

## When Angels Speak, Who Listens?

Merry Christmas! What a joy to gather this morning to celebrate the coming of our King and Savior. We are, of course, right in the midst of St. Luke's account of Jesus's birth. If you were with us for yesterday's service, you're all caught up. If not, well, you know how this story goes. Mary and Joseph have made it to Bethlehem. They've landed in a stable because the local inn is full, and Mary has just delivered her baby. Night has fallen. Luke cuts away to the fields outside of Bethlehem, where shepherds are standing guard over flocks of sheep, protecting them from wolves, lions, and thieves. An angel pops in out of nowhere, ablaze with heavenly glory, to tell the terrified shepherds first, that the Messiah has been born and, second, that they can find him in a nearby manger, of all the absurd and marvelous things. The angel is suddenly surrounded by a multitude of the heavenly host, whose ringing voices and divine radiance must have set the sky on fire. And when the celestial fireworks end, the most remarkable thing in this passage occurs. The shepherds go looking for the newborn Son of God.

The shepherds' departure may not seem like much compared to the angels' extravaganza, but it was a very big deal. Sheep farming was essential to the economy of agricultural Israel. It was a significant financial loss when sheep went missing or were taken by predators. You might have heard one academic's theory that the sheep raised outside of Bethlehem were particularly precious. In his book, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Bible scholar Alfred Edersheim argued, based on his interpretation of Hebrew law, that Bethlehem's shepherds were tasked with the awesome responsibility of raising the unblemished lambs sacrificed by the Temple priests. Those lambs would have been especially valuable; we know that worshippers paid exorbitant prices for them. Edersheim's arguments have been challenged in recent years but, for our purposes this morning, it may not matter whether Bethlehem sheep were raised for the Temple or

not. Sheep were valuable either way. No shepherd could afford to leave his precious flock unattended for long.

So, when the shepherds went off in search of the infant Messiah, it was no ordinary excursion. They left behind the thing they valued most to go and see what the Lord had made known to them. How many of us would do the same? Granted, the angels don't normally put on a floor show when God wants our attention. That only happened this once, to mark the singular occasion of the Word of God being born as one of us. Most of the time, God's desires are conveyed to us in a quiet whisper, a barely perceptible nudge, or a tiny serendipity that can easily be dismissed as mere coincidence. We can miss it if we're not paying attention. We might not even want to acknowledge it. The shepherds were poor men doing difficult, dirty work at the bottom of the social hierarchy of an occupied country. They and their neighbors were desperate for a deliverer, so they were probably eager for the angel's news. By contrast, many of us would rather pursue our own desires without concern for what God wants. That's especially true when things seem to be going well, and we can imagine we're responsible for our own successes. God sometimes has to smack us pretty hard to trigger our interest in finding out what he would like to do in our lives or have us do for someone else.

The shepherds could have politely thanked the angel for dropping by, then turned back to tending their sheep. It would have been the practical thing to do, and what their employers might well have preferred. But if they had, they would have missed the miracle of seeing the Messiah in the flesh. They would have lost the opportunity to tell Jesus's parents what the angel said to them, words that Mary treasured and pondered in her heart. And they would have had nothing over which to rejoice and praise God beyond the mundane circumstances of their everyday lives.

That we have life at all is reason to praise and glorify the God who gave it to us, but life is infinitely better when we notice and are grateful for the special blessings that God provides.

There can be no greater blessing than Jesus's gift to humanity of his own sacred self. By coming among us and, as St. Paul wrote to Titus, justifying us by his grace so that we might "become heirs according to the hope of eternal life," Jesus elevated a fallen humanity so that we can stand in the presence of our Creator without fear or shame. And, as if that were not enough, Jesus taught us how to live, faithfully, lovingly, and in accordance with our Father's will. Even without the redemption he gave us, Jesus's teachings would have been an incomparable gift. That he gave us both gives us every reason to glorify and praise him.

There's a lot to do on Christmas Day, friends, and family to call and visit, gifts to give and receive, traditional meals to prepare and enjoy. Perhaps you celebrate Christmas with a lot of noise and bustle. Or perhaps you prefer to spend the day more quietly. Christmas can be difficult, and people don't always understand why someone might not want to join in the festivities. Either way, it's a good time to remember that we're not just here for the presents and the eggnog. Christmas comes to us because Jesus did. When he calls, how ready will we be to go to him? Will we, like the shepherds, drop everything and run, or will we hold back, afraid to put our personal concerns aside for even a moment? (The sheep seem to have been okay, for what it's worth. Maybe we can take a lesson from that.) We always have a choice. Our Lord asks – he doesn't demand. But he does ask. So, when you feel that little nudge, notice that happy coincidence or hear a sweet, small voice inviting you to go somewhere or do something, my prayer is that you'll put down whatever it is you're doing and *go*. When an angel speaks, I pray you'll listen. There might just be a miracle waiting for you. Merry Christmas, friends. Amen.