

The Watching Shepherds

A sermon preached at
Lendrum Mennonite Brethren Church
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Text: Luke 2:8 – 20

I am always watching.
My life is watching.
When I was little, I used to walk with my grandfather everywhere,
and he used to say, "You have eyes to see, use them!"
He asked me to describe to him everything I saw.
The clouds building on the horizon on a spring evening.
I watched and described it,
but he told me what it meant, that the rain would come tomorrow.
The bird suddenly flying up from the bushes...
I watched and described it, he told me that birds have reasons for what they do.
Together we watched and saw a wolf creeping.
"Watch the sky, watch the birds," he told me,
"these are all signs that tell a story if you are only watching."

My grandfather taught me to watch the limping sheep, the listless sheep...
these are all signs that can tell you something.
And hardest of all, he taught me to see the sheep that's not there...
to see the missing sheep.
And of course we often went looking and he taught to me to find a lost sheep.
Watching is what I did my whole life, it's what I still do.
Watching is my bread and butter, it's my life, it's my reason for being here.

Watching isn't the only thing we do as shepherds, we also count.
Watch and count all the sheep, all the time.
Watch in the morning, watch at night, count them up the hill and down.
I count things without even realizing I'm counting.
Even in my dreams I count sheep, and they are always wandering off.
My grandfather would laugh when I told him my dreams,
he said every shepherd dreams of sheep wandering off.
"Don't worry about your dreams," he said.
"Not unless you are dreaming about skinny sheep and fat sheep,
like the cook in the Egyptian prison with our father Joseph!
There are enough worries with the sheep that are real!"

I was just a young man on the night I am going to tell you about.
I had only begun watching the sheep at night.
I was with my brother and a number of my other friends.
We were out in the fields after the harvest,
letting the sheep pick up what the gleaners missed.

The roads at that time around Bethlehem were so busy, far busier than usual.
People travelling, dogs barking, donkeys braying...the sheep were watching too. They
wouldn't go close to the road with all that commotion.
People travelling, in groups and ones and twos,
trudging along by foot or riding donkeys.
My uncle had asked about it in town,
and he was told the busyness was because of the census.
I asked, "What's a census?"
And he said that the emperor in Rome, that one called Caesar,
he said that every person had to be counted.
Every single person in Judea!
That's what you call a census.
Then what I do every day is census taking, but of sheep not people!
Who would think you could count all the people in the world?
This has never been done in all of history!
Our father Abraham was told by Yahweh that his descendants
would be more numerous than the stars in the heaven.
Too many to count.
Who would think that you could count this many people?

But that's an emperor for you, thinking they're God,
trying to know what only God can know.
And the reason for it? Greed.
They want more money, they want to count us so that they can tax us
and make sure they're not shortchanged by one penny.
Another way for the Romans to get us coming or going.

We've seen trouble...the Romans marching down the roads,
with their spears and chariots.
And if you protest, then they will crucify you on a tree.
I haven't seen it myself, but my cousin has gone to Jerusalem,
and he said he saw men crucified along the road, dying in agony.
When we heard about the census, my grandfather grumbled,
and said we shouldn't have to be counted like sheep.
But my cousin said, "We don't have a choice, they can kill us if they like!"
No one wants to pay more taxes.
But we all went to be registered, to our city, Bethlehem.

Everyone has to go to their home city to be registered...
so that explains the travellers,
everyone hurrying to get home before they get into trouble.

The night I want to tell you about was the same as any other.
It was my turn to take the watch.
We were perched on some rocks on one of the hills,
the flocks spread out like so many clouds below us in the dark.
It was cool, dark, quiet...like every other night.

The sheep sleep lightly, they make their little sounds, everything was normal.
I remember I was watching the stars.
You start to count them, even if you don't mean to, after counting sheep all day.
And I noticed one star that seemed new to me.
It was bright and shining that night.
It was while I was staring at this star that it happened.

One minute we were alone in the dark with the sheep,
and the next minute, there was light all around us, and a figure standing there,
brighter than anything I've ever seen.
There was a radiance about this figure, it was almost crackling it was so bright.
Of course I looked to the sheep immediately,
it's second nature when something happens
the first thing you do is see how the sheep are going to respond.
You don't want them panicking and running off in every direction.
But that was amazing too...
because the sheep were just standing there blinking at this light,
as if it was something they looked at every day of their lives.

