

HURRYING TO JESUS

A Christmas message by Dr. Rick Perrin from Luke 2:8-20

"They came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in a manger."

Luke 2:16

On Christmas Day 1943 the world was at war. But somehow tired, dirty soldiers followed their yearning hearts to a different agenda. In the demolished port city of Ortona in Italy, British troops laid out plank tables in a church and shared a candlelit Christmas dinner of roast pork and pudding. A young lieutenant with the picturesque name of Wilf Gildersleeve played carols on a pump organ while a chaplain led the singing. Radio calls to units on the front lines began with a few bars of *Silent Night* strummed on a mandolin by an adjutant who sat near the microphone. In the U. S. 34th Division an infantry captain gathered his company near Monte Casino and read aloud from the second chapter of Luke. He focused on the message of the angels: *"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."* (v 14)

Those words were spoken to the shepherds outside Bethlehem. I'm intrigued by the shepherds' response. Verse 16 says, *"And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger."* What interests me is that as soon as the angels had disappeared again into heaven, the shepherds made a quick decision. *"Let us go straight to Bethlehem,"* they said. (v 15) And then they hurried off to Jesus. You say, "What is so unusual about that?" It's just that these shepherds were the last people you'd expect to go rushing into Bethlehem. Oh, curiosity might have gotten the better of them eventually. They might have drifted into town to see what there was to see. But to hurry? I wouldn't have thought so. I can imagine religious people dashing toward the town to seek Jesus. But shepherds? No.

There are a couple of reasons I say this. First, shepherds were not religious people. They were men of irreverent coarseness, not faith, not prayer. They were considered with good reason to be thieves, dishonest characters you wouldn't turn your back on. Shepherds were known as liars, so much so that they were forbidden to be witnesses in court. They were certifiable outcasts, kept at arm's length by the better people of that rather religious society.

And then, second, the shepherds were businessmen who sold their sheep to the temple priests in Jerusalem, who in turn sold them for sacrifices to pilgrims coming to the temple. Passover time in April was their version of Black Friday. That was the month they made more money than all the rest of the year combined, for the population of Jerusalem swelled then by several hundred thousand, and each visiting family needed a sheep for the Passover meal. The shepherds dealt with the priests and their procurers. That meant they viewed operations at the temple from behind the scenes. They saw what other people never glimpsed. And what they saw rendered them totally cynical about religion. Perhaps you have had a similar experience with the church in our day, and you understand how they felt. The bottom line, then, is that the shepherds had every reason *not* to hurry to find Jesus, even if the announcement came from angels. And yet they rushed into town in a frantic search. That causes me to wonder--why?

For the answer, let's go back to the story itself as Luke has written it in chapter 2, beginning with verse 8. Luke paints the scene for us. The shepherds were out in the fields around Bethlehem, sitting around their smoldering fire "*keeping watch over their flock by night.*" We don't really know what time of year it was. Some scholars suggest that it was in the spring, near Passover. But it could have been December. The air would have been chilly. The fields were not the lush and grassy pastures we often imagine. To find that you must go north into Galilee where water is plentiful. Around Bethlehem the climate is dry and vegetation is somewhat sparse. Stones and boulders litter the landscape. The shepherds may have piled these up, constructing low stone walls to make a sheepfold into which they herded their charges for safety during the night. They would have set up camp near the gate of their sheepfold so they could keep the sheep in and the wolves out. They would have been accompanied by their dogs, of course. And thankfully, there was no little drummer boy to shatter their nerves with his rapping. It was dark. The fire was smoky. Occasionally the night air would be rent by a staccato burst of laughter from some shepherd responding to a joke. This was the familiar ritual of a thousand nights no different from this one.

Then Luke drops in the word, *suddenly*. "*An angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.*" (v 9) Any time the quiet night is shattered by a bright spotlight or a loud noise, you are startled and frightened. But this was not merely a light someone turned on. In the midst of the light stood a supernatural being who would be terrifying enough if you met him in broad daylight. Angels are not feminine. I would not even go so far as to say they have wings. As a matter of fact, since we know the significance of who was born that night; and we know that as a baby Jesus was totally helpless; and we know that Jesus was the target, first of the devil, and later of king Herod and his soldiers, we may have a clue as to what this angel looked like. Probably he was dressed in full military gear, armed to the teeth. For his job that night was not only to announce Christ's birth to the shepherds, but also to mount a protective guard to defend the infant and his parents. This angel was not floating in the air, as artists always picture him. He was standing on the ground right in front of the shepherds. For them, then, one moment they were drifting toward sleep, perhaps drinking a bit, and talking; and the next moment a brightly shining soldier not of this earth was standing in front of them. Yes, I'd say they were "terribly frightened." If anything, Luke is understating the shepherds' reaction.

