

Unexpected Guests for Christmas

Pastor Bill Price, December 25, 2011

We looked at the calendar late last summer and saw that Christmas day fell on Sunday, leaving us with an issue that we face about every seven years, “Should we have a worship service when Christmas day falls on Sunday? Will anyone attend?” We knew that virtually everyone who considers Autumn Ridge their church home would be here yesterday for the three Christmas eve services, and we did have over 2300 people here yesterday, including – I would imagine – many of you. We also expected that any families that had young children would be at home opening presents and having a big breakfast, so that would affect the number of people that might come to a Sunday morning service. So we decided to plan a service, having no idea if anyone would show up. I’m very pleasantly surprised to see you here today. Worship really is a great way to begin Christmas day.

Our gathering today reminds me of the unexpected guests that arrived to worship on that very first Christmas day. I would imagine that after the long journey to Bethlehem, the difficulty of finding a place to stay and the birth of their baby among farm animals, Mary and Joseph must have imagined that all the excitement was finally behind them and they could begin to settle down. Perhaps Jesus was born in late afternoon or early evening, and Jesus’ parents succumbed to the exhaustion that all first-time parents know a few hours after the birth of a child. But their rest was to be short-lived, for unexpected guests arrived later that evening.

The Bible tells us that “Shepherds were abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flocks *by night*...” and I’ll warn you in advance that my scripture quotations will come from the King James Version since that’s the version Linus used every year in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” when he quoted Luke 2. Of course, Mary and Joseph didn’t know the shepherds and had no idea they were coming, so I’d like to consider a couple of questions about the shepherds, the unexpected guests of that first Christmas. I invite you to open your Bible to Luke 2, on page XXX in the pew Bible.

First, what do you think the shepherds looked like by the time they got to the manger?

Of course they looked terrified, maybe even “shell shocked.” Verse 9 says, “...they were sore afraid.” Of course they were terrified. They probably also looked exhausted...winded. Verse 16 says, “They came with haste...” After the angels left the shepherds, they abandoned their sheep and ran as quickly as possible toward Bethlehem. Shepherds aren’t usually known as track stars, so I’m sure they were doubled over after their late night sprint. They must have been breathless by the time they arrived.

I wonder if they were glowing just a bit. That same verse says, “...the glory of the Lord shone round about them...” We know that when Moses spent time with God on Mt Sinai his face glowed with the glory of God when he returned to the people. I wonder if Mary leaned in more closely to find out why the shepherds looked iridescent.

My second question is, “How did they find the baby?”

If the manger scene on my coffee table at home is any guide, it would have been easy. Climb over the family Bible, walk between the coffee cups, squeeze past the wise men and their camels and there you are. That’s ridiculous, of course, but my point is that it didn’t happen the way we often picture it in our minds. We’ve been told that the innkeeper sent Mary and Joseph to a barn behind the hotel, but none of that is in the Bible. Verse 7 does say she “laid Jesus in the manger because there was no room for them in the inn,” but the word “inn” doesn’t mean hotel like we think of an inn. It referred to the guestroom, what we might call a spare bedroom. Luke used a different word than this when he referred to the hotel used by the Good Samaritan, but this word was used in Luke 22:11 when Jesus sent the disciples to a house to borrow a spare room for the last supper before his crucifixion.

In many parts of the world even today, poor families bring their animals into a small stable connected to the house for protection and warmth. Mary laid her baby in the feeding trough because Bethlehem was packed with visitors and there was no space for them in the guest room.

Now Bethlehem is a very small village, not a town or city. When the people from Bethlehem want to go out to the “big city,” they head for Zumbro Falls or Eyota. Bethlehem has maybe fifteen or twenty small homes with multi-generational families living under the same roof. That means everybody knows everybody else’s business. I picture the shepherds running into the village suddenly realizing they don’t know where to go next because every house has a stable attached and every house has a manger. The mud streets are dark and deserted, except maybe for one old guy who’s noticed an unusually bright star way off on the horizon. He’s been watching it for a month or so now, not knowing that in about a year the light from that star is going to keep everyone in Bethlehem up all night. But right now, it’s just a strange, flickering speck in the sky. The breathless shepherds get his attention and they ask, “Where’s ‘the baby’?” He cocks his head but doesn’t speak, pointing to the house across the street with a curious look on his face as the shepherds dash into the courtyard.

