

A Cause for Joy Advent - Week 3

*35 Then Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty."
- John 6:35 NIV*

How do we see Bethlehem become the House of Bread in the Gospel of Luke?

29 The next day John saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" - John 1:29 NIV

Some scholars believe these shepherds were watching the Temple flock at Migdal Eder, the location near Bethlehem where Temple lambs were raised for sacrifice. If that is the case, then these shepherds were witness to the birth of the ultimate sacrifice, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

WRAP-UP

Luke's Gospel tells how the long-awaited Messiah entered the world in a way no one expected—born not in a palace but in a manger, and announced not to the powerful but to shepherds, a group considered poor, unclean, and untrustworthy in Jesus' day. Yet God honored these unlikely witnesses, reflecting His heart for the lowly and His desire to draw near to humanity in its brokenness. Scripture reveals God as both mighty and tender, a powerful ruler and a gentle shepherd who guides, protects, and provides for His people. The significance of Bethlehem—the “house of bread”—and its connection to Israel's sacrificial lambs points to Jesus as the true Shepherd and the Lamb of God who would bring salvation to the world. There was a reason for joy because God was coming near, because the Good Shepherd has chosen us to be His sheep, and because God wants to be found by us. The good news that brought great joy is for all the people

MEMORY VERSE

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. - Luke 2:10-11 NIV

Challenge – Share God's love in a practical way this week with someone who might consider themselves as unworthy.

INTRODUCTION

In Luke's Gospel we read the announcement of the birth of the long-awaited Messiah. We are familiar with the story and perhaps have images of it as portrayed in plays, movies or artwork. It was not what the people expected, and many could not accept. Their King and Savior wasn't born in a palace and didn't appear with an army, but He came in a manger as a helpless newborn. And who had the honor of being the first to bear this news? Shepherds! We tend to hold a bucolic image of this scene on a grassy hillside with gentle caregivers surrounded by contented fluffy lambs. But that was not the case. The shepherds of Jesus' day were poor, rough, dirty and considered untrustworthy. This was a job taken after all other options were exhausted. But if shepherds were such a notorious crowd, why would God entrust them with this important news? In our study we will consider why they might have been the perfect choice as the heralds of the Good News.

Ice Breaker

What are some of the jobs that get the least respect in our times?

Key Passages

10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." ... 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." - Luke 2:10-12, 15 NIV

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Not What You Expected

If we search the scriptures for shepherds, we will find that early in the Old Testament there were many notable figures who were shepherds at some point in their lives. Abraham, Rachel, Moses and David were all shepherds. At that time, herds of livestock represented wealth, and a shepherd was an honorable profession.

But hundreds of years later, at the time of Jesus birth, shepherds had lost favor. In some of the writings of Jewish religious law (e.g. Babylonian Talmud) herdsmen (including shepherds) were listed as ineligible for court testimony due to their perceived lawlessness and untrustworthiness.

12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." - Luke 2:12 NIV

If you substituted a disreputable modern occupation for the shepherds in this story (think of them as garbage collectors, or telemarketers) what would be your response if they told you they had a message from God? Now if you were a garbage collector yourself, and another garbage collector told you that God gave them good news, how would you respond?

Mankind was created in God's image. In Eden we enjoyed the abundance of God's provision and walked and talked with Him directly. But sin marred that image. We left the Garden to walk through the muck of life, struggling to sustain ourselves amongst the thorns and thistles that resulted from our sin. This is not unlike the shepherds who roamed the Judean wilderness looking for enough food and water to sustain themselves and their sheep. They were poor, often dirty and "unclean" in the religious sense, prevented from drawing near to God. But just as God still sees His image in us and drew near while we were sinners, He saw the heart of the shepherds who tended their flocks and lived off the land, and he honored them by entrusting them with the birth announcement of the Son of God. Jesus came to us in a manger, surrounded by the dirt and dung of the animals housed there. And that is good news, because even the most common among us can relate to this baby who would offer salvation to all.

2. The Heart of The Shepherd

10 See, the Sovereign LORD comes with power, and he rules with a mighty arm. See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him. 11 He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young. - Isaiah 40:10-11 NIV

If you were longing for a Messiah to rescue you then you would certainly focus on the first half of this passage. But Isaiah also says the LORD tends His flock like a shepherd. What specific characteristics does Isaiah emphasize? Which are you more in need of right now, the Lord's mighty power or the gently guidance of the Shepherd?

Our God is not one-dimensional as some may see Him. He is not only a Righteous Judge, a Loving Father, a Holy God, or an Omnipotent Creator. He is all those and more. There may be times you need God to "come in power and a mighty arm", but there will also be times you need Him to be your Good Shepherd who draws you close to His heart and leads you gently in the way you should go.

David knew the heart of the shepherd for his flock from personal experience. Consider how he sees the LORD in relationship to himself in Psalm 23.

Read Psalm 23 aloud and allow it to be your personal declaration.

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He makes me to lie down in green pastures; He leads me beside the still waters. 3 He restores my soul; He leads me in the paths of righteousness For His name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me. 5 You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; My cup runs over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me All the days of my life; And I will dwell in the house of the LORD Forever. - Psalm 23:1-6 NKJV

As you view the Lord as your Shepherd and consider v. 6-7, allow Him to fill you with joy knowing that you will experience his goodness and mercy and dwell with Him now and forever.

3. Why Bethlehem?

2 "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." ... 4 He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. - Micah 5:2, 4 NIV

4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ... 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ... 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. - Luke 2:4, 6, 8 NIV

The birth of the Messiah in Bethlehem as a shepherd to His people was prophesied in Micah 5:2,4. This insignificant town had big theological implication. Its name has the literal translation, house (Beth) of bread (lehem).