

“Who Invited Them?”

Text: Luke 2:8-20

Series: Follow the Star Week 4 The Shepherds

The Woodside Church

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Twenty-six and a half years ago we brought our little baby girl, Lizz, into the world. What an amazing time that was for Michelle and me. I was, of course, in the room for the delivery, although the day might have been a little more stressful for Michelle. My stepson Jimmy came to meet his baby sister as well. And after we came home, Michelle’s father and brother visited, as did my dad. As a proud daddy, I definitely wanted to show off my baby girl to as many people as possible. But I also realized that a parade of people flowing through our home at this time would not be something Michelle would appreciate. So we kept it to family and very close friends.

So how did Jesus’s Father handle his birth? Think about it. He had about 330 million children to choose from. Tough to narrow down. I’m sure that he wanted Mary’s cousin Elizabeth to be there. But she and Zechariah had just had their baby John born six months earlier and Elizabeth probably wasn’t up to the trip. We know he invited the three wise men, but they had their own trip to take, and it was going to be a quite a while before they arrived. Since Jesus was royalty, maybe King Herod? Well, as Doug shared last week, inviting somebody with homicidal tendencies to come visit the baby that was prophesied to be his eventual successor, might not be a good idea. So, counting Mary, Joseph and Jesus that leaves 329,999,990 to choose from. So who does he invite?

Does he choose the Jewish leaders in Bethlehem? Pharisees, Sadducees or even the Rabbi’s or teachers? Nope. How about businessmen? Merchants, money lenders, even farmers? Wrong again. So who?

“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified”. – Luke 2:8-10

Shepherds! What’s the big deal you ask? Maybe you didn’t realize it, but shepherds were considered to be on the very bottom rung of the social ladder in that society. They slept in the fields, so they must have been dirty. They were generally considered to be ceremonially unclean by the Jewish leaders. They were somewhat nomadic, travelling from place to place looking for new grass fields for their sheep to graze. And if something disappeared from a town that they had passed through, they were often suspect. Their reputation was that they were so untrustworthy – a shepherd’s testimony was not valid for legal matters. Put another way – lawyers were considered more honest than shepherds.

And let’s be clear here. This is not a last ditch effort by God to get somebody to come to the party. God wants these shepherds there. God doesn’t settle. He chooses a course of action and moves. This isn’t the whispering in the heart – the nudge. His invitation was not to be refused. Look at the passage again -

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Despite what the feelings were about the shepherds, they were probably not faint of heart. After all, they slept in the fields guarding the sheep from wolves, bandits and who knows what else. But the appearance of the angel must have been dramatic – it got their attention. No, God chose them – but why?

- Well, let’s remember what the angel said – “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you...” And scripture said that the Messiah was to be of the line of David. And what was David’s occupation, prior to being King? A shepherd.
- Consider what the shepherds did for their livelihood. They were caregivers – taking care of the flock no matter what. Sheep had to be cared for, watched over, herded from one place to another. The sheep is among the most helpless of all animals on this earth. When confronted by danger, most animals, including humans, will fight or flee. Not sheep. Sheep will huddle together in the hopes that some will survive an attack. At night, when the sheep were in their pens, it is said that the shepherds would sleep in the entrance so that the sheep couldn’t leave, and predators could not enter. There were plenty of times that Jesus referred to himself as a shepherd –

“I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out, and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.” John 10:9-11

- But still; the shepherds are so ordinary. Why would He choose ordinary people to share the most important event in history? Well maybe since God was sending His son to earth, in the form of an ordinary baby, to save all of us – especially those of us that are ordinary. And despite the fact that these were very ordinary shepherds, they followed God’s instructions and went to greet the baby. And then, these ordinary shepherds, went and did the extraordinary.

“So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.” Luke 2:16-18

They went out to share the information. And the people were amazed at what they said. Why would they have been amazed at anything these men said? Didn’t we just discuss how untrustworthy they were? Have you ever read a scripture passage over and over, and then one time recognize something that you never saw before? It happens to me regularly, and this was one such case. It reminded me of a time that Peter and John spoke after being infused with the Holy Spirit.

“When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.” Acts 4:13 (NIV)

Like Peter and John, these shepherds spoke with authority and power. They had been filled with the same spirit and strength. Back in the “Follow” series, Doug mentioned that Mary Magdalene, on Resurrection Sunday, shared the first Easter message. A few weeks ago Linda reminded us that Mary, Jesus’s mother, was really the first of His disciples. The shepherds, well, they were the first men to spread the good news; to share the Gospel. Their actions can also be an inspiration to us if we follow the same path they took with this news.

Listen to God – Paying more attention to what God has to say to us is a good way to start. And while I have never come face to face with an angel giving me instructions, I have felt God’s words powerfully in my heart. On Mission Sunday 2007, I heard about multiple mission trips that Woodside had taken. But the story of the Dominican Republic trip struck me so powerfully that as soon as the service was over, I found Bruce and Judy Jones and told them that I was going on the 2008 trip.