Therefore the angel quickly spoke to them in verse 10 to allay their fears. "*Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people.*" So there was nothing for the shepherds to fear from this angel. What could his good news be? The angel did not delay. "*Today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*" (v 11) It is important that we get his message straight. Christ the Lord has been born. The word *Christ* means *Messiah*. In the common understanding of the term in those days—which the shepherds surely shared—the Messiah was the long promised descendant of David. Remember that Bethlehem, just across the fields from where the shepherds were, was the birthplace and boyhood home of David, Israel's greatest king. So it was fitting that David's heir should be born in that

particular town. The Biblical prophecies stated that the Messiah would ascend to the throne of David. He would be a powerful king who, like David, would defeat Israel's enemies and set the country free from the occupation of the Roman empire. He would establish a government, and under his rule Israel would ascend to a new golden age. The angel was announcing what seemed to be the beginning of a war for Jewish independence. This message would thrill the heart of every true son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. That's how it would have seemed.

But notice that the angel calls Christ *a Savior*. The word contains the same meaning as the word Christ, or Messiah. The Christ would save his people, and it could be simply a political "saving," except for one thing. The angel said to the shepherds, this Savior has been born "*for you*." He intended them to take the message personally. This is a Savior for all the nation, surely, but specifically for them. Why else would the announcement be given to this particular group of shepherds? Why not to people at the temple, for example? No, the Savior was being announced to the shepherds out in the fields because God had sent him as a personal Savior for them. These shepherds were outcasts from the religious life of the nation. They were rough and corrupt and sinful. They had no desire to participate in a hypocritical worship at the temple. Nevertheless, in spite of all their disqualifications, the Savior had come and was born for them.

To emphasize this point, the angel next told the shepherds how they could identify the right baby, how they could find their Savior. At the same time he provided them with a means by which they could objectively verify the truth of his announcement. In Bethlehem they would find a baby lying in a manger. Understand how this last piece of information underscored the personal nature of the shepherd's Savior. Mothers did not, and do not, ordinarily lay their newborn babies in a cow's feeding trough. Especially first time mothers. A few days ago we had a little baby born to one of the families in our church about seven weeks premature. He's doing well. His mom and dad brought him home from the hospital earlier this past week. I visited him a couple of times while he was in the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit. Everyone who enters the NICU must wash thoroughly so he does not bring any germs into the nursery. As I looked at that tiny little boy I could see that he was hooked up to a monitor so the nurses could tell how he was doing at any moment. He was wrapped in cloths like the baby Jesus was, but these were sterile cloths. Every piece of equipment in the unit was scrubbed and wiped with bacteria killing solutions. No mother today wants to have her new baby lying in the dung-smearred confines of a manger, even if the straw is fresh. Stables are dirty places by definition. And yet, for the shepherds, this was the common way they cared for their infants. Every shepherd baby began life in conditions like that. The point is that the baby Savior had not come for the proper and pleasant people in the upper levels of Middle Eastern society. No, he came and was born for shepherds. And the shepherds understood this clearly.

As he conveyed these words, the lone angel was suddenly surrounded by what Luke calls "*a multitude of the heavenly host*." The word *host* is a military term, so what the shepherds could not see before was now fully visible. The single angel was actually accompanied by a vast number of angel soldiers, armed and ready for battle. They were

the vanguard of the Messiah's armed forces. They were standing watch over him. No one could attack while they patrolled the perimeter of his base. Just as the shepherds protected their sheep, so these angels protected their Savior in his defenseless state. Shepherds protect the lambs. Angels protect the Lamb of God. But listen to their chorus: "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.*" (v 14) Then just as suddenly as they came, the angels retreated once more into invisibility--not any the less present, just not seen any longer. The night closed in again and shepherd eyes readjusted to the darkness as their night vision returned.

What do you say after an experience like that? It required a moment for them to regain their tongues, and then Luke describes what happened in verse 15. "*It came about when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds began saying to one another, 'Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.'*" And then the words that follow: "*And they came in haste and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.*" They hurried to Jesus. They hurried to Jesus because they realized he was their Savior. He had been born for them, and they had to find him.

As I look around this Christmastime, I don't see very many people who are hurrying to Jesus. Perhaps it's always been that way. In 1943 people in America sent gifts to their soldiers fighting in Europe. Among the presents shipped to men who slept in muddy foxholes and ducked their heads when explosions showered them with dirt; among the gifts sent to men who ate Christmas dinner under the ruined walls and roof of a battered church; were polka-dot neckties, black silk socks, and cologne. There were tennis rackets and masquerade costumes. The people at home just didn't understand. One private from Denver wrote his family after attending a makeshift worship service, "I prayed there would be no more wars after this one." He understood.

But there have been wars, haven't there. One after another. What are we to make of the angel's words, "*On earth peace among men with whom He is pleased*"? The message of the angel was not that wars should cease. At least, not until Christ comes back again. Instead, the angel was declaring the end of a different kind of war. He was announcing peace between men and God. Between you and God, if you will have it. For the real war, the source of all wars, lies in the human heart. You and I have, like all the human race, asserted our independence from God. We have resisted him. The Savior born that night came to bring peace to restless souls. He came to take away war's destruction and replace it with a restored friendship between God and all who find their Savior. The shepherds understood that—at least a little. And that was why they hurried to find Jesus. What about you? Has Christ the Savior made peace between you and God? My dear friends, hurry to Jesus. Trust him to save you. You hear the angel's message. It is a declaration and at the same time an invitation. Come. Find him. He is just there in Bethlehem. And he is here! What a Merry Christmas this can be for you and those you love!

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