

Advent Study series 2020

Session 4

**Angels encounter Shepherds and Shepherds encounter the Holy family –
God reveals**

Luke 2:8 – 20



We remain in Bethlehem for the last of our series of Encounters, this session joining the shepherds on the hillside where they are met by an angel and then following them to their encounter with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus.

Read Luke 2:8-20

So what did you make of the story? What stuck out for you? Any immediate comments?

Here we read of another group of visitors to Bethlehem, a group in total contrast to Matthew's Wise Men. And as we only find the latter in one gospel, only Luke includes the visit of the shepherds in his nativity narrative. Unlike the suggestion that Matthew may have created the account of the visit of the Magi to serve an important purpose at the beginning of his gospel, there is no hint from historical records or tradition that Luke invented the shepherds. But as did the Magi for Matthew, so the shepherds serve a key purpose for Luke at the beginning of *his* gospel.

What do we know of Luke's concerns / the themes that run through his gospel?

Gold star if you thought / said anything long the lines of *concern for the poor, the marginalised, the outcasts, the lowest levels of society, women...*

So how might this passage set part of the agenda for Luke's gospel?

Shepherds in scripture

You only need a nodding acquaintance with the Old Testament to see that shepherds run through it, as it were, almost from beginning to end.

Just for fun, how many shepherd stories or references can you think of in one minute?

Shepherding was a very important part of Hebrew life, sheep (usually kept in a flock with goats) being valuable for their wool and meat. Sheep and shepherds would have been as common a sight to people of Old and New Testament times as something like cars are to us today. Everyone would have understood the potentially dangerous job of a shepherd – constant watching over the animals; leading them to food and water by day; keeping watch over the flock at night - even sleeping across the entrance to the open fold to protect the sheep from predators.

So it's no surprise that shepherds appear so often in scripture.

Shepherds get a special mention in Jeremiah (25:34ff), Israel's false shepherds are contrasted with God the true shepherd by Ezekiel (chapter 34) and again in Zechariah chapter 11.

Later, when Jesus uses the image of a shepherd to explain his relationship to his disciples, calling himself the Good Shepherd (John 10,) he is echoing the numerous references to God as the Shepherd of Israel that we find, especially in the books of the prophets and the psalms (Look at the opening verse of Psalm 80).

Whether they made this connection immediately or not, people would have understood "one who lays down his life for his sheep". They may even have called to mind the beautiful image of the caring shepherd from Isaiah 40:10-11, or the poem we know as the 23rd Psalm.

Who would Jesus' reference to "shepherd" have also brought to mind?

Why would Jesus (and Luke!) want people to make this connection?

So shepherds were a big deal in C1st Palestine life and in Jewish scriptures. Perhaps not surprising then to read of shepherds among the first to visit the Bethlehem baby.

Luke's Shepherds

The fact that they are nameless is not an encouraging start to answering the question 'what do we know about these shepherds?!' We meet them at night, after a typical working day, wandering over the stony hillsides, checking all is well with their flock of sheep. And we leave them returning to the same sheep on the same hillsides sometime later. They are an important part of God's plan, but it is not the men themselves but what happens to them between these times that Luke wants us to focus on.

So let's travel to the hillside – coats on, it will be cold – for the encounter between the angel and the shepherds.

It really hasn't stopped since Gabriel was sent to Mary. Heaven has been buzzing, with choir practices and angels sent here, there and everywhere at God's bidding. Now it's my turn and I'm off, with a message from God to some random smelly shepherds. Gabriel got Mary, whatshisname got Joseph and I get ...shepherds. But it's all part of God's big plan so here I am, looking down on them round their fire. Must remember how frightening we seem to mortals and tell them not to be afraid....

We'd just stoked the fire and were arguing about who would keep the first watch – there were animals around, hungry for our sheep – when, out of nowhere, light! Amazing, blazing, blinding light... all around us. And.. a figure. It was terrifying, even though the figure told us not to be afraid. And then the figure told us – well, you know what was said.

We were standing, mouths open, listening, trying to take it in, when from the light, in the light, through the blaze, we heard voices ... voices ... more voices...Glory! Peace! The words bounced from hill to hill all around us, holding us up...