That confirmed for us that what we were looking at wasn't a worldly light,
it was an other-worldly light!
We were terrified.
We knew we were in the presence of an angel of the Lord...we fell on our faces.

But the angel said to us, "Fear not".
And then it said, "Behold".
I'm a shepherd, when someone tells me to look, I look. So I opened my eyes...
It said, "I'm bringing good news which will be to all people."

All people...everyone.
Right now all the people are getting bad news...
we're all being counted, every one by Caesar.
But this angel is telling us that there is good news for all people.

"For unto you is born this day in the City of David..."
Here the angel pointed to Bethlehem behind us.
My mind was working so fast,
trying to comprehend everything the angel was saying,
it was like time was slowed down,
and I could think all sorts of things with every single word the angel said.
The city of David is Jerusalem...it's the city where King David ruled so long ago.
But the angel wasn't pointing forward towards Jerusalem,
it was pointing clearly to Bethlehem.

The funny thing is that the angel isn't wrong...
Bethlehem is a city of David, in a manner of speaking.
Yes, David ruled in Jerusalem, but he was born and grew up in Bethlehem.

David was a shepherd boy as a child,
it was here on these very hills that he tended his flocks.
We don't think about Bethlehem as David's city
because he was just a shepherd here...we wasn't important yet.
But it was his city.

Then the angel said "is born this day in the city of David,
a Saviour who is Christ the Lord!"
A Saviour, Christ the Lord?
Is this the Messiah that we have been waiting for?
Will this be the one who will rule us, who will cast out these foreigners?
Maybe we won't have to pay this tax to Caesar after all!

And the angel went on to say, "And this will be a sign for you..."
A sign, something to watch for...I'm good at watching, that's my specialty.
"This will be a sign for you,
you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."
A baby in a manger...why would a baby be in a manger?

We had been watching this angel, our eyes glued to it.
It was brighter than anything we could imagine,
but suddenly there were beings of light everywhere, filling the night sky.
And they were all murmuring, all talking in a big whooshing sound,
"Glory to God in the highest" over and over again,
the sound going out and through us and reaching as high as heaven.
And then they said, "And on earth peace, goodwill to all people."

And suddenly it was dark.
Darker than dark, now that the light was gone.
And as our eyes slowly adjusted we found ourselves staring at the sheep
who were staring right back at us.
We had some long moments of silence as we turned and looked at each other,
as if to say, "Did that really happen?"

My brother was the first to break the silence, saying, "Shall we go?"
We were all eager to see this Saviour, Christ the Lord,
and if we were told about a sign,
and were given directions to find the sign,
surely that meant we should not delay.

We left one of our group with the sheep,
and the rest of us started towards the Bethlehem.
We started slowly enough,
but our eagerness to see what the angels had told us just grew and grew,
and before we knew it we were practically running through the night
towards the town.

We knew we were looking for a baby in a manger,
so we poked our heads in every stable we passed.
There were a lot of startled donkeys looking back at us,
and not a few sleepy people asking us what we were doing.
The town was so full up with people for the census,
they were even sleeping in the stables.
But finally we came to a place
where we found a young couple who had a tiny newborn baby,
and sure enough, they were using the manger as a cradle.

We were so overwhelmed by this happening, just as the angel said,
that we fell to our feet and worshipped God.
We told the young couple what had happened...
they didn't seem surprised to hear about our angel visitor.
I think something like that must have happened to them too.

We looked at the baby and it looked like any other baby,
small, wrinkled, blinking.
But for us it held all the hope that God had promised,
this baby would grow up to save us.
This baby was sent from God.

We only stayed a few minutes.
We knew our job was waiting for us,
and we took a risk leaving just one person with all those sheep.
And the family looked tired.
We said our good-byes and started our walk back up the hills.

