Passover. So it was, on Passover, that Jesus sat down with his disciples for the last time. But he told them something they had never understood. He told them that the passover lamb merely represented him. If our lives were marked with his blood, God would pass over our sins. Do you remember what he said? "This is my body, broken for you--this is my blood, shed for you."

No, the baby lying in a manger was no accident. It was deeply symbolic. It not only told the shepherds where he was, more important than all else, it told them who he was, what he was.

So it was to the shepherds who kept watch over the flocks for the temple to whom the angels came. Could we make some observations about those special shepherds? First, they believed the wonderful good news the angels told them. Do you believe the good news the Bible tells us? Do you believe that Jesus died for you, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself? I suspect most of us here this morning believe the Bible and we believe that Jesus is who the Bible says he is.

But the second thing was this: the Bible tells us the shepherds acted on what they had been told and found it was so. Have we done that? Have we acted on what we have been told about Jesus? You see, it really isn't enough to believe the Bible, we must act on it. Those who have done that have made a wonderful discovery. They have discovered it is just as God said. I know so many people this morning who have a happy radiance about them, who have a new dimension to their lives, who have found an exciting new life. They are the ones who have acted on what God has said and like the Shepherds, have found it to be so. I have seen lives changed by an encounter with Jesus. I have seen broken lives made whole, I have seen marriages put back together, I have seen relationships restored. But it happens only to those who not only believe, but who act on what God has said. Have you done that?

The third thing we can notice about the shepherds is what they did after they found that what the angel said was so. There were two things. The first one was they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child. When the angels sang, they said, "I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all people..." Yes, it was good news for all and the shepherds share it with the world. Are you doing that? Do you know people whose lives are not working well, whose marriage may be in trouble, who have broken relationships and little meaning in life? Are we doing what the shepherds did? Are we sharing with others the incredible good news of what God did at Christmas?

So the first thing the shepherds did was to share with others. Somehow, if we don't do that, we make the message of the angel a lie for there can be no joy to all people unless someone tells them about Jesus. The second thing the shepherds did was to glorify and praise God. The Bible says, "And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God..." Are you doing that? Sometimes I forget to give God the glory. Sometimes I forget to praise God. Do

you? Yet, one great thing Christmas does is to remind us that our lives should give glory and praise to God.

Back there so long ago in the city of Daivd there was born for us not just a teacher, not just a religious leader, not just a fine example. No there was born to us that day a Savior. If we don't praise and glorify God for that, what will it take?