

FIVE FORKS BRETHREN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: Luke 2:7-20; Psalm 13

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SUBJECT: Shepherds and Joy

Series: Through the Eyes of the Shepherds

THEME: God and the Meek and Lowly

SERMON: "The View from the Edge"

Introduction

Have you ever been to **professional sporting event**? Many of you have, I know. **Where** do you usually sit? Way up in the **nose bleed** section, where you need **binoculars** just to tell which team is yours? Or down a little **closer** to the players, where you can **talk to them** when they throw the ball in? You know, the really **good, pricey seats**, right next to the **owner** of the team, almost like you are **part of** the team?

Several years ago a very **generous friend** of mine gave me 4 tickets to a professional **soccer game**. It just so happened to be a game between my **favorite** soccer team since childhood, **Manchester United**, and a team that had several of the **currently best players** in the world. I **couldn't believe** my luck. Then we got to the stadium to **find our seats**.

We **followed the signs** and got closer and closer and closer to the field. Then we found our seats. They were in the **first row** of the stadium. We could almost reach out and **shake hands** with some of the best soccer players in the world. Talk about a **dream come true**.

I haven't always been that **fortunate**. On one of our **missionary furloughs** from Zambia, I had the opportunity to watch a **professional basketball** game, which was held in a **football stadium**. On missionary salary you don't purchase courtside seats. We bought the **cheap seats**. Our seats were so far away from the court, we were in a **different zip code** from the players. I'm still not sure who was playing that night.

Well, today, we are in the **third** week of our advent series, **"Through the Eyes Of..."** and we meet some people whose view of advent began as **"A View from the Edge,"** the

cheap seats, literally from the **outskirts**. Today we see through the eyes of the **shepherds**.

Kevin Geis – monologue

Shepherd's Monologue

What a night! It started out like every other night for us. The sheep were corralled and safe so we sat around the fire telling stories. Some of the stories we had heard often. Stories about the past. Stories about God and the great things God did, helping our ancestors escape from Egypt and then feeding them with mana from heaven. There were stories about God speaking to people through angels. We told the stories of the great kings and the prophets, like Moses and David. Oh, we love to tell those stories as we sit around the fire.

But those are stories from so long ago. They sounded like fairytales. God hasn't rescued us from the Romans. God doesn't speak anymore, at least he hasn't. Do angels really appear and speak to kings and prophets? I didn't think so.

Well, I settled down for a nap because it was Ruben's turn to keep watch over the sheep. I had just shut my eyes when suddenly it seemed like someone turned the sun back on. It was the brightest light I've ever seen, shining right in my eyes. I jumped to my feet, instinctively moving between the light and the sheep, but at same time trying to refocus my sleepy eyes. Ruben and the others did the same thing. We were terrified. "What in the world...?"

We could barely make out some figure in the center of the light, and then a calming gentle voice spoke:

"Don't be afraid I've got some really good news for you. A baby's been born. He's the Messiah. The Lord. The one you've heard about and are waiting for. Yes, that Messiah."

Suddenly we realized we must be seeing an angel this must be a message from God. "But to us? Ordinary shepherds, out at the edge of town, minding their own business. God doesn't speak to people like us."

The angel kept speaking. "Go to the feed trough in town. There you'll see a little baby, wrapped up in simple cloth, laying in the feed trough. That's him, the Messiah"

All at once there was this whole choir of angels and boy could they sing. They sang about God, about peace for everyone, about joy. Wow, the harmony was amazing.

Almost as quickly, they disappeared. The night was dark and still. But we were far from calm.

We looked at each other. “Did that really just happen? Or are we all in the same dream together?” Ruben said, “Let’s run into town and see if it’s true.”

We ran, practically tripping over each other to get there first. (pause)

There he was. The sweetest little, cuddly, baby, all wrapped up. His mom and dad were sitting there to. Just gazing lovingly into his little face.

At first we just stared, we couldn’t say anything. Then his mom said something I couldn’t believe I was hearing. She said, “Do you want to hold him?”

