

The Birth Announcement
Luke 2:1-20

One of the many decisions parents choose to make as they anticipate the birth of a baby in today's world is how they want to share that news with family and friends. Today many couples have already had a great gender reveal event and many close family members and friends are sitting on ready to appear when the news of the actual birth is shared. Some will be at the hospital to greet the baby as soon as it arrives - often with the proud father being the first to bring the news of the birth. But many others will be waiting in other places for the news by phone, text, Facebook or Twitter. And then there are others who eagerly await the official birth announcement by email or snail mail. You know, the official notice sent to friends and family by the parents of a baby that typically features a newborn photo and essential birth announcement information, including name, date of birth, weight, length, time and place where the baby was born and of course the proud parents' names.

In the days when Jesus was born such things as printed announcement cards did not exist. Communication was much slower and depended on people to share the news. Word would have slowly trickled out to family and friends one person at a time as they ran into one another. For Mary and Joseph the whole announcement thing was complicated by the fact they were not in Nazareth where they lived and most of their family was but in Bethlehem thanks to the decree from Emperor Augustus. But there was a birth announcement - and what an announcement! Nothing like it has been seen since that day. It was a one of a kind announcement and it came to some pretty unusual folks in an unexpected place.

Friends, we have heard this story so many times that we might have missed how powerful and

unique this announcement was. In the region around Bethlehem there were shepherds out in the fields. It was their job, their way of life to watch over the flocks day and night. They were used to being away from family and friends for lengths of time. Shepherding was a time honored tradition - after all King David had been a young shepherd boy at one time as had Joseph and all the sons of Jacob. The shepherds were used to living on the land among their sheep. They loved and cared for the sheep just as many people love and care for dogs and cats or other animals today. Each sheep mattered and they kept a close eye on each of them.

Shepherds enjoyed the quiet of the night as the flocks rested and rested themselves under the beauty of the night sky with stars shining brightly. A beauty we so often miss today because of our abundance of light. But any who have ever camped out in the open know the beauty the shepherds witnessed every night in the fields. And the peace and serenity found in the open air.

The shepherds were simple folks. They didn't need a lot of things. They lived off the land with their clothes on their backs. They cared for their flocks because their lives literally depended on them. And yet it was these simple folks who lived away from the hustle and bustle of village life that God chose to announce this special birth to. God didn't make the announcement to kings or to the High Priest or the faithful gathered for worship in the Temple but to simple shepherds out in a field. God has a way of catching our attention by how different God does things than we imagine God would do them. That is what keeps us on our toes and reminds us to always be open to what God might do in our lives! For when God does choose to reveal powerfully good news God does it in dramatic fashion!

Just as the angel Gabriel had appeared to Zechariah, and Mary, and Joseph here in the open field an angel of the Lord appeared to the shepherds. But this time the *glory of the Lord shone around*

them. This angel lit up the sky. Nothing subtle about this appearance! Imagine a spotlight suddenly coming on in the dark of night and a voice speaking out of the light. No wonder the shepherds were terrified! They were probably temporarily blinded by the light. But then the announcement came and oh how amazing it was!

First a word of calm - *do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people* - wow! Okay this is good news not someone come to rustle their sheep. Good news that will affect all the people - not just news for them but for the whole world! This was big news! News not just for the shepherds in that field that night but news for us over two thousand years later - news for all people, in all places, in all times. So listen carefully to the birth announcement -

“to you is born this day in the city of David

a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you;

you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” A baby has been born. But the shepherds were not told his name or his height or his weight. Those were not the important things about this birth! But they were told where his birth took place - in the city of David - in Bethlehem, David’s hometown. Maybe the shepherds hometown too - we don’t know. And they were told something else - something that set this child apart from all other children - that made this birth announcement so special that we come more than two thousand years later to hear the announcement again this night - the child born is *the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord* - the long awaited Messiah. And they were told where they would find him - *in a manger wrapped in bands of cloth* - swaddled as babies always are after birth to keep them warm. There were no pictures taken to pass around. No, to see this child they would have to go to Bethlehem to see the child with their own eyes.

But they were told they would find him lying in a manger.

The angel's birth announcement was punctuated when with the angel there appeared a multitude of heavenly hosts of singing angels praising God with these words:

*Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!*

Glory to God! Words of gratitude and praise to the giver of life who reigns in heaven and brings peace to earth!

And just as suddenly as the angels had appeared they disappeared leaving the shepherds alone in the dark. Can't you imagine the conversation among the shepherds as they remembered the angel's words? In the end they felt compelled to go to Bethlehem to see this thing that had taken place for they wanted - no needed to see this child with their own eyes. They needed confirmation that what the angel had proclaimed had indeed happened. And so they went quickly to Bethlehem and found Mary and Joseph and there with them was the child lying in a manger. We imagine them kneeling at the manger looking with awe at the face of this child. Maybe Mary offered to let one of them hold the child as Mother's so often do. We imagine the wonder and love in their eyes as they shared with Mary and Joseph what the angel had told them - this child was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

Scripture tells us that Mary *treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart* no doubt remembering her own encounter with the angel Gabriel who had told her that she would conceive and bear a son, and that his name should be Jesus. And that had happened and her child was now born. Gabriel had also said her child would be great, and would be called the Son of the Most High, and he would reign over the house of Jacob forever. And here were shepherds who came to share similar words - could it be true? Was her son the Savior, the Messiah, one she would one day call the Lord?

On this night over two thousand years later we too ponder these words for we know the rest of the story - the story of his life, his ministry, his death and his resurrection. And yet it is the shepherd's witness - their actions after they had seen the child before the child's life story is played out that gives us pause and reminds us this night of our calling as children of God. Scripture tells us the shepherds left the manger and returned to the fields - to their work and their life - praising God and telling all who would listen the good news that had been revealed to them! May we too share the amazing news of the birth of our Savior with others. For Jesus is the light of the world - the light that shines in the darkness and offers us peace. He is the *Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace*. That is the good news that has come into the world again this night and we, my friends, are God's messengers the ones who are to share the birth announcement with the world.

It is up to us to tell the story over and over again bringing the good news of great joy that Christ our Savior is born!