

Detour! – The Shepherds  
Luke 2:8-20  
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We're continuing our sermon series today called, "Detour!" When you think about it, every single one of the characters in the Christmas story thought their lives were going to go one way, only to have the birth of Christ send them in a totally different direction. As someone who thought he was going to be a journalist or a college teacher, I can relate, and I bet you can, too. If we are brave enough to profess our faith in Christ and let him into our hearts, we have to be willing to have him change our direction.

That can happen when you least expect it, as we learn about in our story today about some shepherds who are out working in a field. Imagine for a second you don't know this story, and I told you God went to someone to announce the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, God's only son. To whom do you think God would go? You might first think of Caesar, the emperor of Rome. That's a natural thought. What about King Herod, who ruled over the region? Makes sense. Maybe God went to the High Priest in Jerusalem, the religious elite. Or maybe God went to the Mayor of Bethlehem: "Organize a parade, Mayor, I've got good news." All of these people would be logical recipients of God's birth announcement, wouldn't they?

But the palace doesn't hear. The Temple doesn't hear. Jerusalem doesn't hear. This birth announcement that God gives out goes to a group of anonymous sheep herders on the outskirts of Bethlehem – sheep herders! These shepherds are forever immortalized in our Christmas hymns and nativity scenes. We picture them with their crooked canes and flowing robes, as if they actually belong at the birthplace of a king. But the reality is they didn't belong there. In fact, they didn't belong anywhere.

There were few occupations more demanding or degrading than a shepherd. They were the last people you'd expect God to take notice of. First of all, they were religious outcasts. According to religious law, these men were unclean. Because their work was a seven-day-a-week job, it prevented them from participating in the feasts and holy days that made up the Jewish religious calendar. Why? Well, somebody had to watch the sheep. When everyone else was making the trip to Jerusalem to make sacrifices at the temple, they were out in the fields, watching over the flocks. A modern-day example might be a truck driver or shift worker, whose job keeps them from regularly attending church. It wasn't really their fault. But they were excluded. They weren't regular attenders, so didn't belong.

Not only were they religious outcasts, but shepherds were social outcasts, as well. Since they were constantly on the move to find new pasture for their flocks, they were looked upon with suspicion as untrustworthy nomads, the way people today might look at gypsies or carnival workers. They were often accused of being thieves. If something came up missing – it must have been those shepherds. They were not even permitted to give testimony in a legal proceeding, because their word wasn't considered trustworthy.

And on top of all that, they really didn't have much contact with other people. Most of the time, they were "living out in the fields" (v. 8). This was not a job with regular hours. They didn't come home every night for dinner. They were with the sheep 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. During the day, they led the sheep to grass and water.

They watched while the sheep grazed. They kept an eye out for predators. And at night, they actually slept in the sheep pen to guard against theft and animal attack. They didn't exactly smell like fresh holly and Christmas cookies, so shepherds didn't get a lot of invites to Christmas parties. By profession and cultural status, they were loners. Do you see why the shepherds didn't belong at the crib side of a newborn king?

Now, step back for a moment. Imagine you're God and you want to announce the most amazing, incredible, joyous news ever, an event which will literally change the course of history – the birth of your only Son, Jesus Christ. The birth of the One who will be the Savior of the whole world, the One for whom the nation of Israel has been waiting and hoping and praying for thousands of years. Finally, He has come! Who gets the announcement? Who do you invite to come and see?

Not Caesar. Not Herod. Not the Pharisees. Shepherds. Smelly, dirty, socially and religiously excluded sheep herders. Can you imagine how the conductor of the angel choir must have felt when she realized her audience wasn't the royal family? It's as if the Mormon Tabernacle Choir rehearsed all year to perform Handel's "Messiah" and ended up giving the concert for eight guys on the landscaping crew.

Why go to them? Were they outstanding believers in God? Nothing shows us that. Had this visitation been a prophecy? Not that we have record of. The shepherds were probably convinced God had no idea who they were. Didn't go to church, rarely said a prayer, hardly read the Hebrew scriptures. Does God even know who they are? Everyone in the local synagogue had told them they weren't welcome, they didn't belong, that God didn't care about their smelly existence. Is it any wonder, then, that when the angel of the Lord appears to them, they were absolutely terrified? How would they have heard the angel's announcement?

The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy." Not bad news? Not condemnation? Not any sarcastic remarks about only coming to synagogue for Hanukkah and Passover? "Today in the town of David (wow, David was a shepherd like us!) a Savior has been born to you (to us? God has given something to us?); he is the Christ, the Lord."

And the shepherds, who are normally obsessive in their protection of the flock, who lived to watch over their animals, take a detour. They leave the sheep behind and race off to see the baby. And after they do, they spread the word concerning what had been told to them about this child. They became living birth announcements. And I love how people responded to this. The Bible says, "And all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." I bet they were! This is not the kind of information to which a shepherd is usually privy. The going rate for wool, maybe, but not good news of great joy about the Messiah.

At first, the shepherds may seem like a strange choice, but I think God knew what God was doing here. If God had gone to Caesar or Herod or anyone else in power, they would have tried to turn this miraculous event to their advantage. "How can we use this to increase our prestige? Can we make money off this announcement?" People in power are always looking for ways to increase that power. The shepherds? They had absolutely nothing to gain, and certainly nothing to lose. They were empty vessels, waiting to be filled to overflowing with God's joy. They were proof that God's message is for everyone, from the highest to the lowest, from the faithful churchgoer to the seeker to the skeptic. God's word is for everyone, and God proves that by starting at the bottom.

I have another theory as to why the shepherds became the first-responders to the Christmas miracles. Maybe, just maybe, they were the only ones listening. They were alone in the fields, they were not distracted, they weren't worrying about finishing their Christmas shopping or finalizing travel plans. So when God called, they were attentive and responsive. They listened. Are we listening this Christmas season to what God is calling us to do?

This was not the night the shepherds expected. They thought they knew what was in store for them. But God had other plans, and thankfully, the shepherds had ears and hearts to hear it. Because their lives weren't so cluttered, because they weren't worried about their social status, they could receive the news for what it was: the greatest gift ever given, a gift to be treasured and shared.

After the Christmas season, we too will return to our "fields and flocks," our normal routines and responsibilities (whatever normal is these days). But we are not the same people we were before. Christ has come. God is with us. Therefore, let us go forth humbly as the shepherds, forever changed, transformed by the experience of Advent, praising and glorifying God, and letting people know about the good news of Christ through the way we live our lives. Let's go back into the world as living birth announcements. We are not the same people as we were before. "When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about the child. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." What will you do?