“What, me, in my smelly shepherd cloak? What, each of us? You mean we can hold him?”

“Sure,” she replied, “Here,” and she reached into the trough, picked up her little baby and handed him to me.

I can’t describe what it felt like to hold that little guy. First I just held him and swayed back and forth. I slowly shook my head with disbelief. His eyes were open and it seemed like he was looking right back at me.

All of a sudden it hit me! I was gazing into the face of Messiah. Me, a common Shepherd, face-to-face with the Lord. Sounds impossible, I know. But there I was holding the Messiah. (pause)

We each had a chance and a special moment with the baby. Words can’t describe what it was like. You’ll have to experience that for yourself.

I don’t know how long we were there. It seemed like a moment and yet an eternity all at

the same time. Face to face with God. Indescribable. Surreal.

Ruben snapped back to reality first. Because he said, “Hey, the sheep. They’re out there all alone. We have to get back and protect the sheep!” Much as we hated to go, we knew we had to get back to work. So we said goodbye to the little guy, and his parents, and left.

But on the way back out to the field, I think we woke up almost the whole village. It seemed like we knocked on every door. We were excited. We were noisy. Everyone talking at once. But we couldn’t help ourselves. We held the Messiah. We were face-to-face with the Lord. And we had to tell someone so we told everyone

What a night!

Thanks, Kevin.

Gospel writer Luke, tells it this way. Turn to **Chapter 2** in the Gospel of Luke. **Vs 7**.

Luke’s Account of Advent

[Luke 2:7-20](#)

⁷ Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them.

⁸ That night there were shepherds staying in the fields nearby, guarding their flocks of sheep.

These are just:

Ordinary shepherds

We are **introduced** to the shepherds in the most **ordinary** way. It was common for there to be shepherds on the **outskirts** of town, in the **fields**, watching the flocks of sheep. Some suggest the shepherds in this area may have typically **raised lambs** for people to purchase for their **sacrifices** in Jerusalem, just 5 miles away.

It was common for the shepherds to **gather the flocks** together at night and then take turns **watching** out for predators or wondering sheep. They were just doing what shepherds did.

As one author put it: there were **no more “normal Joes”** in ancient culture than shepherds. Why is this significant? Because it reinforces an important **characteristic** of God.

As God **enters** the human race, and **announces** the birth of the Savior of the world, it is done in the most **humble manner**, to the ordinary, lowly people of society. God is **not** so **impressed** with greatness and fame and status. God is impressed with the humble, the lowly, the ordinary.

But let us not think there is going to be an **ordinary announcement**, like at dinner each evening, “Hey, supper is ready.” Not that kind of ordinary announcement. The recipients, the shepherds, are **ordinary people**, but they receive:

No Ordinary Message – They receive **Divine Revelation**. The shepherds are ordinary people but this is a **message from God**. This is made clear by the sudden appearance of angels.

⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared among them, and the radiance of the Lord’s glory surrounded them. They were terrified, ¹⁰ but the angel reassured them. “Don’t be afraid!” he said. “I bring you good news that will bring great joy to all people. ¹¹ The Savior—yes, the Messiah, the Lord—has been born today in Bethlehem, the city of David! ¹² And you will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger.”

¹³ Suddenly, the angel was joined by a vast host of others—the armies of heaven—praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in highest heaven, and peace on earth to those with whom God is pleased.”

Advent through the eyes of the shepherds, was a **divine announcement**. This was a **word from God**. God had seemed silent for hundreds of years. Oh, I am sure the shepherds knew the **prophecies** and the **promises** of a **Messiah** coming someday. I am sure the shepherds were longing for a **great king** who would rescue them from the iron hand of Rome.

But they never expected something like this. The appearance of the angel terrified them. Many accounts in scripture, of angels appearing, were accompanied by initial terror or

fear on the part of the recipients. Angels were an indication that it was **God speaking**.

