

“Hark, the Herald Angels Sing”

// Luke 2:11–18

Well... Merry Christmas.

Last year at DPAC I got up on stage here shortly after “Silent Night.” The mood after that song was all solemn and reverent...

This year is a little different transition... The little drummer boy... (Do you ever wonder, btw, **how those 2 Christmas Carols** relate?)

- *Silent night* and *The Little Drummer Boy*?
- *All his calm, all is bright...*
- ...**until the little drummer boy shows up** to do his drum solo...
- And do newborn infants **even like drum solos**? I’m not sure it would have worked **for my kids...**)

You know, I feel like *a number* of Christmas Carols don’t make a lot of sense. A couple of weeks ago **I was at a party** where we sang, “We Wish You a Merry Christmas” and we did that verse you hardly ever do (I think it is the 3rd), “Now bring us some figgy pudding...” and then the next verse, “We won’t leave until we get some...” First, if your friends really want figgy pudding at Christmastime, they have bad taste; second, if they say they **WON’T** leave until they get some, they have bad manners. And you probably just need some new friends. **THAT’S JUST MY OPINION.**

My role this evening is basically to take a few minutes and set up the next CAROL we’re going to sing together: ***Hark the Herald Angels Sing...***

- (Technically, **this is the last installment** of a short series on Christmas Carols in which we’ve looked at the **text of some** of these **incredibly rich**, but overly-familiar songs.)

“**Hark**” is a pretty old word. We don’t use it much anymore; it just means, “listen.”

- The writer of this carol is telling us to **pay attention** to something that he’s afraid we’ll miss.

He puts his message in the mouth of a shepherd. *The shepherds were the **only ones to actually see** the angels, and there are some things about what they saw that evening that they want to make sure we see.*

This shepherd who sings this Carol seems pretty overwhelmed by 3 things, which give you the secret to understanding the true meaning of Christmas:

First, he’s amazed that the angels chose to appear to *him*.

I explained to our church a couple of weeks ago that the **shepherds had to be the least likely people on earth** to receive an angelic announcement about the birth of a King.

- Shepherds occupied the **lowest class** in Jewish society.
- They were the **ultimate unskilled laborers**; shepherding was a job you gave to kids.
- If as an adult you were still a shepherd, that was a **total life fail**.
- Their **testimony was not even received** in court.

And here’s ***why the angels’ appearing to the shepherds*** is so important for us:

*Because while Christmastime is joyful for a lot of people—all calm and bright—for others it reminds them of **how disappointed** they are in life.*

- It makes some feel **really alone**:
 - *Everybody else seems to go home to their real friends, and you stay alone*

- Or maybe it reminds you of **someone who used to be in your life** that is not anymore—a father, a husband, a child, a friend or girlfriend
- Or maybe you **forget how broken and dysfunctional your family is** until Christmas comes around.
 - For some of you, your whole goal over the next few days is for the police not to get called.
 - I heard one guy say that happiness is having a large, close-knit family... who all live in another city.
- Maybe this Christmas finds you **jobless and worried** about the future; **concerned with your kids** or your marriage or lack of marriage prospects
- Maybe you are in **trouble with the law...**

These shepherds came into the 1st Christmas **not feeling like** their lives were awesome, either. **Maybe you are in the same place.**

You are the ones to whom the angels most want to give their message.

Hark.

Second, this shepherd must have been amazed at all the celebration going on over the birth of a baby.

