

There once was a small group of people – separate from the rest of the world. While the rest of the world was gathering together with family and friends, having a good time, eating and drinking, laughing and talking with music in the background – while the rest of the world did this, there was a small group of people off by themselves – things were quiet – and they heard the Word of God. Who is this small group of people – is it you? Sounds like you, doesn't it? Right now the rest of the world is gathering together with family and friends – there's a party going on right now and you're missing out. Here you are, off by yourself, things are quieter here, and you're hearing the Word of God. But I'm not talking about you – I'm talking about the shepherds that first Christmas Eve, a small group of people off by themselves. The rest of the world was having quite a party. It was tax time in Judea – everyone had gone to their hometown to register, just as people today go to their hometowns for Christmas. I'm sure there were all kinds of family gatherings as people returned to their hometowns.

But not for the shepherds. They were off by themselves, in the hills with their sheep, missing the party in Bethlehem. Everything was quiet out there, and then they heard the Word of God. And by the time that night was over, we are told in Luke chapter two that they “returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.” The shepherds were filled with joy. Wouldn't you like to have that kind of joy tonight? Did you know that you don't need to be at a Christmas party to experience Christmas joy? You don't need to eat until you can't eat anymore, and sit around with the presents and the tree and the Christmas music, in order to experience Christmas joy. Those things to make people happy – but it's a very temporary kind of happiness. Wouldn't you like to feel a kind of joy this Christmas that lasts beyond the holidays?

Tonight, let's spend some time with the shepherds, and see where their joy came from. In verse 8 we are introduced to them, “shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.” When we think of shepherds, we might think of the clean-cut, respectable altar boys we see at the manger scene every year. But if you were a shepherd in Palestine, at that time, you would laugh at that sort of description. “I'm no altar boy,” a shepherd would say to you. “The priests consider me unclean because I live in the fields and don't attend services at the temple. I'm not allowed to give testimony in court, because no one trusts me.” The shepherds at that time were the wanderers, the drifters of society, gypsies. People didn't trust them – they had shady reputations.

And so there they were, out in the fields, missing the big party in Bethlehem. Things were quiet. But then everything changed. In verse 9, we are told that “an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” What's your first reaction when the phone rings in the middle of the night? You fear the worst don't you? It could be a friend calling to tell you that your son or daughter was in an accident, or Grandma to say that Grandpa isn't doing so well. In the same way the shepherds must have feared the worst when they saw God's messenger standing before them. Had he come to announce that it was Judgment Day? If so, were they ready to be judged by the righteous God? “Terrified, we are told, scared out of their minds. It's not every day that an angel of God appears to you. But that's not why the angel had come. “But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people.’” And what was that good news? “Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ, the Lord.” I wonder what the shepherds were thinking as they heard those words: “A Savior, has been born to US? We are lowly shepherds. Why would God use a Savior?”

“This will be a sign to you,” the angel said, “you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and

lying in a manger.” How strange! You would think that the Messiah would be born in a palace. You would think that kings, and pious priests, and all the high class members of society would be invited to see the Messiah. Things were upside down that first Christmas – The Christ is lying in a manger, and the only people in the world, besides Mary and Joseph, that know that the Christ had been born were shepherds. “Suddenly, a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men, on whom his favor rests.” The angels told the shepherds, you can feel peace, because God has shown favor to you.

After the angels had left them, 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.” Now they were curious. They hurried off, and found Mary and Joseph and the Christ, lying in a manger, just as the angel had said! They said their good byes and then went back into the fields, spreading the word about what had been said concerning the child. And then verse 20, a picture of Christmas joy: “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.”

There were no gifts. No lights. No eggnog. No party. On that first Christmas Eve, lowly shepherds were working the night shift. But they felt a sense of joy that most people today can only dream about. ON the outside, it didn’t look like they had much that night. But on that first Christmas, they were the richest, happiest people in the world, because they knew that God had sent a Savior, even to them.

Can you relate to those shepherds? Deep down, you and I are one of those shepherds, aren’t we? We try to hide behind our nice clothes, our nice houses. We’re very modern, with our cell phones and computers. On the outside, we act like we don’t really need God or a Savior or anything like that. But deep down, we are those shepherds. We have our fears, our worries. Perhaps at times we have felt like outcasts in our lives. Many of us, deep down, are relieved when Christmas is over – now I don’t have to pretend to be so joyful. But tonight, you are the one sitting out in the field, and the angel speaks to you. He tells you that a Savior has been born to you. God cares about you, loves you so much that he sent his Son to be your Savior. There you see him, lying in the manger. Lying in the manger. Do not be put off by how lowly he looks. This baby is God’s gift to you. This baby is God in disguise, and he comes to this earth to do something for you. 33 years after he is born, the Christ makes himself even more lowly, dying on a cross.

He does all this for you. This is how God saves your soul. This is how God brings you peace. It all starts here, at the manger. Look at this gift that God gives you – a Savior who takes all your sins away. All your sins, your backsliding, your broken promises, your dirty thoughts and words, all have been paid for. You can never submit a debt of wrongdoing to Jesus that will come back to you marked “insufficient funds” Wrapped in swaddling clothes is the gift of eternal life! He is Christ the Lord. Here is where you find joy that lasts beyond the holidays. It is true, that you can find joy in the giving and receiving of gifts. There is joy in decorating, joy in gathering with family and friends, joy in eating. But there is a deeper joy, a joy that lasts when all these other things fade away. To know that God came down to this earth, in the form of a lowly child - there you find joy that lasts. To know that this child is your Savior from sin – to know that no matter how lowly you are, no matter how sinful you are, no matter how young or old you are – you have a God who has sent his Son to save you – he is Christ the Lord. There you find joy – God’s kind of joy. May you be filled with that joy long after the holidays are over. Amen.