Also as usual, the first part of God's message is, "**Don't be afraid.**" This is also important to remember as we consider how **God typically interacts** with people. God does not want our relationship with God to be one **based mainly on fear**. Fear of God's power to **crush or punish**. Rather, God comes to us typically in a manner that promotes **love and trust** in someone who is **on our side**.

In fact the angel immediately gives the reason for the shepherds not to be afraid.

"I am bringing you good news that will bring great joy."

Through the eyes of the shepherds, Advent is about

Good News - Good news of an event that signals **great joy is on the horizon**.

It is interesting that Luke's way of presenting this **announcement** would likely have been familiar to his readers. There are significant **parallels** between the angel's announcement of Jesus' birth and the announcement of the birth of **Caesar Augustus** – the Roman Emperor. The birth of the Roman Emperor was announced as "**Good News of a coming Savior.**" Turned out not to be such good news for the Jews who desperately wanted liberty and self-rule. The announcement of the Emperor's birth was broadcast **far and wide** – across the whole Roman world.

What a contrast to the way God does things. The announcement of Jesus' birth, the True Savior of the whole world was just to some lowly, ordinary shepherds. **What was God thinking?**

Max Lucado comments on why God chose shepherds.

Had the angel gone to theologians, they would have first consulted their commentaries. Had he gone to the elite, they would have looked around to see if anyone was watching. Had he gone to the successful, they would have first looked at their calendars. [Had he gone to the politicians, they would have tried to figure out how to spin it to their advantage]

So he went to shepherds—Men who didn't have a reputation to protect or an ax to grind or a ladder to climb. Men who didn't know enough to tell God that angels don't sing to sheep and that messiahs aren't found wrapped in rags and sleeping in a feed trough.

So God announces the good news to ordinary people. But this good news is confirmed with an:

Extraordinary Sign

Remember how God confirmed his promise to **Noah** with the 'sign' of a **rainbow**. When God tells people something extraordinary, and knows they may have **trouble believing** what God said, God often gives some 'sign.' God gave the shepherds a sign. But even the sign was **not extravagant**. It was a simple, humble sign. A sign shepherds could readily relate to and find. The angel said:

"You will recognize him by this sign: You will find a baby wrapped snugly in strips of cloth, lying in a manger." Or what we would call a feed trough. Say what?

The Savior, the Messiah, the Lord – all names assigned to this baby - and announced by the angel. These are names the shepherds would have associated with greatness, power, grandeur, strength, royalty. This one would be **found in a feed trough!**

What a paradox. The **greatest one** will be found in the **lowliest place** – but this is so often the way **God is** and **how God works** with people.

Shepherds understood feed troughs. Perhaps they even knew where this feed trough would be found.

Alison Gerber expresses this thought so well:

Jesus, who is able to free people imprisoned by their bad decisions. Jesus, who is able to give humanity a renewed relationship with their creator God. Jesus, who is able to transform individual lives and whole communities for good. Jesus, who is able to break the power of death and offer the gift of eternal life.

Jesus, the king of glory, the Son of God, might as well have been zipped up in a used backpack, because when his family gets to Bethlehem, this teensy tiny town, not big enough for a hotel, the guest lodging is full, and they have to sleep among the animals.

And when Jesus is born, his momma puts him in a feeding trough. That's a crazy place to put him, isn't it? A crazy place to put the Son of God, a crazy place to put the hope of the entire world.

Do you ever think about why? Why did the angels tell common shepherds? Why did they direct the shepherds to a common stable? Why did God put himself in the form of a little baby laying in an animal feed trough? Why? Gerber answers her own question.

Here, among the animals, among their sweat and dung, no one could say "That little baby is out of my reach." No one could say, "He's too good for me." No one could say, "He doesn't understand my life." Isaiah 57 tells us that God dwells "with the contrite and lowly of spirit, in order to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite."

Isaiah teaches us that while humanity might spend all of its energy building tall towers, God is the builder of a trench. When God had the chance to offer a gift of hope for the whole world, he put that hope where anyone in the world could reach him. God placed himself in a common feed trough.

