

Luke 2: 8-20; Ps. 78:65-72; Shepherds Keeping Watch Over Sheep I. Shepherds in the Bible II. Shepherds in Luke 2

Congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, when is the last time that you have been outside on a dark, moonless night? Living close to Chicago means that our dark nights are not really all that dark- but if you have ever traveled to a remote location and stood outside at night gazing at the stars, you may have some idea what the night was like for the shepherds in our passage. Keeping watch over their flocks by night. Silent and dark! Tonight, we continue our series by considering the shepherds who were keeping watch over their sheep. Now shepherds and their sheep are intricately connected. The state of the sheep says something about their shepherd. Sheep that were malnourished, sick or wounded would betray the fact that their shepherd was either unskilled or uncaring! To leave your sheep alone at night would put the lives of those sheep in grave danger. So what kind of a message would be so urgent that it would compel shepherds to leave their sheep? That they would be willing to risk their livelihood and reputation by forsaking their sheep? Well, today we come to the second character in Luke 2- that of the shepherds who were keeping watch over their sheep. We consider this theme: the angel calls the shepherds to worship the Good Shepherd. The dark, silent night will not be dark and silent for long!

I. Shepherds in the Bible

We begin by looking at the roll of shepherds in general in the Bible. Shepherds and their sheep are one of those major themes that run through the pages of Scripture. Many of the patriarchs were shepherds in their occupation. From Abraham to Jacob; and Moses to David; God choose to call and use men who were trained in the art of shepherding. Shepherds in the OT were nomadic by nature, they would follow the sheep or lead the flocks to places of green pasture. This was a very common occupation, similar to that of farming here in the States a few generations ago. The shepherds would get to know their sheep very well, spending much of their time tending to the sick and finding the lost. But in God's providence, this task of tending sheep was often used as the training grounds for future leaders. As both Moses and

David would be called from tending the sheep to tending the people. Soon a link would develop between shepherds and kings. As shepherds were responsible for the safety and well-being of the flock, so kings would be charged with caring for the people and protecting them. Interestingly, the shepherd's crook or staff forms the basis for the ruler's staff or sceptre. So the image of shepherd with his sheep and a leader with his people takes root in the OT mindset. We read of this in Psalm 78 where David was taken from the sheepfolds and told to shepherd people of God. To guide them with a skillful hand- to shepherd the flock of God. Interestingly, as a side note, the elders of the church are also called pastors which means shepherds. But as history unfolds, the leaders of Israel did not do right by the people. So in Ezekiel 34, the LORD rebukes the leaders by saying- woe to you shepherds of Israel. You feed yourself and get fat off the flock, but you do not tend to the sick or bind up the wounded. The leaders of Israel- her shepherds- did not care for the sheep! So the wicked shepherds were rebuked, and the solution given in Ez. 34 is this- I, the LORD, will come and I will remove these shepherds. And I, the LORD will shepherd My sheep! The LORD God of Israel would come and He Himself would shepherd the sheep of Israel. These words are fulfilled in John 10 where Jesus identifies himself as the Good Shepherd. The sheep hear His voice and follow Him! He lays down His life for the sheep! The Good Shepherd will find and gather the lost ones, taking up the little lambs in His arms. So the concept of a shepherd is one that runs deep in the mindset of God's people. The LORD is my Shepherd- and we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.

II. Shepherds in Luke 2

So as we come to Luke 2:8 we find that there were shepherds out in the field in the region around Bethlehem, keeping watch over their flocks by night. As you remember, children, Bethlehem was the city of David. So it was on these very hills that David once kept his own sheep as well. But although being a shepherd was a noble trade that often brought great wealth in the OT, in Luke 2 this respect was no longer present. As the Israelites moved away from the nomadic lifestyle, fewer and fewer Israelites

became shepherds. And at that time, the shepherds were considered a lower class, uncivilized and uneducated group. They were seen as rough, harsh and untrustworthy. Being outside and with animals all the time meant that they were dirty, smelly and often poor. They were not seen as belonging to the upper crust of society. Shepherds had been known to take things that did not belong to them- and their testimony was not trusted in the court room. Now it is interesting that our God chooses men like this to be the first to hear the news of Christ's birth. Remember that after Jesus rose from the dead, to whom did the angels pronounce news of His resurrection? Who was the first to see the resurrected Jesus? It was the lowly women, right? Well here, these lowly shepherds are the one to whom the good news of Jesus' birth is first told! We see this often in the Scriptures, God chooses to use the lowly of this world. He exalts the humble but brings down the proud. Using the lowly to shame the exalted! Our God sees fit to reveal to these men- to invite these shepherds to go and see the newborn king! Going from the field to the manger- actually the manger had been turned into a throne! The stable was now the house of God! But they would not be offended by the lowly coming of this child- because they were lowly themselves! To these shepherds, it was a sign of God's love! That He did not appear in a palace with a royal crown on His head- but rather He came dressed like one of them! Appearing in their home town in a stable- where they would feel at home! The wonder of the incarnation is evident in that Jesus came humble and lowly, taking on our fallen flesh! Made like the shepherds- like us in every way! Why would these men risk the sheep on the hill? To find their heart's desire in the stable!

