

Christmas Sunday

December 25, 2005

What I learned about following Jesus from the Shepherds

Luke 2:8-20

Well, now, we all survived Christmas again this year! Isn't it a pity that we think of it that way?

And wasn't the Christmas Eve service last night great?

And here we are—with Christmas on Sunday. I don't know what you think about Christmas on Sunday, but we preacher-types dread it when it happens that way.

But I have to note this: I have a friend, he's now professor of preaching at my seminary, at Gordon-Conwell Seminary, who studied for his doctorate in Britain. He spent several Christmases in the UK and he loved the fact that in the UK, Christmas Eve isn't the big event. Instead, many churches had a Christmas morning service, which, if you think about it, makes a lot of sense. I mean, there's no telling what time of day Jesus was born. Maybe he was born, like both of our kids, in the afternoon and the angels came that night to the shepherds. And in any event, it's not at all clear what time of year, much less what day, Jesus was born on. So here we are.

And what I intend to do is what we've been doing the last four weeks, setting aside last Sunday when we had "Because of Bethlehem." That is, we've been going through the major players in the Christmas story and asking what we can learn about following Jesus from them.

So on November 27, we looked at what we can learn from Mary, and the big lesson was

availability. Then on December 4 we looked at Joseph, and the big lesson from him is **flexibility.**

Those are great lessons. Are you **available** to God? That sounds like a no-brainer, but all the time I speak to people who are too busy for an important task for the kingdom. "Sorry, with my lifestyle, my job and so on, I'm just too busy." Somewhere along the line, we got more worried about giving someone a "guilt trip" than about the expansion of the influence of Christ in our community and our world. It's not the ultimate sin to make someone feel bad that they're not doing diddly for the kingdom of God.

With Joseph, it was **flexibility.** He had a plan that involved settling down with Mary in Nazareth—a plan that God threw a 500 lb monkey wrench into. Are you flexible? I tend to me a by the schedule kind of person, so this is one I struggle with. God jarred Joseph loose and blessed him as the earthly father of the Messiah.

And we learned a lot about the heart of God with the Magi. The big lesson there is that **skeptics, even followers of other religions are welcome** to investigate Jesus, because He's the answer to every question.

Now we have the **shepherds.** You can't get through Christmas without those shepherds—even if it's a ten-year old boy with glasses and tennis shoes wearing a bathrobe. I've often spoken about how they were the down and outers of the time, but I want to turn it around and ask, what can I learn about following Jesus from these shepherds?

It seems to me that there are two big lessons that just jump out at me:

1. The best place to be to hear from God is—
doing your duty and working hard
2. The best thing to do when you hear from
God is to tell everyone about it

First,

**The best place to be to hear from God is—
doing your duty and working hard**

Look at these guys hard at work and at what happens:

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." 13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*14"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

Where did God speak to them? Was it at the temple? Was it on the peak of Mt. Sinai? Was it on retreat? Was it at a monastery? No, it was in the midst of their work as shepherds.

Now I've never had a band of angels show up. Have you? If you have, I'd love to hear about it. And I'm no enemy of setting apart special times to seek God. For the last three years, I've gone on a one-day retreat every January that I find very refreshing and spiritually

uplifting. I really ought to do it more often. But the reality is, on a regular basis, I'm going to find God's will not on a mountaintop, but when I'm doing my duty and working hard.

It's funny. It makes me think of another shepherd who was just doing his duty and working hard when God spoke to Him—Moses. Remember the story? He wasn't out to hear from God the day God showed up and spoke in the image of a burning bush. According to Exodus 3, it wasn't even his sheep...they belonged to his in-laws!

This should remind us to beware of the spiritual highs. They are just that—highs. God speaks in the normal times and that when we find the real test of our faith. Not on Christmas Eve or on Easter morning. It's easy to be spiritual then. The real test of our faith is 2 PM on Tuesdays. Are we walking with God then?

We want the spiritual heebie-jeebies! We want something spectacular, and we try to make it happen. "Then, I'll know what God's like!" we say. "Then, I'll have a deep faith." So we try to manufacture some fireworks.

These guys weren't trying to get fireworks—they were just trying to stay warm and watch the sheep. The Bible is full of people who were just working hard and doing their duty when God showed up and spoke to them. Abraham was working for his dad. Gideon was threshing wheat. David was watching sheep. Peter was fishing. Nathaniel was reading Scripture under a fig tree. See a pattern here?