So let’s read the verses from the Bible here. Verse 16 says, “And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”

And then verse 17 says, “And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.”

Personally, I find this very frustrating, because there is a huge gap between verse 16 and verse 17. Verse 16, they get there – verse 17, they leave! This leads to my last question:

“What did they talk about?”

Countless millions of Christians have been here before us. Like us this morning, others have eavesdropped on this scene, watching the holy moments that transpired between verse 16 and 17. Joseph stirs himself quickly and has the semi-vigilant look of one who’s been caught unsuccessfully fighting sleep. Mary opens her eyes at the sudden presence of these unexpected Christmas guests. The breathless shepherds are now speechless as well. Other Hebrew eyes have seen the great plagues, rivers parted, manna scattered on

the ground, kings enthroned and fire falling from heaven. They have seen the glory of God that filled Solomon's temple of old and the anointed Messiah of God.

What did they talk about? Of course, they were speechless. Their heart rate returned to normal but they continued breathless. Not breathless from running, but breathless with the sense of the presence of the holy. It was the breathlessness of Moses before the burning bush, quickly pulling off his sandals. It was the breathlessness of Joshua before the angel of the Lord, his face in the dust. It was the breathlessness of Isaiah, crushed with a sense of utter doom for having dared to gaze upon "Holy, Holy, Holy."

But now in this holy place...shepherds. Not great leaders, not warriors, not kings, not prophets; shepherds.

The moment continues, but they lose track of time, their frail human minds racing to grasp the immensity of the moment, what they have seen and heard. Later, they would talk and talk...you wouldn't be able to shut them up as they recollected their thoughts and pieced together the angels announcement. But in this holy moment, one word from the angels rings in their ears, "Unto you is born a savior, which is Christ the Lord."

Quietly, almost before he realizes he has done it, one of the shepherds speaks a single word: "Soter" – "Savior." Joseph's head snaps toward Mary. "What did he say? Savior?" Mary had previously sworn that nothing could ever amaze her again, but she meets Joseph's gaze with her mouth agape. They're shepherds. We've never laid eyes on them before. How could they know?

Joseph quickly remembers the angel's words to him, "...he will save his people from their sins." Mary had been told, "You will call his name Yeshua." The name that means "Jehovah saves."

In response to the first shepherd, the second mouths a word...but no sound escapes. Joseph kneels beside the manger. "What? What did you say?"

"Christos," the shepherd replies. "Christ." Thanks to the influence of Alexander the Great, the Jews of Jesus' day don't speak Hebrew as their ancestors did. "Christos" is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew "mashaich" – messiah. The anointed One. The One we have waited for for generations has arrived.

A third shepherd completes the triplet from the angel's song with a single word: "Kurios," – "the Lord." Those who question the doctrine of the deity of Christ need to be taught by this lowly shepherd who assigns the name of God to the baby in the manger. Every Israelite since the time of Moses learned the prayer called "Hear!" "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One." The angels had sung to the shepherds, "Unto you is born soter, christos, kurios." A savior, the Messiah, God, the only Lord."

Now Mary and Joseph are speechless. The baby, God who once spoke worlds into being, now limits himself and is not yet able to speak. Later, he will speak and his words are fit for lowly shepherds and all who would gaze in wonder at his birth:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

The angels are speaking to us today, “Unto you is born a savior who is Christ the Lord.” In a very real way, we are among the unexpected guests at the manger this morning, and perhaps we need say nothing more than was said by the shepherds 2000 years ago.

Have you called Jesus “Soter” – “Savior”? Have you come to realize that don’t have all the answers, can’t fix all the problems, can’t overcome sin on your own and you need a Savior? He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world and he is here to be your Savior today.

Have you called Jesus “Christos” – “Christ”? Is Jesus a great teacher, a moral leader, a revolutionary, a martyr, or is he the one anointed by God, ordained from before creation to redeem lost humanity and reconcile us back to God?

Have you called Jesus “Kurios” – “the Lord”? After Christ’s resurrection, doubting Thomas was finally convinced of Jesus’ victory over death and in humbled amazement he echoed the shepherd’s pronouncement, “My kurios and my theos!” – “My Lord and my God!” In response, Jesus said, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”

This can be the most blessed Christmas you have ever known if you will pray and receive this Christ as your Savior and your Lord.