

Today is our third song of revolution in our Advent series. We've looked at Mary and Zechariah, and today we'll look at the Shepherds in Luke 2:8-20.

You may have noticed there's a thread of humility running through each of the songs in this sermon series. A teenage girl, a barren woman and old man, and now shepherds. Today we'll be examining how God uses the humble to accomplish revolutionary things. The question for us all is, are we humble?

Now, we are going to read a story that is probably familiar to many of you. It's known as a song of Joy, pronouncement, excitement and worship. This song often fills us with 'warm fuzzies' and is a sweet and happy Christmas moment. This may seem like a strange thing to talk about in the wake of the terrible news of the shooting at the elementary school in Connecticut this Friday and the shooting in Oregon. Such sadness and horror happening in the same space this week. And now we're supposed to talk about how Joy fits into the story of our lives? Not an easy task for us this morning. Let's remind ourselves that joy is not a promise of always feeling happy. Rather it is a deep, abiding peace that God is working and writing a story-even when we don't understand it, sense it or feel it. Joy is one of the emotions that we have-and one that God has also. There's also righteous anger and sadness, which are appropriate for us to feel. Innocence has been lost this week, and we stand with those families and communities that are grieving now and for months to come in our own form of grief and sadness.

It seems that today we find ourselves in a state of longing for Jesus to come and heal, just as Israel felt back before Jesus was born. We have crime, corruption, hatred, murder and awful things today just as they did back then. We are in such a deep need of a Savior, and this week I found myself, as I'm sure many of you did, longing for Jesus to return and defeat evil and bring us full restoration. I want to remind you that God has come to us in Jesus, and then has not left us alone. We have the gift of the Holy Spirit as our comforter and our healer and I hope that we desperately seek the Spirit's presence to help us gain understanding and healing. God calls himself "I AM." (Exodus 3:14) And declares that: He was--He came to us, He is--He is still working now on earth, and He will--He will return to us someday. We find ourselves in the middle--in the 'already but not yet' where God is working and moving on earth, but where we have not yet experienced full restoration, which we long for. Evil is still at work in earth and we're in the middle of the battle. So let us not forget the message of the Angel's song on that Christmas day--the battle is already won. We know the end, we just are in the process of getting there---Joy has come and Joy will win.

So let's pray and then listen to the story ...

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

company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." When 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." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in a manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.'

Wow what a story! Here, we see heaven respond to one of the greatest events in history. God came to restore earth as a vulnerable baby born in a dirty stable and then Angels appear to Shepherds with an anthemic-revolutionary song. There's a lot going on here--Today we'll look at what this song really means and see how it plays out for each of the players in this part of the story--the shepherds, Mary, and the greater community. We see that this song changes them all with Joy: A hope fulfilled!

The theme of this anthem is "Joy to the world! The Lord has come. Let earth receive her King!"; the message commonly sung at Christmas time. But, maybe it should be sung, 'Joy to the Humble of the World,' since the players in this story are socially & economically insignificant. Shepherds and a teenage girl. A message of joy to the humble. God uses these humble people to accomplish a revolutionary task, which is to spread the best news for Israel then and for us today-- the Messiah has come! God is now with us.

It's the first Angel who gives this message. What a terrifying sight it must've been! The angel tells the shepherds don't be afraid; a common theme when heavenly beings make appearances. When God visits Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden after they've eaten the fruit, they're afraid. When they see God after 'the fall' they recognized, "There's a difference between me and my Creator God!" It's sobering. When Joshua meets the commander of the army of the Lord on the battlefield he is overwhelmed. When Mary receives her angelic visitor she is frightened. When Zechariah is visited in the Temple he is filled with fear. When Jesus meets the disciples in the room after the resurrection, they're filled with fear.

With Mary and Zechariah the Angel's first words were, "Don't be afraid." It must be a sight to see an Angel from Heaven. Emotionally humbling. Fear is the common reaction throughout the Scriptures. In such encounters one gets a glimpse of higher realm; the glory of God. At these times people sense their finiteness, it's humbling. "Here's something greater than myself; something holy." And we're pretty used to walking around, feeling like the top dog.