Other times I have heard that whisper in the night. In the second year of holding the quarterly Recovery Service and Luncheon, I wanted to try to get Dave Pettigrew to lead worship at one of the services. But I also knew that Dave had to pay his band, and since it was a long trip from North Jersey for them... Well our budget just wasn’t built for that. And then one night an idea crossed my mind. What if we held a ticketed Pettigrew concert the night before? Bingo! One little problem – I knew nothing about running a concert. I’d been to plenty of concerts before, but never ran one. I knew nothing of marketing and promotion or selling tickets. Not to mention being completely oblivious to technical needs for a band. But I accepted God’s suggestion and seven years later, Dave is a Woodside favorite and has blessed many that have come through our doors.

Look for ways to share the Good News

So how can we share this good news we have received? This is actually a simple step, simply because there are so many people that need to hear it. A little over a year ago I started a new business and purchased a franchise. While spending a week at the corporate headquarters for orientation there was one thing we were told during the marketing session that has stuck with me. The presenter said, “If you are ever driving down the road thinking there is nobody else to talk to; you’re not thinking hard enough.” This is true ten-fold regarding sharing the gospel. There are always people that need to hear this news. Sharing your story on how Jesus has changed your life, just might be the most powerful option.

Let other people hear about it

Tell people. It could be a simple conversation. An answer to a question such as, “How was your weekend,” or “What did you do last night”. But it could be something a little more, complex.

Many of you are aware that I have been a part of a prison and recovery ministry for the last dozen years. We go into the Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility (CFCF) in Philadelphia

on a weekly basis and lead a worship service. A few months ago, one of the men, a chaplain's aide named Courtney, who had been attending services for the past year, asked me if I would baptize him. I explained that due to rules of the Presbytery, only ordained Pastors are supposed to perform baptisms. I suggested that one of the other ministry members do it. I was surprised when he told me he really was hoping I could do it. I said I would talk with my pastor and see if the rules were relaxing at all. I met with Doug the next week and we discussed the sacrament of baptism and what my motivation for desiring to officiate it was. Satisfied that I understood the importance of the sacrament, he suggested that I write a letter to the Elders on Session at Woodside asking them to authorize me to perform Baptisms at the prison. I did this and they voted and passed the motion.

The next week I told Courtney that I had been given the authority to perform the baptism, but that I still needed to get permission from volunteer services to bring a bowl into the prison chapel. When I mentioned that I wanted to perform the baptism just before I shared the message one night, he balked. He was uncomfortable with it being in front of all the men at the service and wanted to do it before service started. I told him that I thought it important that he did it at the service as this was his church family at this time and they should be a part of it. I told him not to answer me, but to pray about it that week and we would talk again. The next time I was at CFCF, he agreed that would be the right thing to do.

A couple of weeks later, I received authorization from volunteer services to bring a bowl to the chapel in order to perform baptisms. The evening arrived, and before the service, I went over the procedure and questions that I would ask. I also suggested that he give a short testimony after. He was a little uncomfortable with that. However, after we completed the baptism I asked if he wanted to share a few words. Reluctantly he stepped forward and began to speak. And then he spoke some more, and then a little more. He talked about his faith and how it helped him to survive an extremely difficult situation. As I looked around the room I realized that the men were focusing intently on what he was saying, and it hit me. I can come in on a regular basis, share God's message and make an impact. But another inmate, going through the same struggles, can relate with his brothers in a way that I never could. His story is their story, even if it isn't the individual facts are different.

I must admit that sharing the good news isn't always simple, or safe. Not that we have to worry about persecution, such as that in countries where it is illegal to speak about our religion. But it is sometimes out of our comfort zone. And there are situations where it is frowned upon, such as work or school. We watch "A Charlie Brown Christmas" today and wonder if the scene where Linus reads the Luke passage would be possible if that special were written today. But did you realize that even back in 1965, when Charles Schulz wrote it, there was considerable pressure to not include it after Charlie Brown cries out, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Lee Mendelson, the show's producer, and Bill Melendez, its lead animator, didn't want it to be included. In fact Melendez said, "It's very dangerous for us to start talking about religion now." Schulz, who had a very strong faith, answered him by saying, "Bill, if we don't, who will?"

Where did he get that strength and resolution from? I think we can get that answer from the show itself. Most of us know who the character of Linus is. A youngster that always has a

blanket in hand. A security blanket that gives him the confidence that he needs. But during his reading of the scripture, there is suddenly a point where he drops the blanket and says,

“And the angel said unto them, Fear not...”

Like Linus, we don't have to fear because God is watching over us; Jesus is with us; and the Holy Spirit lives in us. Don't withhold your story from others. Take that strength God gives you and share your faith as often as you can.