- The angels proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest,” **which means**, “God deserves the GREATEST praise for the birth of this baby.”
- The GREATEST praise... Which is **pretty remarkable** when you think about **what else** these angels had seen!
 - They had been **firsthand witness** of creation, where God spoke a word, “Let there be light” millions of galaxies.
- Astronomers tell us there are a total of about **3 million trillion stars**.
 - That’s a “3” with 24 0’s after it...
- And after a while, numbers like that start to **escape us...** million, billion, trillion... **it all sounds the same.**

- **See if this helps:**
 - One **million** seconds ago was Sunday, Dec 12. About a week and 4 days ago.
 - A **billion** seconds ago would be **April 15, 1984**. In 1984 the very first CD player was introduced on the market, and the Jedi had returned for the 1st time.¹
 - **How many of y’all in this room** aren’t even a billion seconds old yet?
 - A **trillion** seconds ago was 31,688 years ago:
 - a million seconds: about 11 days
 - a trillion – 32,000 years
 - The universe, scientists tell us there are 3 *million trillion* stars.
 - **The sun, which is just one of those 3 million trillion stars**, and it’s not even a very big one, puts out the same amount of energy as a **trillion** mega-ton bombs.
 - **That’s enough energy to run our entire civilization for 500,000 years.** Every second.

These angels had seen all that... but that’s **not what they thought gave God glory** in the highest.

- *THEY SAID: Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, Hail th’ in-car-nate Deity!*
Pleased as man with men to dwell, Jesus, our Immanuel.

The **greatest glory that God displayed was his decision to come and die** for sinners... to come and live among them and take their place...

WHY WOULD GOD DO THIS, THEY THOUGHT?

- If you have been paying attention to the news... the case of Bo Bergdahl... the discussion is whether he was a deserter; unbecoming conduct in front of the enemy; some even say a traitor... I heard one guy say, “*What if these 5 Al Qaeda fighters go*

¹ 1 billion seconds = 31.69 years

back and kill Americans... that means we've traded the lives of good Americans for this deserter...?"

- **I am not in a place to know** the truth about Bo Bergdahl... but what I know for sure is that God knew that we were traitors, and he **traded not the lives** of 5 terrorists to get us back, but the life of his most precious Son.
- **1 Peter** says that the angels are amazed by the gospel and “long to look more deeply into” these things.
 - **Think about that:** the angels who saw God create the universe and see his face every single day, long to look more deeply into the wonder of the gospel.

They say: *Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace! Hail the Sun of righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, ris'n with healing in his wings.*

- The **angels had seen God's power to create, with a word, 3 million trillion stars**, each putting out the power of a trillion mega-ton bombs every second, but they were **more amazed at the mercy** Jesus showed to rebellious sinners and his power to heal them.
- **GREATER** than the power that pours out from our sun is God's power to put your life back together after sin has messed it up

Mild he lays his glory by, born that man no more may die, born to raise the sons of earth, born to give them second birth!

The gospel is that you and I were doomed, and Jesus came to save us.

- You see, underneath all your religious, good, moral make-up we're really just rebellious sinners...
 - That may **sound harsh**, but look into your heart—Deep down, haven't we all assumed that we knew best how to run our lives, better than God?
 - Haven't we preferred to make ourselves the focus and center of our lives... thought that our will ought to trump God's?

- **THAT'S MORAL INSANITY**, and **COSMIC TREASON**, and the **penalty for that cosmic treason** is death.

I know it's popular today to see ourselves as basically good people with blind spots, or weaknesses... or misunderstood people with hidden potential.

- But that's **not what the Bible says** about us... It says that we are traitors to God, under the rightful curse of death.

And **there are ONLY two ways that curse can be resolved:** we suffer it eternally ourselves (which means we are separated from God forever in a place called hell); or Jesus, in his love, absorbs it in our place.

- That was the **CROSS: Jesus dying—absorbing the curse**—in my place.

The Creator, **dying in the place of the created**, and the angels **can't understand** it:

Mild, he lays his glory by, born that men no more may die...

I know it is popular today to say that whatever way you want to follow God is ok; God is like a mountain, many roads going up but all headed to the same place...

