

Opening

- Well, it's almost Christmas and we continue our journey- looking through the eyes of some of the biblical Characters of the Christmas Chronicle.
 - We first looked at "Zechariah and Elizabeth" and their story of the Holy Spirit working in their lives and we were reminded that it is never too late for God to do something new in our lives.
 - Then we looked through the eyes of Joseph and examined the tremendous faith he had in trusting God.
 - And then last week, Sandra showed us that "There is Something About Mary"
 - We examined her tremendous faith that granted her the longing to serve God unconditionally.
 - Today, we continue our journey, through the eyes of the shepherds who were out working in the fields on the night Jesus was born, when they received a visit from an angel sent by God.

Life on the farm

- You know, when we read the story about the shepherds, it's easy to overlook how difficult life was for the shepherds.
 - When the scripture tells us they "were out living in the fields", we might think about the shepherds out under the stars, a gentle breeze stirring the air, with the sound of the sheep baying in the night, as they receive this glorious awakening from the angel and it sounds quite glamorous, innocent and beautiful.
 - But living in the outdoors as the shepherds were, is a hard thing.
 - As I was thinking this past week about the shepherds and what life might have been like for them, I was taken back to my days in high school, where during the summer, I frequently did farm work, to earn money.
 - For a couple of summers, I worked for a man named Tony
 - Tony was a restaurateur, who also owned a farm up near Valley Falls.
 - And Tony offered to have me work with him on the farm, helping him put up hay and work with his livestock.

- He was willing to pay me in cash, so I eagerly jump at the opportunity and so our days looked something like this: He and I would go in early in the morning to work at the restaurant and work through the lunch hour.
 - After lunch, we'd rush up to the farm, work all afternoon putting up hay and working with the livestock and then we'd rush back in time to work the dinner hour.
 - And that was hard work- we put up a lot of hay, often gathered up his livestock, tended to his horses and whatever other farm work needed to be done.
- And it's interesting- during the lunch hour, I was a bus boy, pouring water and cleaning tables in the dining room, but during the dinner hour, Tony always had me working back in the kitchen, washing dishes.
 - He kept me back in the kitchen, because after an afternoon of working on the farm, I was a mess.
 - I was grimy.
 - My hair was tousled and my clothes were filthy.
 - I had hay, dust and manure, mixed with sweat caked all over.
 - And after working around livestock all afternoon, I pretty much smelled like the livestock.
 - So, I was kept back in the kitchen, so the public wouldn't see me.
 - Nor smell me!
 - And I endured the occasional ribbing from my co-workers, who took enjoyment commenting on the state of my condition.
 - But I didn't mind, because I was making a pretty decent wage.

Life as a Shepherd

- It is these conditions that describe the life of the shepherds.
 - They were the precursor to the modern-day ranch hand.
 - They worked and lived out in the rugged wilderness.
 - It was a hot, dirty, dusty place to be.
 - The work was hard.

- And the smell, oh can you just imagine the smell.
- For shepherds in today's scripture, they were enduring all of this, while working the third shift at night.
 - You see, these are the night shift shepherds and we all know that the night shift is generally regarded as the lowest shift of all.
 - People working the night shift often do so, because they have little choice- they are the new guys- the people who need to pay their dues, until they earn the opportunity to work a different shift.
- So, for the shepherds in this story, their life is far from glamorous
 - And shepherds in those days, they were lowly and downtrodden- considered the lowest of the lowest.
 - They were nobodies.
 - They didn't count for much.
 - They were people who were uneducated.
 - They were people of little means.
 - They were considered by most to be lower class.

The Heart of God

- So, when announcing the highest of good news, God chose to start with the lowest of the lowest.
 - Why do you think that is?
 - Why would God choose filthy, stinky laborers, wearing manure-caked sandals to be the people who would welcome the Christ-child into the world?
- Do you see a connection here?
 - God's son, was born into the most lowly and humble of circumstances.
 - He was born in a feeding-trough, with livestock all around.
 - He was born to lowly, humble, working-class parents.
 - And the people God chooses to introduce to the Savior of the world are lowly and humble people.
- What does that tell us about the nature of God?
 - It tells us that God values people differently that we do.
 - It tells us that God cares for the lowly- the people whom life keeps down- the people whom the world views as insignificant.

