

“A Box Full of Nothing”

Luke 2:8-20

Series: Welcome the Child Week 4. The Shepherds

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Beverly White tells the story of a three-year-old girl who asked, "Mommy, what is Christmas?" "Christmas is Jesus' birthday," her Mom explained. "Then why don't we give presents to Jesus if it's His birthday?" Mom said we give Christmas gifts to show our love for each other. That seemed to end the matter. It did not come up again until Christmas Eve when a sleepy little girl placed a package under the Christmas tree. "It's a birthday gift for Jesus," she revealed. "I just know he will open it tonight." Once she was asleep, Mom, not wanting her daughter to be disappointed, opened the clumsily wrapped package and found: an empty box. An empty Christmas gift. What a strange gift. Why go to all the trouble of wrapping up nothing with pretty paper and a bow? Why give God nothing for Christmas?

There are people you know, perhaps some in this room, who think that's what God gave us for Christmas: nothing. We were promised salvation for Christmas.

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

So? Where is it, Savior? Where's the salvation? Did God mean political salvation? An end to tyrants and dictators, to ethnic cleansing, human rights abuses and oppression? No. Economic salvation? An end to hunger and joblessness, crippled economies and sweatshops, homelessness and poverty? No. Medical salvation? An end to the corona virus, cancer and heart disease, AIDS and diabetes, multiple sclerosis and muscular dystrophy? No. Emotional salvation? No more depression and rage, fear and anxiety, schizophrenia, addiction or outbursts of violence? No. They are all still with us two thousand years later.

Then what salvation did God give us on Christmas? Spiritual salvation. I can hear the critics snicker. "Who needs Spiritual salvation? That's like a box full of nothing," they complain. "It can't kill a virus, topple a tyrant, wipe out poverty, protect us from terrorists or change the world. Thanks for nothing, God!" they cry. I wonder if the shepherds felt the same way. Maybe they were disappointed by God's gift. Though when they first heard the news they were excited, even terrified.

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I wasn't terrified. I may have been flummoxed or perturbed but I weren't terrified. Shepherds don't get terrified. Zeke's the name – its short for Zekeriaah. Oh I know. You were expecting one of them silly Christmas shepherds – the kind that wears a bathrobe and carries around an oversized candy cane. You want me to speak in the King's English and say, "Hark, let us go unto Bethlehem and see this which forth with hath taken place...for I am sore afraid." There are three things that make me sore. The first is jalapeno and hot tamale humus. The second is carrying a lost lamb back home on my neck. It chafes my skin so bad I turn into a red

neck. (I bet you didn't know there're red necks in the Bible). And the third thing that makes me sore is the way all you city folk have no idea what it's like to be a shepherd. It's rough out there. We're like what you call a cowboy – except with sheep. Don't call me a "sheepboy" if you know what's good for you. I'm a shepherd and I have one job – to herd sheep. 'Cause let me tell you something: sheep are dumb. It's a fact. All they care about is eating. They will get lost, fall off cliffs, wander among wolves just to find their next meal. That's why my job is to keep them together and keep them moving from one pasture to another. Let me tell you another thing about sheep: Sheep stink. And that's why shepherds stink. If I came into your church and sat in a pew everyone would know it. In fact everyone would be saying, "Pew!"

Maybe that's why we live outdoors away from civilized folk most of the year. It's brutally hot by day and bitterly cold at night. Sometimes we put the sheep in the pen for the night. Then we take turns all night sitting in the opening of the pen. The only thing between my sheep and a mangy sharp fanged wolf is me. I'm the gate he has to get through.

When the flock is not in the pen, we lead them out to graze in the field. Being a shepherd is an old and honorable job. Abel was a shepherd and so were our fathers Abraham, Jacob and his twelve sons. Moses was a shepherd for forty years before he led our people out of Egypt. When King David was a boy he watched his daddy's sheep on these same hills. Here's where he learned to swing his sling, fight off enemies and lead God's people. But despite all these illustrious members of our fraternity, the dignified civilized folk don't want us around. We're not considered fit company for them. To them, we're rustlers, thieves and trespassers on their property. Some of them, the uppity religious windbags, call us unclean.

Well who the he...heaven cares what they think. When we watch over our flocks in the fields at night, we have a good ol' time. We sit around the fire, tell stories and dirty jokes, sing bawdy songs. We know many of David's psalms and Isaiah's words by heart.

Now one night I watched the herd like a hawk. So I can't explain how or when the stranger snuck up on us and stood by the fire. Nor can I say how the creature was brighter than the fire. It was like staring directly into the sun. I wanted to run for cover. Then the thing spoke:

"Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."
(Luke 2:10-12)

Then I heard the most glorious sound. When I raised my eyes I saw a sight that did terrify me: rank upon rank of fiery angelic soldiers all standing in formation. The army of heaven invaded our pasture. God's strike force pulled off a flawless surprise assault. I must confess I was ready to give them every last sheep. But they didn't steal from us or attack us. They just sang for us.

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."
(Luke 2:14)

Then, as suddenly as them angelic squadrons landed, they were gone.

I looked at my buddies. "Did you see that?" They looked as consternated as me. "See what?" "That army of singin' angels." "Yeah," said Jed, "I'm glad you saw it. I thought I was dreaming." "Well what are we going to do?" asked John Boy. "I know what I'm going to do," I said. "I'm gonna find him." While we raced up the hill to Bethlehem we tried to figure out what the angel meant. "God is keeping his promise," I said, "A Savior, a Messiah, a King like David was just born in David's town. He'll rout the Romans and kick out that evil Herod. He'll make Israel an empire greater than Rome... a kingdom that will never end. This is good news and great joy for all our people." "Glory to God in the highest heaven," we sang through the quiet streets of Bethlehem "and peace for God's chosen people on earth."