Through the eyes of the shepherds, Advent is an event in which **the Savior is accessible to everyone** – no matter how low one feels about oneself. Jesus is accessible to you, today, right now. Will you respond to this good news? (Pause)

The angel assumed correctly, that the **shepherds would respond** by going to see for themselves.

¹⁵ When the angels had returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go to Bethlehem! Let's see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ They hurried to the village and found Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying

in the manger.

Through the eyes of the Shepherds, Advent is not just story you hear, and say, “Oh that’s nice.” Advent is about:

Coming face to face with God

But God comes in such a lowly, vulnerable form, that no one need fear coming close. I love to let my mind wonder what that **scene must have** been like. I know I am influenced by all the **Christmas cards** I’ve seen over the years. I also know what happens to rugged, tough, outdoor men and women, when we come face to face with a little baby – all snuggled up safely in their baby wraps.

The hard **toughness** is replaced with soft **tenderness**. The **loud** voice is replaced with **gentle** cooing. The hurried **busyness** is replaced with **calm** and slowing down.

Advent is a time when **anyone can come face to face with God** in a non-threatening way. And if you are hearing this Advent story for the first time or the 100th time, the invitation is the same. God has come among us, in a gentle, humble, non-threatening way, and **God wants to meet with you**. (Pause)

We would be remiss if we did not notice how the shepherds responded to this whole event God specifically invited them to witness.

An Advent Response

¹⁷ After seeing him, the shepherds told everyone what had happened and what the angel had said to them about this child. ¹⁸ All who heard the shepherds’ story were astonished, ²⁰ The shepherds went back to their flocks, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. It was just as the angel had told them.

Advent – the story of Jesus coming into the world is something to be talked about, commemorated and pondered over. The shepherds:

1. **Told everyone** what had happened and who this baby was.

It really was **good news** for everyone, even though the goodness of it was not realized right away by many.

2. **They** also **went back to their calling** – their jobs, being shepherds. While Advent is a time when we celebrate, it is also a time when you **continue**, faithfully doing what God has called you to do. As you participate in your ordinary jobs, your common activities, your usual routines, it is there that God often meets you and speaks to you. It is there that you fulfill God’s plan for you. It is there that you run God’s errands for him – just doing your ordinary stuff.

The shepherds also:

3. **Glorified and praised God** – not sure what that looked like. But I can imagine some giving each other **high fives**. I can imagine just **retelling over** and over again what they experienced. I can hear them saying:

“Can you believe what God did, and God let us in on it?”

“We saw the cutest little baby.” “Yea, but that is the Messiah.” We know it’s true because everything happened just like the angel said it would.”

So, **What do we learn from the view of the Shepherds on the edge of town?**

1. You can always reach Jesus

You should know that wherever you end up, it doesn’t matter how lowly you become, God has put the hope of the world in a place where you can still reach him.

When you are **tempted** to the point of going out of your mind, God has put Jesus there, you can still reach him. When you are **under such stress** that you feel you might sweat blood, God has put Jesus there, you can still reach him. When you are **grieving a grief** you feel you cannot bear, God has put Jesus there, you can still reach him. When you are completely **alone**, Jesus is there. Even when you are dying, Jesus is there. When you are in the chicken coops and cow sheds of the world, God has put the hope of the world there too.

God has put the hope of the world where anyone in the world can reach him. And that is good news.

We also learn:

2. You can always use good news.

Who hasn't wanted: to see God show up, to find some good news, to have a chance at a new beginning, or find someone to believe in? Who hasn't longed for that, at a personal level? And who hasn't looked for it in our families, communities, or our nation? Everyone can always use some good news.

Just recently one person invited some readers to describe, in just six words, some good news that made them thankful in 2020. It's a form of writing — the six-word memoir. More than 10,000 people replied. Here is a selection of some responses – I know we can relate to these: (each one only six words)

The crinkling eye above the mask – there's a smile behind the mask.

A furtive hug with a friend – I know we shouldn't hug right now, but I so badly need one.

My choir still meets on Zoom.