- **But that's not what the Bible says.** It says, “Salvation is found in no one else; there's only one name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved.”
 - Jesus said, “**I am the way, the truth and the life.** No one comes to the father, but by me.”
- **You see, every other religion teaches** you that you can save yourself. If you are good enough, do enough religious observances, you'll be saved.
 - **But Jesus taught we couldn't** save ourselves, so he did, if we'll receive him...
- **And that's not the same message...**

- **I see it like this...** If I can't swim, and you are on the boat deck and you have a lifesaver and an anvil... and you say, "Which one you want?" And I say, "it doesn't matter which one you throw me, just throw me one now..." **That's crazy!** It makes a big difference!
- **Religion says,** "Try harder; be better." Jesus' message is, "*I did it for you. I did what you could never do. Receive it as a gift.*"

So the shepherds say, "Hark! This is your lifesaver!"

Lastly... This shepherd was probably amazed that he was the one chosen to announce this to others.

And we're amazed by that, too.

Think about this... The only ones who got to see the angels that night were the shepherds.

- **Everybody else** had to hear about this announcement from, well... the shepherds.
- *The shepherds got glory and songs and angels and everyone else got smelly, barely literate shepherds.*

And honestly, that may disappoint us... **Most of us would probably prefer** the angels...

But this is a **very important thing you need to learn about God:** Throughout Scripture, God's PRIMARY way of speaking to people is through broken and flawed instruments: through **shepherds.**

You see, the first time most people hear the gospel message is from someone they know... a family member or a friend. And you know their flaws.

- And you wonder, "**How could God be speaking** to me from my OLDER brother?" *Do you know how he **terrorized me?***

- Or maybe you heard about all this for the first time from that annoying neighbor seated right beside by you right now. And all you can think is, "Their kids are totally out of control... How are they supposed to know the mysteries of eternity?"
- (AT LEAST WHAT MY NEIBHBORS WHO ARE HERE ARE PROBABLY SAYING...)

LISTEN: Just because the messenger is flawed does not mean the message is flawed. God chooses as his **primary mouthpieces** shepherds.

- That's how it was at the 1st Christmas, and that's how it is today.
- **Famous OT story...** The prophet Balaam was about the do something God didn't want him to do. And so he sent an angel to stand in his path, but Balaam couldn't see the angel, only the donkey could. And so the donkey refused to go forward. So Balaam started to beat the donkey. And then God opened the mouth of the donkey, and the donkey said, "Look, Jack, you best stop hitting me."
- And the point is... **God spoke through a donkey...** KJV of course says "an ass."
- And the point is, if God spoke through a donkey, he can speak through your annoying neighbor.
- **Or let me say it like this: And I'll use KJ English: Just because the messenger is an ass doesn't mean the message isn't the truth.**² AND YOU CAN ONLY USE THAT WORD WHEN YOU'RE QUOTING THE KJV, SO KHARIS AND ALLIE AND RYAH, YOU CAN'T USE THAT WORD ABOUT YOUR FRIENDS.

So the message to you from the shepherds, and from me, and from the person who invited you tonight, is this: ***HARK—Listen! God has been pursuing you, speaking to you, trying to wake you up and draw you back to himself...***

² This line, and general sense of the larger point, come from Tim Keller in a sermon on Luke 2 given at Redeemer Presbyterian.

Would you stop for a moment...and listen?

- *Would you let the rush and stress of the Christmas season fade away for just a second...and **listen**?*
- *Would you put aside for a minute all of your objections...and listen?*
- *THE ANGELS are not telling you to try harder, or to be better. They are not telling you that you're not good enough.*
- *GOD IS telling you can **never be good enough** but **he loves you**; so much that he left heaven for you and did the work of saving you.*
- *There's nothing you **need to do**. Nothing you **can do**.*

*Nothing, **but LISTEN** to his voice and receive the gift.*

Are you ready to harken—to listen—to his voice?

PRAYER OF SALVATION

TRANSITION: Well, Summit Church, what did the shepherds do when they heard the angels? Luke 2 says **they worshiped**.

- So (as our music team comes back to the stage), I can't think of a more fitting way to respond this Christmas than to stand and sing this carol.
- *With all our hearts let's give glory to the newborn king!*