The angel appears, and calms their fears saying, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. "Today in the town of David a Savior has

been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Jews were expectant of the coming Messiah. They studied the Hebrew Scriptures, the prophecies, and bound themselves to Levitical law. They were waiting. Hoping. Longing. And this angel says, the wait is over! The Messiah has come! God has spoken once more in this baby. And upon that pronouncement a whole ‘company of heavenly hosts’ appeared and began praising God.

Create a mental picture of that! Can you imagine what that must’ve looked like, sounded like, or felt like for the Shepherds? Picture the brightest lights, the most beautiful music, maybe even the ground shaking with power; even a mere mental picture humbles us. What a great sight it must’ve been. Wow. They sing, “Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom His favor rests.”

A Revolutionary song. The savior, the Messiah is here! And you get to see him! Glory to Him! And to those on whom his favor rests. Peace is promised to them.

The Angels say, “glory to God in the highest”... Glory’s a word we say or sing in worship songs, but what does it mean? It carries with it the idea of great honor and high regard. It’s associated with beauty. We might feel a sense of glory when we feel like we’re doing well in comparison of others, that we’re better than them. We may feel it when our team wins the game or championship. We glory or revel in the victory. But the Glory of God resides *in the very being* of God. God *is* glory. And when we compare ourselves with the ultimate embodiment of beauty and honor, God the Father, we pale in comparison. Humility is born at such times, realizing there’s a difference between God and me. It’s not that they’re down on themselves or self-deprecating, but they now have a holy perspective. It’s the humble whom God uses to do the most transformational work of His Kingdom because they are open.

Have you experienced the Glory of God here on the earth lately? Perhaps you’ve had a recent miracle happen in your life and you say ‘only God could have made that happen!’ or You’ve seen a particularly beautiful sunset or nature scene, nature is so good at giving glory to its Creator, isn’t it? I often feel a sense of God’s glory when I’m cooking or baking. It might seem like a random place to experience this, but I’m always completely amazed that God created things that can compliment each other so well. As the cook or baker, I don’t create them, I just mix proportions and watch the magic happen. I especially feel this glory when I make my Christmas cinnamon rolls--stay with me here-- it all starts out as a pile of liquid and powder and after hours of watching and heating and mixing and cooling it becomes something completely different, that is *seriously* amazing. And what an analogy for our lives sometimes--what seems like a pile of mess is overtime crafted and formed into something really beautiful. We give God glory for that. We can’t do this. Only He can make something out of nothing. God takes glory in the very being of Himself. In who He is, what He’s made and what He does. Doesn’t that just give you a shiver? Seeing the glory of God here on earth is so life-

giving. It brings us joy. Start looking for it if you can't think of a place where you've seen it lately. It's all over the place!

The angels claim this message brings peace to those on whom God's favor rests. For a people that have loved God and longed & waited for Him, they're now promised peace in this child. For people who who could care less, this isn't a message for them. Yet, hopefully they'll be awakened as well. This message of Jesus' coming, is for the humble; those who are open, seeking, searching, waiting, listening, and teachable. The humble receive peace. This is *good* news bringing deep, abiding joy. The humble truly understand joy because they've been visited by God; they're open and looking to find joy outside of what they can produce themselves. Joy is found in what is given to you, not what you can make for yourself. Remember--Joy isn't fleeting happy feelings, it's a deep knowledge of the gospel; that God is working and moving for healing and restoration even when I don't understand it, sense it, or see it. This is joy, and this brings peace.

I'm reminded of the apostle Paul in the Bible who writes countless stories in the New Testament about praising God while he is in prison and prison guards and families who meet Jesus through their time with Paul. This is a person in a difficult situation, who still sees joy and a purpose in his day, and God uses him in mighty ways.