But we kept the story, and we told it to everyone we met.
People were amazed to hear about a bright light and an angel,
and the part about the baby was interesting.
But it was just us shepherds who saw the angels...no one else.
And when people asked questions, we didn't have answers.
I didn't even know the people's names...it didn't seem important to ask at the time.
A few days later, I went back to that stable to see if that family was still there,
but they were gone, and no one seemed to know where.
There were so many people from all over, they could have been from anywhere.

I never doubted what happened to us, but I never understood it.
If that baby really was a Saviour,
wouldn't God have revealed that to the high-priest,
and the other people in charge in the city of David, Jerusalem?
Wouldn't all sorts of people know about Christ the Lord?
It was just our word against...well everyone who never heard the angel.
And we really didn't know how this baby was a Saviour or really anything at all.
We saw the signs, but we weren't sure what they meant.
People got tired of hearing the story,
so eventually it was something we kept to ourselves.

All this happened a long time ago, when I was a young man,
when I first started staying up to watch the sheep.
Now I'm an old man,
and I've seen more nights watching sheep than I could count.
But I still haven't forgotten that night.

I am still puzzling about what that sign meant.
Why did the angel come, why did the angel come to us?

I've heard stories about someone they are calling a Saviour.
They are telling about a Galilean, a man named Jesus.
I don't know how he could be connected to our Bethlehem boy,
who was also supposed to be a Saviour.

This Galilean, he travelled all over Judea and Galilee,
and even into the Decapolis, they say.
He told stories, stories that revealed something about God.
They say he must have passed close by to here, but I never saw him.
I talked to someone once who heard him talk,
and he told me some of the stories he heard.
One sticks with me.
This Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd,
and the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep."
That's a man I would have liked to hear.
I think I would have liked his stories, they would have spoken to me.

But that can't happen now because this Jesus got into trouble in the City of David...
Jerusalem.

He was pretty popular, I guess, and when he went up to Jerusalem,
people were so excited to see him, the city was bubbling with it.
Apparently when he arrived there was even a procession,
with him riding a donkey, and people laying palm branches before him,
like he was a king or something.
And this man I talked to, who had heard Jesus talk,
he had been with him then, and he said that as Jesus walked into Jerusalem,
the people were saying,
"Blessed be the King that cometh in the name of the Lord:
peace in heaven, and glory in the highest."

Well that made my ears perk up, because the angels had said,
"Glory to God in the highest!" to us,
and they had talked about "Peace on earth".
Now people were talking about "Peace in heaven".
Peace on earth and heaven...is that even possible in these troubled times?

There was no peace for that man Jesus, for the Roman crucified him,
just like those men my cousin saw.
He was nailed to a tree and left to die by the side of the road, for everyone to see.

I was so disappointed to hear that he had been killed,
even though I never met the man.
He sounded kind, I was told he healed people's diseases,
he fed them when they were hungry.
I don't know what he did wrong that they had to kill him.
But the Romans don't need much of a reason.

The strangest thing though, is that this man I talked to,
he said that they wrapped Jesus in linen cloths and laid him in a tomb.
It sounded so much like what the angels said to us,
"you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger".
It's not the same of course, but it sounds the same,
and it stuck me as a big coincidence. Or maybe it was a sign.

The thing that's hardest to believe
is that people are saying that the tomb of this man was empty three days later.
And that people actually saw Jesus walking and talking.
After he had been crucified and buried!!
They say he was raised from the dead!!
The man I talked to said he believes that this Jesus was the Messiah,
this Jesus was a Saviour for us.

Long ago, I saw a sign, something that was real and bright, and filled with hope. That
baby, so beautiful and defenceless.
I don't know how that baby connects with this Galilean man Jesus.
How is God working among our people?
All I know is that we need a Saviour.

Every day I look out at the sheep, and watch for signs.
I know how to read these signs, I look at them till I figure them out.
But I have been thinking about the sign the angel told us about my whole life,
and I am no further ahead.

I think about our father Jacob,
about the dream he had where he saw angels climbing from earth to heaven.
How did he know what that meant?
All we know is that Jacob said, "Surely God is in this place."
He muddled his way through his life somehow...God showed him great favour.
And David too.
For all he was a king, he made mistakes over and over again, but God favoured him.

It's so clear when we look back at those people,
that God was working through them,
but maybe the signs were hard to understand when it actually happened to you.
Maybe understanding the signs takes a lot of people, a lot of time to figure out.