Now these shepherds were keeping watch over sheep at night- that was labor of love! It was often a dangerous job. But sheep were needed in that day! They were not only needed for food and clothing, but for the sacrifice! Being in the vicinity of Jerusalem meant that some of these sheep would end up at the temple for the burnt offering. But these shepherds would leave their flocks in order to find and worship the Lamb of God! The shepherds on the hill would travel into town to find the Good Shepherd! So we have these shepherds out the field in the dead of night. When suddenly, a heavenly angel

appears to them and gives them a wonderful message. It is a privilege that these men enjoy- to be the recipient of the good news and great joy! That God would choose them to hear this message of a Savior's birth! Unto you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord! To you- to you shepherds standing guard in the fields! To you despised men who work hard keeping watch. Someone has seen you! Someone has a word- good news for you! Those who were watching are the first to see!

Now we have seen the shepherd's privilege- how they were honored by God in the reception of this angelic message and tasked with finding and praising the King of Israel in Bethlehem. What remains is how they respond to this privileged task. After this angelic visitor and the host that praised God with him had left, we find that the shepherds did 3 things. First, they went in v. 15-16. Let us go and see this thing that has happened- and they went with haste and found Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. The angel's message moves them to go- to obey- and they find it just as the angel had said! They believe the angel's word- the message proves reliable- and they go and worship the newborn king! It was not the wise men- not the magi from the East- not even Anna and Simeon- no this honor belongs to the shepherds alone! They were the first to see and worship the Christ child who had been embraced by Mary and Joseph. But that was not all they did- they continued in v. 17 by spreading the news far and wide. They made known to all this saying and revealed the arrival of this baby. Now remember that because of the census, Bethlehem was packed. There was no room in the inn because the city was full! And these shepherds become the first evangelist- they go and tell everyone who will listen- they reveal and retell the message from the angel and the arrival of this king! How many people heard the good news this first Christmas Day? A better question- how many went and searched for this child to worship Him as well? The residents of Bethlehem were so close- they could find out for themselves- they too could search and find the Prince of Peace- but how many did? Well, after this work of evangelism- spreading the good news of Jesus' birth- making known the arrival of the King in the land- these shepherds returned to their own field. So in v. 20 we read, the shepherds returned, glorifying and

praising God for all that they had heard and seen. What the last thing that the shepherds did? Well, they went back to work! They went back to their flocks on the hill. Yes, it was the same work, but these men had been changed! They had seen the hope of the nations- and they would not forget! Now why did they have to return to their fields? Did you ever think of that? Having met Jesus- having seen the Lord of Life- being in the presence of the Good Shepherd- why would they return to their sheep? Well, remember where we are in redemptive history. The time of rest and fulfillment had not yet full come! The full blessing of the Kingdom of God were not fully present! They still needed to work- still needed to tend sheep! There is a waiting that is part of the present life! We know where we are going- we know that our citizenship is in the Kingdom above- that we have a place in the land of rest- a home in the New Jerusalem. But like the shepherds, our time to take possession of these is not yet! Like the shepherds, we still need to work- to tend our sheep as we glorify God- until the Good Shepherd returns and takes us home!

To conclude, the shepherds of Luke 2 give us a wonderful illustration of faith, obedience and responding joy! These shepherds believe the message told them, obeyed the word and then returned home with joy and thanksgiving in their heart! They worshipped and praised God for a baby that had been born! But what had this baby done? Well, at this point the only thing that Jesus had done was be born! He was the savior of the world in promise form. And yet, these shepherds praised and glorified God for His arrival! How much more we who know what this child will do! How much more we who live after Jesus has fulfilled all righteousness! How much more will we be moved to praise and glorify God for Jesus who was born, died, rose again and is now seated at the Father's right hand! If the shepherds praised God- will we not even more rejoice in the ascended King who our Good Shepherd! As our theme states; the angel calls the shepherds to worship the Good Shepherd. The angel's message is recorded for us as well- may we give glory to God in the highest because there is peace on earth- the Prince of Peace has come!