- It tells us that God's will is accomplished through the lowly and the humble.
- God looks at the Shepherds and sees their humility.
 - And in choosing them to meet the Christ child, God shows favor on them and elevates them to the highest honor accorded to any human being.
- Perhaps God took a look at this humble lot and said "I think these guys could use some good news."
 - "These guys live a hard existence every day, but this day, I'm going to show them that my eyes are upon them and that they matter to me."
- And so, as these shepherds are tending to their flock, an angel appears in their midst and they are terrified.
 - Perhaps they wondered if robbers had appeared in the dark of night to steal their sheep.
- The angel says to them "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people - to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.
- And then suddenly this entire chorus of angels appears to them praising God and singing "Glory to God in the highest heaven".
 - And the angels announce that the shepherds have God's favor.
- I can imagine that about this time, the shepherds were wondering if they were seeing things.
 - And perhaps they did a check with one another- "Do you see what I see?"
 - "Is this for real?"

God expects humility

- In this story we are reminded that humility is what God expects from us.
 - One of our challenges as humans is that we strive for success.
 - Success itself isn't the problem- the problem is that the more success we achieve, the easier it is to forget our need for humility.
 - As we achieve success, we start to measure ourselves against others and we formulate this pecking order.
 - And as we move up that pecking order, we run the risk of thinking of ourselves as elevated above others.

- We become pretty proud of ourselves and begin to think that our success has been all on our own.
- We overlook the ways God has blessed us- we overlook those times we've gotten lucky.
- We might begin to think of ourselves as more important than "those" people from another zip code.
- We ought to be careful about that and never become too enamored with ourselves- or our accomplishments.
 - Because as this story teaches us, God's favor is for those who exercise humility.

Shepherds know something about taking care of God's flock

- Now, as I reflect on the shepherds, I think there's another reason why God chose them to meet the new-born child.
- All those years ago, watching Tony with his animals, I learned a few things about livestock that have stuck with me all these years.
- I learned that livestock can be obstinate.
 - [Story about Tony telling me to shoo a bull]
- Shepherds know well that sheep have a strong will of their own and sometimes that causes them to do stupid things.
 - Sheep have a tendency to wander away from the flock and get lost.
 - When that happens, the shepherd will go search for them and help the sheep find its way back to the fold.
 - Sometimes, the sheep will get caught in something- they may get stuck in a gulley or some other snare.
 - That's why the shepherd's staff has a hook on its end, you know- it allows the shepherd to reach out- grab a sheep and pull it to safety.
 - And if the sheep becomes ill or injured, the shepherd will often carry that sheep with him.
 - And he will keep the sheep close by his side at all times until the sheep is well again.
 - And you know livestock animals are pretty much defenseless.
 - They really have little ability to protect themselves from danger.
 - And sheep are the most defenseless of all.

- Sheep have absolutely no way of defending themselves against a predator.
- And it is the responsibility of the Shepherd to stand guard over the flock and protect it from danger
 - And a good shepherd stands guard over the defenseless sheep.

Wrap it up

- The mark of a good shepherd is one who goes to any length to care for even one of his flock.
 - Being a shepherd is not a life of privilege.
 - It is hard.
 - It is a life pledged to love, serve, and care for sheep under your charge.
- Does that remind you of anything?
 - Helping others find their way.
 - Reaching out and pulling others to safety.
 - Caring for those who is sick or injured.
 - Defending those who can't defend themselves.
 - Committing oneself to love, service and care for others.
- Do you think that honoring the shepherds to receive the good news first, is God's way of saying "I want you to be more like a shepherd?"
- <PAUSE> Do you think?
- In the story of the shepherds, we are reminded that God's heart is with people who are downtrodden.
 - God's favor and God's grace is with people of humility.
- And in this story, we are reminded of our call by God to be good shepherds.
 - We are blessed to be a blessing- to offer our life- to love, serve and care for God's flock.
 - This Christmas, may we commit to doing that?
 - May we commit to being good shepherds in the year ahead- to love God, love neighbor and live with purpose more than ever before.
- Amen and Amen!