How long did this go on? I don't know but when the voices became whispers and the light faded, we were of one mind. We needed to go to find this baby.

'a Saviour, Lord, Messiah...'

What is the significance of these titles for the baby ?

(It might help to remember that the same first readers would have connected these titles immediately with the Roman Emperor, whose power and authority would have conferred on him almost divine status in the eyes of his citizens, who looked to him for peace...)

'A baby wrapped in cloth, lying in a manger...'

From the beginning God shows us that Jesus will not be Messiah the Jews expect.

What are your expectations of God this Advent?
Has God acted as you would have expected in 2020?

And back with the shepherds...

*So we went into the town. Usually it's quiet but there were so many visitors because of the census, people meeting up with relatives they haven't seen for years, we could hear the sound of voices and laughter despite the hour. We found someone to ask about a newborn and went to the house they pointed out (See below * a note about the "inn")*

We peered into the place, expecting to see animals with the baby but instead, next to the manger, there was a young girl, clearly the mother, with an older man beside her. What the angel said was true! We stood, in awe. Looking. I tried to take in what we were seeing ... but the thought that THIS BABY was our Saviour, Our Lord, Messiah...I haven't got the words. I don't even really know how I felt...

The baby's mother didn't seem that surprised to see us but by way of explanation we told them what had happened. She looked thoughtful but she smiled at us as we left. We needed to go back to the sheep but first we had to tell the householders what had happened under their roof that night.

Luke tells us that the shepherds "made known what had been told them about this child and all who heard it were amazed" (v 17 - 18).

Linking the 'making known' to the phrase 'all who heard it' (in one sentence in most translations) may convey the impression of the shepherds taking their story to the people of the town and beyond. But read these verses again, imagining a paragraph break between verses 17 & 18.

Can you think of a reason why Mary and Joseph needed to hear the shepherds' story?

This narrative about the shepherds and the angels, the shepherds and the Holy family is a narrative of revelation. God's plan, that began to be revealed when Gabriel encountered Mary, has reached fruition. Through the nine months of steady revelation – to Joseph, to the Wise Men, to Herod, and now to the shepherds and from them to the world, this baby is now revealed as the one sent from God, the visible and tangible completion of God's plan.

Jesus: Saviour, Lord, Messiah, has been born and is revealed for the world to see.

Is God's revelation in Jesus clear to you this Advent? Do you have the clarity to reveal Jesus to others? If not, what might you do?

'Shepherds and sheep were as common a sight [then] as cars are today...'

However we understand scripture as "God inspired/ Spirit breathed" the words we

read in the Bible were written by human beings, using images and illustrations from their own time.

What would you use alongside the shepherd / sheep imagery to explain Jesus is the Good Shepherd to people who might not connect with country matters?

Encounters are a part of life but however many we have in the course of our lifetime, the ones that matter are our encounters with God. Reflect on your Godly encounters. Are they all you want them to be? Are they all God wants them to be?!

And finally, spend some time in worship.

Perhaps using a piece of music ... focussing on a piece of art ... or going for a walk ... however you are moved to do so, spend some time with God in reverence and adoration.

Remembering that as people to whom Jesus has been revealed, we need to pass on this revelation. Ask God to show you (or remind you) of those who you know who need to encounter God and who need this revelation now.

And lastly, **Rejoice! Emmanuel has come! God is with us! Hallelujah!**

*** A note about “the inn”...**

However we might picture this, there were no such places in C1st Palestine! But “Inn” is the word early translators gave us... and this word has stuck. So banish all thoughts of the Rovers Return or a thatched country hostelry (or a biblical equivalent) and take a better translation, “Guest accommodation”.

Not only did inns as we might imagine them not exist, it would have been TOTALLY UNTHINKABLE that no-one took Mary and Joseph in.

In that culture, at that time, hospitality was foundational, fundamental, central to Jewish life, particularly for family members(Luke 2:4) and however much of a squash, room would be made for any and every visitor who needed shelter. And if the guest accommodation was already full, (remember the census and visitors), the next best place for visitors to stay would have been somewhere warm and sheltered...So where better than in the part of the house where the animals resided, with the feeding trough making a perfectly acceptable crib?