Maybe you too have seen signs...do you always know what they mean?
Maybe you are just like me, you puzzle over it, you watch, you wait.

But together, I believe that we will hear the good news.
When I sit up at night watching the sheep,
I still hear the echoes of the angels with their enormous murmurings,
"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will to all people."
I don't know what it meant but surely God was in this place too,
right here on these fields outside Bethlehem.

Now that I am an old man,
even though I have watched these sheep my whole life,
I feel an urge to move.
I hear there are people who followed this Jesus,
and they are gathering in Jerusalem, and in Galilee.
I don't think I'm up to a trip to Galilee at this time of my life.
But on a clear day, I can look over and see Jerusalem.
Or at least I could when I was younger and my eyes were sharper.
Maybe I will go up to Jerusalem and hear what these followers of Jesus have to say.

I am longing to hear good news.
Maybe they can tell me more about this Saviour.
I wonder if there is any connection between him and that baby we saw so long ago.
I'd like to hear more of the stories that Jesus told.
I wonder if he said anything else about shepherds.

In the beginning of the story we hear about Caesar Augustus and Quirinius the governor of Syria. Caesar Augustus has only to decree something and the world responds. He says that everyone should be taxed, and it happens...people move from here to there going to the place where they were born. This census or registration or taxation (depending on your translation) is mentioned by name four times in the beginning verses of this story. Obviously the writer is trying to draw attention to the power of this world ruler.

Jesus arrives to his parents who are staying in Bethlehem. There are miraculous signs that Jesus has arrived, but surprisingly the announcement doesn't go to the people who are in power in the world. Instead the announcement goes to the shepherds...The shepherds aren't just happenstance in the story, they are very important. They are mentioned by name four times...the writer wants to make sure that when you finish hearing the story, you will remember. Who was it who the angels spoke to? It was shepherds!

Shepherds were peasants who were located toward the bottom of the scale of power and privilege

Mary's song 1:52...the enthroned versus the lowly

Caesar Augustus and Quirinius the governor of Syria...and shepherds on the other

it's not the rich and powerful who get the angel visitor...it's the peasants, the lowly who are lifted up

birth story...

appearance of an angel

reaction of fear

announcement of birth

and a sign

appearance//Fear//sign//---to Elizabeth, Mary, now shepherds

this is what happens...

genre or pattern that is perfectly understandable by the people who hear the story

angels//...say that Jesus is a Savior...reflecting the song of Mary and Zechariah

Christ...greek word for Anointed One...

announcement of birth always happens to a family member

--this could be a foreshadowing that Jesus is going to have a different type of family who

Status does not make the person

most powerful person ever born came in humble circumstances

--incarnation...total simplicity and humility

making Passover lambs---

I'm watching...

I'm seeing, maybe not always understanding...

Luke 8:19-21 Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, 'Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.' But he said to them, 'My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.'

Zechariah's song...the dawn from on high will break upon us
—watching their flocks by night and the angels shining in the western...

contrast in Luke 2:9-10...great fear is changed to great joy

Matthew 18:12

What do you think? If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?

Mark 6:34

As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

John 10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd. For this reason the Father loves

me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father.'

I Peter 2:25

For you were going astray like sheep, but now you have returned to the shepherd and guardian of your souls.

shepherd
swineherd
plowman
muleteer
general workers
and hired day labourers during harvest

stratum
property, political power, wealth, gender, race, freedom

relatively and absolutely poor...
relatively...had a means of earning money

might see shepherds as hardworking, honest labourers in agriculture, rustic
the peasant...
in Jesus' day shepherds were often seen as dishonest, outside the Law
perhaps for Luke they represent the sinners that Jesus came to save (5:32; 7:34;
15:1; 19:7)

Lucan shepherds are linked closely with the city of Bethlehem
good news is in the city of David
let us go to the city of Bethlehem and see....
tradition that messiah would come from Bethlehem...John 7:42, taken from Micah
1:2

calls Bethlehem the city of David...that is usually Jerusalem

in Luke the

interesting parallels
peace on earth////later peace in heaven
wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger
wrapped him in a linen cloth and laid him in a tomb