That's the message of this song. God has come to those who are open to receive Him! You're peace is here, Israel, and you'll meet Him! Interestingly, this message is given first to Shepherds. Shepherds were considered working class, deemed ceremonially unclean. They were kept away from the temple courts due to the nature of their work. Therefore, they couldn't maintain and participate in Jewish ceremonial cleansing. As a result, they were outcasts since Jews didn't associate with the 'unclean.' Ironically, the sheep the shepherds were guarding were most likely lambs that would've been used for sacrifices at the Temple during Passover - the thing they could not participate in. What a juxtaposition. 'Unclean people' raising the most worthy and pure lambs to be used in the observation of Passover.

These Shepherds, working class people, hired help, considered outcasts by their own people are the ones guarding the sacrifice! Tough men, having to defend themselves from wild animals & robbers in the fields....often times they were accused of being thieves themselves, stealing some of the flock for their own gain. Many were rough, dishonest folk, driven to be so due to their social status. Not the kind of people you'd choose to entrust important matters to, nor want around your wife during your child's birth.

Now, we don't know exactly who *these* exact shepherds were, maybe they were honest men, maybe they weren't. The point is, they were a class of people untrusted and unaccepted. What I propose to you today is that *we* could be the shepherds of this story; don't you feel that way at times? It might be hard to relate, many of us are privileged and don't feel like outcasts....but think of the every-day nature of these shepherds. Put yourself in the story, give one of them your name, your face. They're

everyday people going about everyday work when they encounter a very holy moment. God using the humble to accomplish a revolutionary fete.

In the middle of their mundane tasks God speaks. He can call us at anytime! And the shepherds listen and go. Some scholars speculate that the 'cloth' Jesus was wrapped in were used only for a few hours after the birth to keep the baby warm and protect it from hypothermia. So, it would seem the shepherds response was pretty immediate. The angels appeared and they went as fast as they could to find Mary, Joseph, and the Baby. Do I run so quickly upon hearing God's call?

Imagine what this must have been like for Mary. This passage includes the memorable verse "but Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" Think for a second about Mary's world on this night. This young teenage girl has trekked miles and miles to Bethlehem with Joseph (talk about a chance to get to know your better half, huh?) She's given birth in a stable, or in a cave as some researchers suggest. They're all alone and have gone through something amazing and difficult together, no doubt. A few hours or so after giving birth, a group of burly shepherds come bursting onto her scene. Mary, exhausted, trying to nurse, trying to heal, rest, and recover from the shock of it all.

She may have even started to worry.... "OK, now I've had the baby, now what, God?" I might have thought that...and then BOOM. Shepherds. Dirty outcast shepherds, as if the stable wasn't bad enough! She was probably frightened. Huffing and puffing, they tell her this story of an angel's message and a sky full of angels singing praises.

These 'unclean' outcasts confirm the prophecy Mary was given earlier. I wonder what she thought and felt!? Encouragement, wonder, disbelief, and fear, all at the same time? The angels don't appear to Mary and Joseph to comfort them after the birth of Jesus, or to an important and esteemed Rabbi with many followers. Who would've easily spread a reputable word about a Savior being born, thereby restoring her reputation. But no. They appear to Shepherds, lowly un-esteemed in their community and without much voice to be heard. Wow. Mary's encouragement and confirmation of her prophecy came through these men that no one but God would have written into this story.

I wonder if she even laughed to herself wondering, why in the world is God doing things this way?! I wonder if she ever imagined herself associating with Shepherds, or being filled with hope and encouragement by such a group of people. She's probably been taught her whole life, stay away from those dirty (or scary!) shepherds. God is clearly using the humble to accomplish His revolution of grace.

After the Shepherds visit them, it says, "When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." However, Shepherds, being the unclean outcasts they were, weren't given rights in Jewish society to testify in court. No one valued their word, trusted them, or gave them rights to speak! Isn't this revolutionary!? Think about it, God chose these people to be the first people to testify to the Jewish world that their

Messiah had come. These people who didn't have a voice; sounds Gospel-like. Who'd they tell? Probably other shepherds, other outcasts, the poor, the needy, precisely those whom Jesus has come for. I'm sure there would've been a greater response if the best Rabbi in the land had heard this news. Or at least someone who was a little step up from shepherds! But that's not how our God does things. He chooses the humble to accomplish revolutionary things.