Following the bizarre instructions of the angel, we searched every cave and cattle shed in town until we found the child, wrapped like a tiny mummy in strips of cloth and sleeping in the manger near an exhausted woman and her husband. His name, we learned, was Joseph. She was Mary. They'd come from a town up north called Nazareth but Joseph told us Bethlehem was his home and David his kinsman. I knew I liked him. You wouldn't think much of the scene. There were no angels here. No royal clothes. No signs of a king. But we'd seen His angelic army. We figured if God is fixin' to send a Warrior Messiah like King David, he will be born like a shepherd among animals just as David was born, just as we were born. He won't be born in a palace but among the people, He's the people's Messiah. After we told the Child's parents the news, we went out and spread the word that Herod's days were numbered.

What happened next? Nothin'. Year passed into year. Soon one decade separated us from that glorious night and then two. Herod was replaced by his equally vile sons. When Caesar Augustus died his nephew Tiberius took the throne. And still the soldiers occupied our land with their sandals firmly planted on our necks. They shook us down for taxes, took our sheep, pushed us off our pastures and didn't give a second thought about killing us. Three decades passed. No revolution, no overthrow, no Messiah. People tried. Hot heads claimed to be the Messiah. They gathered troops but all ended up the same way: dead. Rome got tired of it, took Herod's son off the throne and put one Roman governor after another in place. All my brother shepherds died disappointed, without ever seeing any salvation.

I am the last one. Recently I hiked the short distance from Bethlehem to Jerusalem, dragging a lamb to offer to God in the Temple. It was Passover and all the people were streaming into the city. I plum forgot the words of the angels from that long past night until I noticed a parade of pilgrims following a man riding a donkey. The people cried out, "Hosanna, Save us Son of David." Someone in the crowd told me the rabbi is Jesus, son of Joseph from Nazareth in Galilee. The name hit my like a stone from a sling. Could it be? Is this the child cheered by angels so many years ago? They call him Savior, Messiah, even Lord. As I listen to him preach in the Temple courts that week, He sounds like a Shepherd. He says he came to search for God's lost sheep. He is the gate to God's sheep pen, the doorway to God's flock. He calls Himself the Good Shepherd who comes to lay down his life for the sheep. Some even called him the Lamb of God.

I am sure now this Jesus is the Child in the manger. Once again I spread the good news of great joy which will come to all the Jewish people. I tell them angelic armies await his

command. One word from him and they will descend and wipe out the pitiful Romans. All Jerusalem expects this Shepherd, this Son of David to overthrow the oppressors and establish God's eternal Kingdom of peace on earth for all the chosen people.

But by the end of the week, the whole revolution collapses. Jesus is captured, tried by the priests and politicians, and executed. I witness the crucifixion. Jesus calls out to God but there is no answer from heaven. Only silence and darkness. No angelic army comes to his aid. He dies a criminal's death. Every Jew knows crucifixion is the worst of all deaths. It means you are condemned by people and cursed by God. A woman wails at the foot of His cross she looked familiar. It must be His Mama. I watch as they wrap up his body in linen strips just as his mother wrapped him on the night of his birth. They place his corpse in a cave like the stable where he was born and lay him on cold stone like the manger where he first laid down his sweet head. Then they roll the stone in place.

And I am empty. The good news of the angels is empty. God's offer of a Savior is empty. God's gift of salvation is empty. God's promise of peace on earth is empty. And that would be the end of the story except for one more fact.

Three days later the tomb is empty.

And when I heard the news that Jesus is alive an old Shepherd's song comes back to me - one we sang around the campfire the night of the birth, a song from the prophet Isaiah.

He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the sin of us all. He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before her shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer ... for he bore the sin of many. (Isaiah 53: 5 – 7 and Isaiah 53: 10a and 12a)

I begin to hear the angel's words in a new way.

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for *all the people*.

Not just the Jewish people, all the people.

Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

Not a political savior, but a Savior of the soul.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests

(Luke 2:14)

Not peace and freedom from the Romans but peace with God and freedom from sin.

That's what he meant when he said the Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. That's why they called him the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God's gift of salvation is not empty. God's gift of salvation empties us. It empties us of all our sins. It empties them onto Jesus. Like a lamb led to the slaughter he bore our sins on the cross. He emptied all the sin out of us and made room in our hearts for his presence and his peace.

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The world will see an endless parade of political saviors, medical saviors, economic saviors, emotional saviors. They will come and go, some doing good, others evil. But none can empty the heart and soul of sin as this Savior has done.

What fills your heart? Anger, frustration, rage, regret, self-hate, self-doubt, selfishness, worry, anxiety, lust, desire, jealousy, greed, guilt shame? Empty it all at the foot of the cross. Pour it out to him. The gift Jesus wants most for his birthday is a loving heart he can empty of sin and fill with his peace.

Remember the little girl who gave an empty box to Jesus for his birthday? On Christmas morning, she was thrilled to find the package had been opened and her gift was gone. "What was in it?" asked her mother. "It was a box full of love," came the answer.

How childlike. How Christ like. How about offering the same gift to Jesus this Christmas?