So can God speak to you when you're driving a truck, pounding nails, teaching a class, working in an office, sweeping a sidewalk or fixing cars? Can He use you there?

National Presbyterian is a great evangelical church in Washington DC. Robert Evans, now retired, was Senior Pastor there. Once he was flying into National Airport and he tried to spot the spire of the church, but he couldn't make it out. But then he realized that he could see the real church. There was Sally over at the Pentagon, and Alex at the Treasury Department, and Ward, a congressional aide, and Cindy at the Smithsonian. The church is never more real than 2 PM on Tuesdays, when it's at work, at school, taking care of the kids at home. At that's where God will not only reach you, but use you the most dramatically: when you're doing your duty and working hard. That's what the shepherds taught me.

And the second thing they teach me is

The best thing to do when you hear from God is to tell everyone about it

This is not only Christmas Day; it's also the last Sunday of 2005. We started the year by be reminded, that if Jesus' word can be trusted, **if you're not fishing, your not following.** That is, if you're not "fishing for people" to turn to Jesus and be made right with God, then by the definition Jesus Himself laid down; you're not really following Him. That's the example He gave us, and the measure of being a real follower of His.

What did these shepherds do when they heard the announcement through the angel? Luke 2:15-20 says,

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

What's striking to me is the immediate action and simple straight-forwardness of these guys. One the one hand, *let's see for ourselves*. On the other hand, they just babbled to everyone about it.

Nobody had to offer a class to them: "How to Share Your Faith." They just blabbed about Jesus. They "spread the word" about Jesus. It was the most natural thing in the world.

And maybe you're saying, "Well, if I'd seen a gazillion angels and the newborn Jesus, I'd tell everyone too."

Now, I've done all kinds of "How to Share Your Faith" kinds of seminars. And I know that I can get to the end and people are usually just as unlikely to share their faith as when they came in. Seminars won't do it. What will do it is a **gripping conviction** and a **compelling love**.

Technique don't matter beans without that **conviction** and **love**. These guys had both. They were utterly convinced that God, the Creator of the world, had lavished His love on them and had revealed Himself to them. And they fell in love with God, and His Son Jesus. Do believe that God has also shown **you** His love? Does the greatness of that love fill your heart? The whole Christmas thing is a

celebration of the reality of the words, "For God so loved the world that He gave His One and Only Son..."

That's what I really love about Christmas: the beauty and the power of the truth that God the Son became one of us and walked among us. That truth blows me away each time. I can't get over it, or around it, or beneath it. That's a **gripping conviction**.

And that gripping conviction leads me to a **compelling love**. First, it's a love of Him: of the Jesus, born at Christmas. And it's a love of His ways, what He taught, and the way He lived. And it's a love of His cross: the price the Prince of Peace paid for my freedom. And it's a love and celebration of His resurrection in power, and the fact that one day, He's coming back.

But that same love feeds back into another kind of love: the love of Jesus for lost people. I think of what He said about people in Matthew 9:36-38:

36When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. 37Then he said to his disciples, "The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. 38Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into his harvest field."

"Harassed and helpless." Man, that's people today, isn't it? That's *me* before I knew Him.

And it's no act of love to leave people "harassed and helpless." That's why Jesus turned to His disciples, and He turns to you and me on the verge of a new year and says, "Don't leave them like that. As a matter of fact, the harvest is ripe and ready. The harvest isn't the problem; it's the harvesters.

What's needed is a few good men and women to go out and do the harvesting. What you guys need is a **compelling love** that takes pity on the harassed and helpless, the same sort of compelling love that was in my heart when they nailed me to the cross."

Those shepherds just yakked about Jesus to whoever would listen. Some called them nuts. Some called them good for nothing shepherds. Some called them fools. But some listened. And the world was changed forever.

It's Christmas. The presents are open. Later today, there's Christmas dinner and visiting with love ones, and calls from and to the one who couldn't make it.

And maybe you got what you wanted for Christmas. What was the best thing you got? But you know, the greatest gift ever has been given, and it's yours for the taking. That greatest gift is knowing God through Jesus.

Yes, God comes to you when you least expect it. Let this gift given to you on the first Christmas be to you your **gripping conviction** and your greatest **compelling love**. Take what God has given to you and pass it on. There's nothing greater, nothing better, nothing most full of joy.

END
PRAYER