Teenage son still likes to snuggle.

Parents live just two blocks away.

Sunny mornings, a window facing east.

I proposed and she said yes.

My bicycle, the trail, each morning.

Hearing granny laugh on the phone.

Ambulance took him. He came home.

My parents didn't get the virus.

Reached age 92, grandson reached 3.

Wasn't too late to say sorry.

Vaccine is coming, maybe by Christmas.

Many people who still deliver food. (Includes Five Forks Church if necessary)

Advent through the eyes of the shepherds, on the edge of that little Palestinian town is all about receiving Good News. The good news of Jesus and his coming among us. If you are a follower of Jesus, plan this week to **share good news** with someone. (You can use more than six words).

It may be in a phone call, a text, a Face Time conversation, a drive by visit, sending a card in the mail.

Everyone could use some good news, and God will use ordinary people like you and me to receive it and share it.

Lastly we learn that:

3. You can Borrow Joy from the future

How can we even imagine, let alone talk about joy in the middle of a surging pandemic?

I was introduced to the concept of “Borrowing Joy from the future” just a few weeks ago as I prepared this sermon. The Covid-19 virus began a new surge among us and some of our friends were ending up in the hospital. Medical staff were becoming increasingly overwhelmed. Family celebrations and get-togethers were being cancelled. It felt like the joy of Advent was being taken away from us. Advent has to be about Joy, right? The angel announced:

“I am bringing you good news that will bring great joy to all people.”

The shepherd’s circumstances didn’t change instantly. They went back to sheep herding. But their joy came from the trust that the baby they saw, really was The Savior.

Perhaps strangely, I discovered that joy, can be found in **A Psalm of Lament**. These are **passionate expressions to God** of grief or pain over a very difficult circumstance. We find these in the bible. Let me use Psalm 13 as an example.

Psalm 13

¹ How long, LORD? Will you forget me forever?

How long will you hide your face from me?

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts

and day after day have sorrow in my heart?

How long...?

The psalmist is going through something really tough. I can imagine something like we are going through. It was beginning to overwhelm him. So he complains to God. But notice how he concludes the lament.

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.

⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me.

First we have his **Complaint**. The psalmist even protests the undesirable situation to God.

Then he has an **Expression of trust** – that is, faith in the God to whom we can bring our complaints. This expression of faith or trust turns into a:

Vow to praise – the psalmist essentially “borrows joy from the future” as he anticipates the day when God’s help **will** come.

The psalmist speaks of joy, but not in his present circumstances.

Rather, his joy comes from the confidence of what God **can and will do in the future**.

COVID-19 has brought changes to our lives. These changes have opened wounds and caused distress. As we wait and reflect on our need for God, our hearts lament – **cry out and even protest**, the pain, grief, helplessness, and uncertainty of the many problems affecting us.

I encourage you to express your laments in prayers, songs, or cries to God – **perhaps even reading some of the lament psalms out loud**, like this one. God hears our laments. Lamenting is healing.

As we all wait, reflect, and feel the anxiety and pain in our personal lives and community, we **express our trust in God**, and **vow to praise God**. As we do so, Holy Spirit begins filling our hearts with joy, because Jesus, the Savior is born in Bethlehem, and he is easily accessible to each and every one of us.

Prayer for Joy (over)

Jesus, thank You for becoming Immanuel, “God with us.” It’s because of You that we can experience true joy.

I admit that sometimes it can feel hard to be joyful in the middle of a busy or difficult holiday season. Particularly this holiday season. But when the cares of my heart are many, Your faithfulness and comfort gives me renewed hope and cheer.

So today, we choose to take refuge in You and rejoice. We will sing for joy because You are our strength and our salvation.

In Your presence there is fullness of joy! And because of Your humble arrival over 2,000 years ago, we are now able to experience the joy of Your presence forever. Thank You.

You are always worthy of all glory, honor, and power—and so no matter what we face, we will choose to worship You.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Benediction: May each of you experience the joy of the Lord this week. Amen