Put yourself in the shepherds place. Maybe you feel like you don't have anything to say that's valuable, or that you're in a place to speak. Maybe you don't have a voice. Maybe you've told yourself, 'I'm not that smart' or 'I'm not a leader' or 'I'm not....whatever' "I can't do this. I can't talk to my co-workers about church or invite them to the Christmas movie night (December 23 at 6:30pm at church:)). I can't talk to people in the community when I'm out at my community partner for community group. I have nothing to say or contribute there or even in the group meeting."

Well you know what!? That's bunch of crap and lies! That's not what God would say to you. This story tells us that every person in the community has value and has purpose in God's greater story. This is transformational! This is revolutionary! God looks at the heart of things. 1 Samuel 16:7, "The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." Each and every single one of you, and each and every person you encounter in your day has worth, value and is able to play a role in God's kingdom story. Everybody gets to play. Are we looking for these unexpected God moments? Are we open to being used by him to bring a revolution of grace in the lives around us?

Our CG's get to experience this often in their Kingdom Partner opportunities. Groups receive a "Kingdom Partner" at the beginning of their year. Kingdom Partners are area community organizations. Groups spend time each month not meeting in the traditional group format, but out in the community doing whatever these organizations need. So we get these times where we see God move in an unexpected way. Invitations to weddings, joint worship/prayer nights with other area churches, opportunities to pray for each other, lives touched by small and large efforts. It's love in practical and sometimes seemingly small ways making a great impact and ripple effect on our communities and their families. It's awesome. One group was recently praying before starting their activity and a woman from the organization asked if she could join them in praying and it started a conversation about our church. People that rarely, if ever, get prayed for by a church have said how encouraged they've felt when they've come out to one of our group potlucks and are prayed over and encouraged. These are unexpected moments--a potluck, an afternoon at BINGO, or a party at a park that God shows up to and uses to write His Kingdom story. And I feel joy by telling you all that. Sharing our "God moments" and joys with each other brings greater joy to the community, and that's what the Shepherds did after seeing Jesus, Joseph and Mary.

Their "great joy" is made complete when they go and share it with their community. And isn't that true for us too? When a 'great joy' happens in your life, doesn't it make it that much sweeter and more fun when you can tell other people about it? It 'completes' the

feeling of joy as you share it and it multiplies through the crowd. We love to tell good stories; we want them shared. And we need to share these joys with each other to encourage and build up the entire community. That's why we share in CG, have friendships, worship together, and walk with each other. Community increases joy.

I think it's interesting that we don't know the extent to which the Shepherds testimony spread. Did people believe them or disregard them? Some did it says, but we don't really know the exact impact--how many and who? We don't know this, and it's not for us to know the effectiveness of their sharing. What is for us to know is their attitude. We're to mimic the obedience, humility, and sheer joy in the reaction of these men. We too are called to share the joy of this story. Those once on the outside looking in, have been brought near. That's the Gospel message, amen?

Let's really consider this as we close; are we like the shepherds of this story? Open, waiting, teachable? These people received the angelic message; do we operate in a posture which allows us to receive God's word and call?

The entire Christmas message is about God writing a story no one could've imagined. And we have the same God today. Think of your own story...is God writing it differently than you would've planned or imagined? Maybe you think about that and feel immediate joy, recently seeing the work of God. Or maybe you think of your story and find yourself waiting.....wondering....hoping....expecting. Just like Israel was at this first Christmas so long ago. The anthem of the Advent Season is "Come Jesus." Perhaps that's your anthem today, waiting, desiring, begging for God to come and burst into your story. Take heart and be encouraged from the Angels song of Joy today. A Savior has been born to you; born in a way unexpected. May you find joy. May you find God's hand in your story in an unexpected way. The world was changed that night. These unexpected people in an unexpected place were great players in the unexpected revolution of grace.

God certainly uses the humble to accomplish revolutionary things. He can use you. Let's pray.